

# AMERICAN POETRY IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

KENNETH REXROTH

PATCHEN · WHITMAN  
BERRYMAN · MOORE  
ELIOT · FERLINGHETTI  
LOWELL · DICKINSON  
ROOKS · GINSBERG  
ODENHEIM · STEIN  
OUND · ROBINSON  
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MASTERS · WILLIAMS  
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A CONTINUUM BOOK

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IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY**

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# **American Poetry in the Twentieth Century**

**Kenneth Rexroth**

**A Continuum Book  
The Seabury Press • New York**

**First paperback edition 1973**

**First published 1971 by Herder and Herder, New York.**

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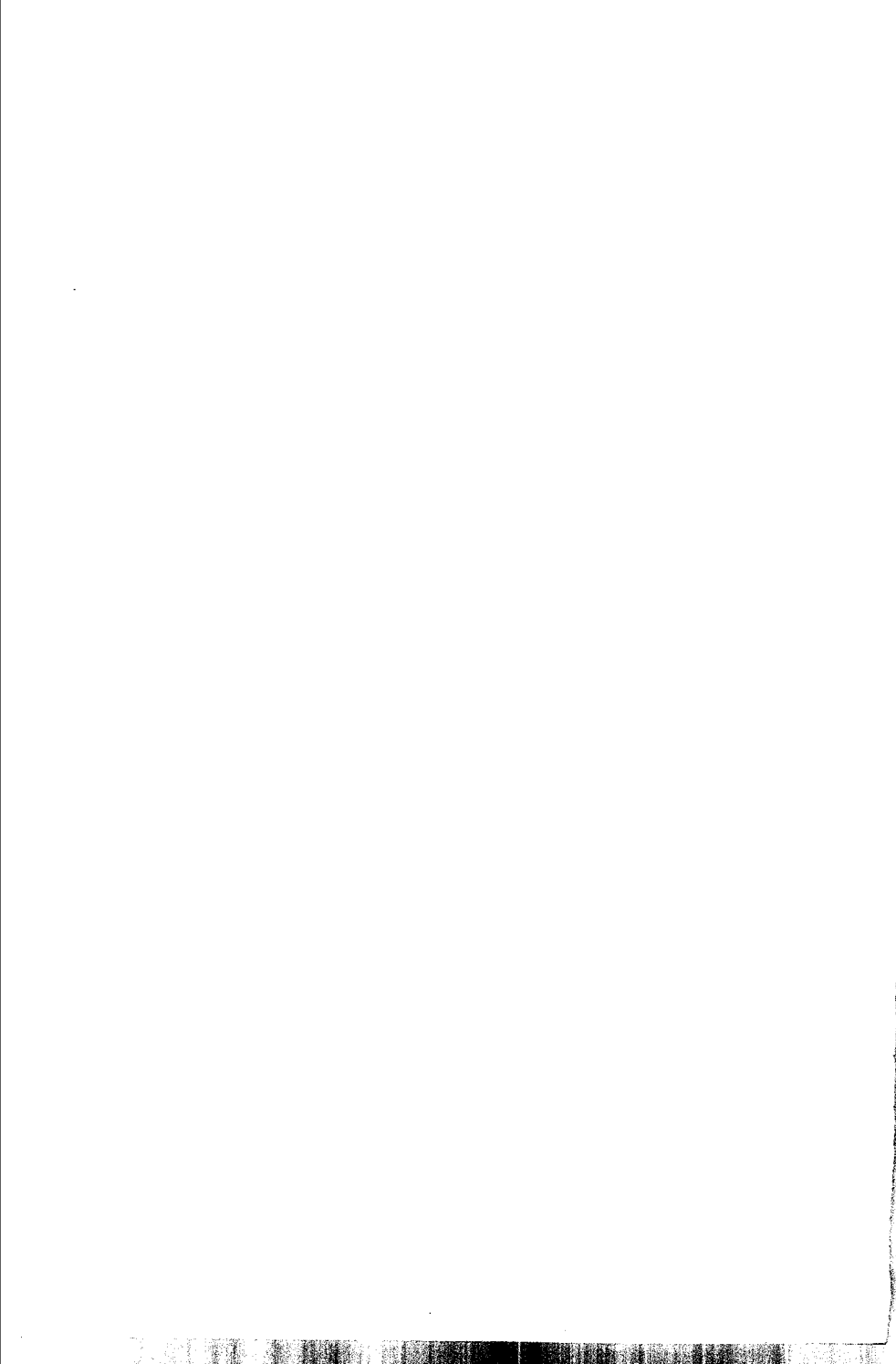
**Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 76-150308**

**ISBN: 0-8164-9167-4**

**Printed in the United States of America**

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*To My Friend*  
JAMES LAUGHLIN  
*to whom modern literature  
owes an incalculable debt*





# I.

THE long-term tendencies in American poetry reflect the major influences that went to form the culture as a whole and these in turn the ethnic and national groups who have made up the American people.

