
OUR
LAST
FIRST
POETS

Vision and History
in Contemporary
American Poetry

Cary Nelson

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for my family

Preface

Our Last First Poets is both a collection of readings of individual poets working in open forms and an analysis of the conflict between vision and history in American poetry of the last twenty years. I have concentrated on a diverse and reasonably representative group of mature poets whose careers were well established by the early 1960s. Indeed, the first poet I consider at length, Theodore Roethke, was by then near the end of his life. These are poets, therefore, whose work merits detailed explication. Moreover, they are poets whose own careers show the effects of the historical pressures of the last two decades. Within these limits, my choices above all reflect my sense of where there was interesting critical writing to be done, either because these poets merit a rereading from this perspective or because few close readings of their work have been published.

To varying degrees and in ways peculiar to their individual situations, each of these poets began the 1960s with a poetic vision largely detached from a sense of immediate political reality. Though often discontented with and critical of American culture, they had until then been able to sustain an aesthetic project seemingly protected from deflation by their sense of the culture's limitations. The public life of the period, however, made aesthetic detachment increasingly untenable, and current events began to threaten their belief in what poetry could accomplish. As a result, the continuing conflict in American poetry between vision and history became especially intense.

This was also the time of a considerable and quite varied resurgence of poetry written in open forms. I use the term "open form" here essentially as a way of making the notion of free verse culturally and temporally specific. Although its early development is associated

with Whitman, free verse has since had a diverse and international history. Thus it is helpful to use a term that can reflect the special ambitions contemporary American poets have associated with such practices as mixing passages of varied and unvaried line lengths or continual enjambment. "Open form" is, of course, a term that occurs regularly in manifestoes by contemporary poets, where it often signals a desire for freedom from both poetic tradition and social constraint—ambitions that discussions of free verse have sometimes claimed and sometimes denied. Of equal importance, however, is the recurrent exhortation for American open-form poetry to be open to both the nation's present condition and its past history. Open forms are frequently envisioned as a communal and collective form of writing. Moreover, they draw on the wider tradition in American literature that treats individuals as culturally responsive and representative—a relation that can become redemptive, prophetic, or sacrificial.

Even when contemporary American poetry emphasizes the local, it typically tries, synecdochically, to speak for the nation as a whole. Moreover, it continues to be involved with the project of creating a democratically inclusive aesthetic, an aesthetic that reflects an essentially ahistorical image of American possibility. The ahistorical image, of course, serves in part to compensate for the less appealing realities of public and private life. Yet the faith that made this compensation tolerable—the faith that an exemplary dialogue between poetic vision and historical actuality could persist and perhaps even be beneficial—did not survive the events of the period. As if trying to find forms at once sufficiently expansive and fractured to contain their experience, the poets I discuss have adopted increasingly more open forms as they worked through the last two decades. At the same time, they have become steadily more aware of how political events counter the cultural ideals these forms embody.

American poets working in open forms have, to be sure, regularly been disillusioned by their immediate political environment and by their perception of the general course and meaning of American history. Through the 1960s, however, these two attitudes toward history came together with particular force. Thus Galway Kinnell,

Robert Duncan, Adrienne Rich, and W. S. Merwin, along with many other poets, experienced Vietnam not merely as an unjust war but as a betrayal of a democratic vision of America and as a negative and seemingly irreversible judgment on the whole of American history. Their increasing awareness of ongoing events led to a rereading of America's past, a rereading through metaphorization and totalization that saw the past as culminating in and fulfilled by an intolerable present. This negative and rather spatialized historical awareness—a recurring feature of American literature that was catalyzed again by the war—compelled changes in the poetry of the 1960s and 1970s which spread beyond the immediate preoccupation with America's presence in Southeast Asia. The resulting body of poetry is an instructive and telling introduction to the continuing conflict between vision and history in American poetry.

For the purpose of this book, it does not matter whether the conceptions of American history that inform and constrain this poetry are accurate or deluded. Even the tendency to oppose an individual or collective vision and a sense of historical actuality is problematic, since the opposition between vision and history is itself historically produced. Yet such attitudes toward history have their own life, one that, as others have shown, can sometimes influence actual events. Of course the sense of disaster these poets feel is not unique. American poets have contemplated the loss of an American myth before. No doubt future generations will be re-inspired by a myth of America and will in turn be disillusioned. Indeed we may even see a rebirth of a wholly optimistic aesthetic of open forms, though this is unlikely to be either immediate or widespread. The issue here is how these poets situate their immediate experience within their perception of American history, what effect that experience has on their poetry, what resources it leaves them. The conception of history these poets share informs and often undermines the open forms with which they work; it leads them, eventually, to adopt open forms that very nearly destroy themselves. Yet these are forms, as I attempt to show throughout this book, that sometimes succeed precisely because of the risks they take.