First in point of time of course was the American Indian, and the Indian endures as subtle, all-pervasive background, both in vestiges of Indian cultural contributions in a positive sense, and in reverse, as the sense of guilt which haunts American history. At no time except at the very beginning has there not been somewhere, on the part of some poet, an attempt to incorporate directly the Indian heritage. Equally important to the traditionally raised children of older families, the Indians took the places of the deities of earth and air, of springs and trees and mountains. They were the satyrs and nymphs of the American child, his connection with the earth beneath his feet. People reared in our contemporary society of urban nomads, broken families, computerized education, and televised leisure can form no conception of the role played by tales of the American Indian in the older, more stable society. It is significant that after the middle of the twentieth century, as the technological empire reached its apogee, the youth revolt turned once again to the American Indian for inspiration and restoration.

Spanish influence in American literature was minimal until the settling up of the Southwest in the twentieth century—Prescott, some poems of Longfellow's—very little else. It is extraordinary that the long, heroic wars of liberation of Latin America attracted little attention in the North, so little that they made no significant impression on literature. Bolivar and Juarez were unknown to the American schoolboy. In recent years the American empire has become frightened by its relations with its Southern vassals and the history of Latin America is touched on briefly in some schools, particularly those in communities with large Latin populations. But these are "lessons," not heroic myths. Today, international writers like Octavio Paz and Gabriella Mistral may be mentioned briefly in college courses, called of all things "Chicano literature," but I doubt if one-tenth of 1 per cent of the "Spanish majors" in the schools of America have ever heard of Rubén Darío. Spanish influence in American poetry comes late, from Spain via translations of Federico García Lorca. Even specialists in Spanish translation like W. S. Merwin show no influence of Machado, Alberti, or Paz in their own poetry. Perhaps Pablo Neruda has at least set an example for some revolutionary poetry.

The English influence we are all familiar with, but only specialists realize the peculiar nature of that influence, the very odd literary sensibility produced by the ideal of the Puritan theocratic city state, an intensely baroque religiosity. There is a Protestant Baroque sensibility as eccentric as that of the Counter Reformation Catholic poet, Richard Crashaw. Anne Bradstreet, our first poet, was a disciple of Francis Quarles. Anne, remember, was welcomed by the literary establishment of the home land as "a right Du Bartas girl." Du Bartas, in case you don't know, was the

most extreme metaphysical poet of his time, quite the equal of the Spaniard Góngora or the Italian Marino, but a Protestant militant, a French Huguenot. The translation from French of his poetic works by John Sylvester was a best-seller for two generations, and my copy with its beautiful title page once belonged to a New England parson.

It is simply not true that there was a continuity in the Southern colonies of a cavalier tradition. The cavalier South, as Mark Twain pointed out, is a dream of chronic adolescents who read themselves to sleep with the novels of Sir Walter Scott. The real Southern tradition was largely French, Girondin, rationalistic. Its great representative is Jefferson, but its appearance in literature is minimal south of Virginia. Its outstanding literary representative, our own *philosophe*, is in fact *le bon Franklin*, hardly a Southerner.

The second most powerful current, or *Geist*, or *Weltanschauung*, in American literature, is French—New France of the waterways and portages of the St. Lawrence, Great Lakes, and Mississippi drainages. New France was a very peculiar kind of France, and bore more resemblance to Kievan Russia with its Varangian, Kazar, and Bulgar river-borne fur traders than anything to be found in the homeland. Its forts and trading posts were communities of armed merchant adventurers. Most of the women were Indians, and later also Negroes and mixed bloods. A masculine, anarchistic, sensual culture grew up of the same character as the Cossacks', or before them, the Vikings'. No other people assimilated and were assimilated so completely, by not just Indians, Negroes, and Spanish, but by the American land. We forget that they were there before the birth of the Republic, from Pittsburgh to the Rockies and from Hudson's Bay to the Gulf. Parkman wrote fourteen volumes

of a history which he saw as the struggle of the anal-retentive British against the oral, sensual, sloppy French. He was right. This struggle still goes on, the Jazz Age against Anthony Comstock, the hips against the uptights. It finds its most conscious expression today in the fantasies of that voluntary Wasp, Leslie Fiedler, who finds the greatest spokesman of the riverain culture, Mark Twain, totally incomprehensible; and like all uptight people when so confronted, he can only dismiss him as a homosexual, like a policeman confronted by a student with bare feet and long hair.