In trying to identify those poems that survive the effects of the historical perspective they reflect, I am often led to make strong statements about which poems do and do not succeed and even to offer observations about the kinds of poems that best dramatize and contend with a dark image of American culture. Somewhat surprisingly, much criticism of contemporary poetry remains divided between those who approve and those who disapprove of poets working in more open forms. The poets I discuss are often reviewed and analyzed by critics who essentially either entirely support or entirely deny their accomplishments. Neither audience will be altogether pleased by my more divided loyalties, which evidence a more mixed reading experience. In choosing to record these varying judgments I was guided not so much by a conviction that evaluation is a necessary part of critical writing, though evaluation is probably inescapable when reading one's contemporaries, but by a conclusion that success and failure are often interdependent within a single poet's work. Much of what follows is devoted to close readings of individual poems. My positive readings are often aimed, in effect, at helping to create good poems where many readers will not have known they existed, but these affirmations are connected with other readings that are negative.

It may be best to give advance notice of my positions. Against Roethke's detractors, who remain vocal, my analysis of "North American Sequence" shows it to be a major accomplishment, however flawed. I also argue, and here even Roethke's admirers may disagree, that in "North American Sequence" Roethke's self-prized naïveté becomes a highly self-conscious verbal artifice. In the case of Kinnell, I find much of his early and often-praised poetry weak and sentimental. Many of these poems, however, can now be seen as exercises in preparation for "The Porcupine," "The Bear," and *The Book of Nightmares*, the last of which is repetitive and almost destroyed by internal contradictions, but nonetheless a powerful and important work. Duncan is particularly problematic, since most readers familiar with his work are even more strictly divided, seeing him either as intolerably self-indulgent and pretentious or as one of

our major poets. At the cost of offending both groups, I will argue instead that, while much of his work is slack and possibly self-destructive, some of his poems succeed remarkably at registering—and perhaps mastering—a radical play of form and dissolution. For Rich and Merwin, success and failure are even more closely linked. Rich has poems that are didactic and banal; Merwin has poems and many short prose pieces that are facile, self-congratulatory, and so vague as to be empty. Yet both Rich and Merwin have poems sharing diction and subject matter with their failures that are among the most forceful and, perhaps, prophetic in contemporary literature.

Although my evaluative comments are grounded in analyses of the poems' historical situation, I do not want to claim that these judgments have a privileged objectivity. As is always the case with criticism, this book embodies its author's sensibility and enacts its author's relationship with the period it examines. The result is a mixture of explication and advocacy that is also built into the book's structure. Since the poets I discuss are roughly contemporary with one another, I might have tried to present their work as a series of alternative and equally valid reactions to similar historical pressures. Instead, the book is structured as a sequence of chapters moving toward more radically open forms; moreover, my sense of what is appropriately radical, in the context of recent American history, is biased toward an openness grounded either in conflict or in an irreducible plurality. The book's structure mirrors my own position on the political connotations of the American tradition of open-form poetry, since I have doubts about its sometimes more optimistic version in Kinnell and Duncan but instinctively approve of its inverted, ironic version in Rich and Merwin. A critic with different sensibilities could, however, easily alter this arrangement and substitute a different bias, concluding that Rich and Merwin are hopelessly traumatized and placing Duncan and Kinnell in the final chapters that look toward the poetry of the future.

This book also represents a specific theoretical project. Because its historical arguments are frequently worked out through phenomenological readings of individual poems, it challenges two common

assumptions about phenomenological criticism: first, that phenomenological criticism is ill-suited to readings of individual texts; second, that a historically based phenomenology is impossible. The practical criticism of the last twenty-five years gives much evidence that the first assumption is incorrect. But the second assumption is more serious. Though phenomenological criticism tends to spatialize its objects of study and thus to slight temporal process and change—even when it describes periodization—it does not follow that historical and phenomenological criticism require mutually exclusive kinds of discourse. This book attempts to demonstrate that they can work together productively, though not that the tensions between them can be abolished, for those tensions are a version of the inescapable interplay of diachrony and synchrony in critical writing.

Neither the phenomenological nor the historical component of this study is offered in a disengaged style. This self-reflexive element in writing phenomenological or historical criticism has received a fair amount of discussion of late, but the further self-reflexive element in reading criticism has not. The subjective and historically constituted character of the reading experience deserves special mention here, for the period I am concerned with is very recent indeed, and many readers will share their culture's characteristic repression of the immediate past. In analyzing contemporary poetry in terms of the political atmosphere of the last two decades, this book challenges its readers to reconsider not only these poets' relationship to that period but also their own. *Our Last First Poets* is not designed as an altogether comfortable reading experience. Its judgments ask to be considered and confronted, though not necessarily to be accepted. I am less interested in convincing the reader that my argument is universally applicable or that it offers the only way to read this poetry than I am in presenting it to the reader and demonstrating that it represents a plausible problematic. Like other modes of analysis that tend to undermine the still common New Critical assumptions about the reader's objectivity and the independence of poetic creation, such as Marxist or deconstructive criticism, the kind of historical phenomenology offered here may seem unsettling and unresolvable.

The polemical element of my argument is most insistent in the first chapter, which uses the limited subject of Vietnam war poetry to introduce the broader issue with which the rest of the book is regularly concerned—the conflict between vision and history in contemporary American poetry. In subsequent chapters, I am less concerned with correlating poetic development with particular historical incidents than with analyzing the pervasive tension between poetic aspiration and a constrained sense of historical possibility. Yet the relationship between the first chapter and the rest of the book is also an aggressive one: the first chapter intensifies and destabilizes the dialectic of vision and history in what follows. In some ways, the burden of the first chapter—the demands it makes of poetry—will make the rest of the book more difficult to read. More prosaically, however, the first chapter also provides introductory comments on several of the poets subsequently treated in greater detail, as well as brief discussions of a number of other poets. The structure of the first chapter in some respects parallels that of the book as a whole; like the book, for example, it ends with a discussion of Merwin and Rich. Chapters two and three are parallel: I discuss two long poem sequences, Roethke's "North American Sequence" and Kinnell's *The Book of Nightmares*, published roughly at the beginning and at the end of the 1960s. Roethke's sequence, which precedes this period of crisis, displays the continuing conflict between poetry and history in a much less traumatic form than Kinnell's. The chapter on Roethke thus provides a reference point both for the analysis of Kinnell and for the rest of the book. The following chapter, on Duncan, is an overview of the work of a poet who has made perhaps the most elaborate recent effort to articulate an optimistic aesthetic of open forms. As these poets move steadily toward more radically open, even dismantled, forms, their work fulfills the need repeatedly articulated in American poetry and prose for a democratically responsive and inclusive aesthetic, while largely undermining its potential for affirmation. This movement culminates in the chapters on Rich and Merwin.

Finally, as I have written elsewhere, criticism is a particularly hybrid kind of discourse—part argumentative demonstration and part

a form of literature in its own right. I have worked in this book to balance those sometimes competing functions against one another, recognizing that this really means working out the terms in which writing and analysis are mutually constituted and compromised. This process of negotiation, however, can produce criticism that offers its own kind of literary experience. To that end, I have structured the individual chapters and arranged them within the book so as to condition the way they will be read. Thus the fragility and the appeal of Roethke's synthesis should be intensified by reading that chapter after reading in "Whitman in Vietnam" about a later period when "North American Sequence" probably could not have been written. Similarly, the chapter on Merwin is placed at the end to provide one convincing poetic resolution to the conflict between vision and history that the book has regularly addressed, a resolution that should be at once argumentative and formal.

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Several libraries have been industrious in helping me to obtain small press editions: the acquisitions and reference departments at the University of Illinois, the poetry collection at the State University of New York at Buffalo, and The British Museum. Robert Bertholf kindly sent me a poem that no library was able to find.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Whitman in Vietnam: Poetry and History in Contemporary America

"Where are you, Walt?
The Open Road goes to the used-car lot.

Where is the nation you promised?"