To return to Ben Franklin. He was more or less a pseudo-Quaker who, like two of our presidents, found a faint aura of Quakerism profitable to a calculating, acquisitive career. But the Quakers represent something extremely important in the compound of American culture. They are probably the only group which enjoys universal prestige—except, of course, in Philadelphia. Insofar as America has a culture, it is a culture of mutual antagonisms. When the melting pot really melts, it produces only the anonymous, anomalous, homogenized, homogeneous, mass man. The pietistic traditions in America, which, one would presume, were committed to producing frictionless personalities who would adjust perfectly to communalist religious utopias, produced in fact quite the opposite. I think it is this tradition, rather than that of New England theocracy, which gave birth to populism, both literary and political, with all its many ramifications—the dream of free men in free communities making up a free society in a free nation. The initial impulse was Quaker and Pennsylvania Dutch, German Pietist, but it is the promise which their little societies first held forth that attracted the millions from northern Europe who filled up the Middle West, and from whom

came the great progressive politicians who were defeated on April 17, 1917. These are the people who gave American socialism its special character—Eugene Debs came from the old French town of Terre Haute, just around the corner of the rivers from Robert Owen's New Harmony.

German influence remains strong in America from 1848 to the First War. St. Louis, Milwaukee, Cincinnati, Chicago, were amongst the most civilized provincial cities in the world, and their civilization was as international in its connections as that of New York, Boston, and Philadelphia.

After 1900 Jewish influence became increasingly strong and has endured, decreasing again, until the present time. From about 1910 to 1925 New York was one of the major capitals of Yiddish culture, a strong competitor with Warsaw or Frankfurt. Plays by the leading European playwrights were performed in the Yiddish Theater. A majority of the leading Yiddish writers came to America to visit, many of them to stay. Yiddish magazines and newspapers discussed the literature and drama, philosophy, and political theories of Europe for a general audience, when such issues were known only to a handful of intellectual English-speaking Americans. The influence was reciprocal. The American Populist writers were translated into Yiddish, or read in English by Yiddish writers. The poet Yehoash was a disciple of Ezra Pound. The influence of Yiddish writing itself on American literature in English was practically nil. In that direction the influence was largely personal or seminal and postponed for a generation, until the children of Yiddish speakers began to write in English. Then too the large number of Jews in the labor movement, especially in the garment trades, provided an audience for Socialist and syndicalist writers. They would cheer the anarchist poet Arturo Giovannitti when he recited his poems at

mass meetings, even though they understood no Italian and little more English. Since this extraordinarily active Yiddish culture was isolated both by language and prejudice, it is without doubt the most underestimated factor in the American intellectual synthesis.

Chinese and Japanese literature did not enter the American mainstream from ethnic sources within the country until after the Second War, and then only slightly, in San Francisco, although imported Far Eastern culture played an important role as an outside influence on American poetry from 1890 on. Negro poetry and folksong is a separate and very important subject and will be treated later.

So much for culture in the sociological or anthropological sense. How does all this work out specifically in the evolution of American poetry? It would be a great mistake to think that an ethnic interpretation of literature would be exhaustively explanatory, any more than Hippolyte Taine's Hippocratic environmentalism of Earth, Air, and Water. It does, however, show why American literature should be far more open to international influences than that of more homogeneous countries like Sweden or Spain. But, it's not necessarily true. The children of immigrants notoriously renounce the ways of their parents.