—Louis Simpson¹

AS THE WHOLE PROBLEM of the interplay between poetry and history in America culminated in Whitman's Civil War writings, so it culminates again in the poetry of the Vietnam war—particularly in the work of those established poets whose careers were significantly affected by the progress of the war during the 1960s. Many poets who began the decade with substantial reputations and reasonably well-articulated personal visions found both their subject matter and their style challenged and invaded by political events they could not ignore. In much the same way that the war appeared to make teaching relevant, it made poetry relevant: both became politicized forms of public address. Yet poets were thereby confronted again with their essential powerlessness in American life; often their work came to embody a kind of urgent impotence. The decade began with a resurgence of open forms aimed at rewriting the myth of American communality, reinvigorating or even reinvent-

1. Simpson, *At The End of The Open Road* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1963), p. 64.

ing the nation's origin. In only a few years, however, an almost unmanageable vision of American history forcefully intruded, a vision based on a record of self-deception at home sanctioning mutilation abroad. That sense of history—with its symbolic, bipolar geography—largely ended the innocent optimism of a poetry inclusive of all American locations. With a terrible irony, the disjunction between myth and reality had been eliminated: many poets believed themselves to be living in a monstrous satire of the American dream. Having broken away from colonialism almost two hundred years earlier, Americans now found themselves among its more grotesque agents. Against the background of a national policy of government by the bad poetry of euphemism and rationalization, it was difficult for good poetry to be other than absurd or desperate. That conflict has always been present in American poetry, but never more vividly. Though this is not a book about Vietnam, an analysis of poetry about the Vietnam war can thus provide us with an extreme but telling introduction to the more general relationship in America between poetic form and public life, between personal vision and our national history. Viewed synchronically, these poets of the 1960s were the last of our first poets; they wrote as though they were the avatars of an open exaltation whose death was inscribed in their work.

Yet the great majority of published Vietnam poems are flat, predictable, and not likely to survive.² A few, conversely, succeed as poems at the expense of making their choice of subject seem almost coincidental. Such poems often do express a deep and unresolved horror at murder carried out in the poet's own name and without his knowing assent. Yet many of them too convincingly master the anguish and anger at their source. They wish to contain and verbally

2. Three anthologies of Vietnam war poems are *A Poetry Reading Against The Vietnam War*, ed. Robert Bly and David Ray (Madison: Sixties Press, 1966), *War Poems*, ed. Diane di Prima (New York: Poets' Press, Inc., 1968), and *Where Is Vietnam?*, ed. Walter Lowenfels (New York: Doubleday, 1967). Since their work is outside my subject, I have not commented on the poetry by Vietnam veterans; their poetry is available in *Winning Hearts and Minds: War Poems by Vietnam Veterans*, ed. Larry Rottmann, Jan Barry, and Basil T. Paquet (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972) and Michael

transform their emotion without themselves becoming part of the inconclusive history of their times. These poems do not so much address a contemporary audience as insulate themselves rigorously from that responsibility. Admittedly, such seclusion, verbally obtained, is itself at the service of an historical imperative; a poem's willed isolation confirms what can and cannot be said to its immediate audience. These poems may reflect the poet's defeated confession that a receptive audience simply does not exist, or his hesitance to speak to his countrymen even if they were willing to listen. A war that daily certified most citizens' individual political impotence did not encourage many to embrace their neighbor's guilt. Many of the poems written in this climate are anonymously private, forwarding their own pain easily, without introversion, and without cost to the reader. This anonymity will increase in time; eventually they can be anthologized, like other war poems with "universal" appeal, without reference to the particular circumstances of their origin. No longer reflecting the historical specificity of Vietnam, they will have succumbed to what Michel Foucault, in another context, has called the "universalizing dissolution into the general form" of war.³

These are the most difficult of the Vietnam poems for a contemporary reader to judge, for they give us exactly what we most want—consummation, control, and eventual forgetfulness. Thus these poems wish to draw on their historical sources with false openness, to re-establish an impossible origin before body counts were daily news, when the war was a sheer flat eventfulness not part of the national psyche. But the war reached back and permeated the past, insinuating

Casey, *Obscenities* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972). For a more sanguine view of Vietnam poetry, see James F. Mersmann's well-informed *Out of the Vietnam Vortex: Poets and Poetry Against the War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1974). An excellent overview of the problems inherent in political poetry is Thomas R. Edwards's *Imagination and Power: A Study of Poetry on Public Themes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971).

3. Michel Foucault, "Powers and Strategies," interview, in *Michel Foucault: Power, Truth, Strategy*, ed. Meaghan Morris and Paul Patton (Sidney, Australia: Feral Publications, 1979), p. 51. Foucault is speaking here of the Gulag and of "dissolution into the general form of confinement."