When the twentieth century opened, American poetry had already acquired a substantial tradition, almost all of it accumulated in the later three quarters of the nineteenth century. These were the poets who were taught in school until well past the First World War: William Cullen Bryant, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, John Greenleaf Whittier, James Russell Lowell, and in the South, Sidney Lanier. The poets whom today we consider important were not taught in schools—Jones Very, Edward Taylor, Herman Melville, Emily Dickinson, were almost

completely unknown as poets. We have a very respectable tradition of Protestant spirituality in the American nineteenth century in these poets. All are concerned, like their Danish contemporary, Søren Kierkegaard, with the mystery of utter contingency over against absolute omnipotence, the existential dilemma—why being at all? Melville never became more than a great amateur poet, but Emily Dickinson is the equal of any woman poet of the century except Christina Rossetti and the Brontë sisters. Edgar Allan Poe and Walt Whitman were frowned on and only their most innocuous verse, "The Bells," "The Raven," and "O Captain, My Captain," were anthologized, or memorized by school children.

We think of Poe and Whitman as the only American poets of the nineteenth century with international reputations and influence, but this is an illusion of perspective. Most of the poets whose portraits once decorated the corridors of American grammar schools had very substantial European reputations. Baudelaire made more money from his translations of Poe than he did from anything else he wrote, but we forget, if we ever knew, that he was paid a substantial sum to translate "Hiawatha" (he never did it), and imitated "Hiawatha" in a poem of his own, "LE CALUMET DE PAIX"—IMITÉ DE LONGFELLOW; "*Or Gitche Manito, le Maître de la Vie.*"

Longfellow was probably the most internationally minded poet writing in his day and he poured into America translations, imitations and echoes of the literatures of all Europe. "Hiawatha" is an imitation of *The Kalevala* put together from folk songs and tales by the Finnish folklorist Lönnröt. Longfellow got his Indian mythology from Schoolcraft, but along with the trochaic meter of *The Kalevala* there is a subtle infusion of its strangely haunted

stories. Longfellow was very much aware that he was attempting to supply the American people with mythological roots in their own land and for three generations he pretty much succeeded.

Emerson was seriously taken both in Great Britain and Germany, both as philosopher and poet, and he is still read in both countries, as the most successful popularizer of a kind of mean, or average, or common-denominator, late German Romantic philosophy of the more liberal persuasion, or perhaps as the forerunner of America's characteristic philosophy—individualist pragmatism. He also shared the interest of the international intellectual community of his time in the literature and philosophies of India and the Far East.

What distinguished America's major nineteenth-century writers was that, like the English, they were not alienated. They gave expression to the attitudes and opinions of most Americans. Even Whitman—even more than any of the others—for he was above all else the apostle of the American Dream, when that dream was still capable of passionate belief. There were *alienés* in America but they were peculiar people, separated from society by circumstance, like Emily Dickinson, or by a constitutional mental oddness, like Melville. Toward the end of his life Whitman probably came to realize that, at least within the context of post-Civil War American enterprise and Manifest Destiny, his dream had failed. Even so his alienation was largely posthumous.

Poe is a special case. "Jamais Plus" by Monsieur Poe is a classic of French literature. Poe's great reputation in France is due to the fact that his translators, Baudelaire and Mallarmé, were the greatest French poets of their times and more important, that they didn't understand English



all that well, even though Mallarmé taught it. What prestige Poe enjoys amongst modern American poets is due mostly to the reflection of his extraordinary French reputation and also somewhat to the propaganda of modern Southern writers—who even like Sidney Lanier. Tales of his genre are now considered quite respectable, the Gothic romance pushed to its extreme by the French and German Romantics. As a matter of fact, they are rather better than their European counterparts—with the exceptions of Kleist, Nerval, and E. T. A. Hoffman. Poe, too, perhaps more than any American writer, was a popularizer, and in spite of his Baudelairian life, anything but alienated. He is incidentally the only one of our leading writers of those times who was a professional—who tried to live by his pen.

In the early years of the twentieth century in the Protestant parts of the country that still clung to the old ways—Maine, Indiana, Kansas, Oregon—by far the most popular poet, and not just with school teachers, was Whittier. Now that two generations of literary contention have died away, it becomes possible to see that this judgment may almost have been right. Whittier in his narrow tradition is a very good poet indeed. In comparison with Longfellow his verse sounds like poetry, the work of a man who thought in aural-oral terms and not just in verbal. He is a better poet than Isaac Watts, the English hymn writer, or in fact than anyone else who wrote eighteenth-century Augustan quatrains, and he is better than all but a few who wrote narratives or reveries of nature. He was also, with the sole exception of Whitman, socially the most radical important American poet of the nineteenth century. Like Whitman, or like William Carlos Williams later, he was also supremely autochthonous, with a wonderful eye and ear for the sensory detail of the poetic situation—the especially American situation.