

Modern Critical Views

CONTEMPORARY POETS

Edited and with an Introduction by
HAROLD BLOOM



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Harold Bloom

Sterling Professor of the Humanities

Yale University



CHELSEA HOUSE PUBLISHERS

New York ♦ Philadelphia

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Printed and bound in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

∞ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum
requirements of the American National Standard for Permanence
of Paper for Printed Library Materials, Z39.48-1984.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Contemporary poets.

(Modern critical views)

Includes bibliographies and index.

Summary: Critical essays on the works of twenty-eight
modern American poets.

1. American poetry—20th century—History and criticism.

[1. American poetry—20th century—History and
criticism] I. Bloom, Harold. II. Series.

PS325.C66 1986 811'.5'09 86-8306

ISBN 0-87754-709-2

Editor's Note

Contemporary American poetry, in this book, is taken to extend from the work of our greatest living poet, Robert Penn Warren, through the achievement of the poets of my own generation. Some of the poets studied in this volume are now lost to us: Elizabeth Bishop, Robert Fitzgerald, James Wright, but they are still very much part of the poetry of the contemporary scene, as Robert Lowell, John Berryman, Randall Jarrell perhaps no longer are.

I would not be prepared to assert that all of the twenty-five living poets examined here are likely to prove canonical. But Ashbery, Ammons, and Merrill are of the eminence of Warren and Bishop, and there are books, sequences, and separate poems by several of the others that should be permanent also. I do not believe that canonization is an arbitrary process, and I am aware that many readers will regret some of the prominent omissions from this volume. But the same readers are unlikely to welcome the presence both of Daryl Hine and of Gary Snyder. Admirers of Robert Duncan and of Anthony Hecht tend to be separate individuals. I myself am not much moved by the work of Allen Ginsberg, or of Amiri Baraka, or of the recent phase of Adrienne Rich, but they all have their informed admirers. With some poets, such as Dorn and Creeley, the right critical essays just did not seem to suggest themselves. Finally, there are poets only recently come to prominence, like Amy Clampitt, Vicki Hearne, Douglas Crase, and Alfred Corn, where there has been little time as yet for critical reception to mature.

The essayists, like the poets, are not necessarily inevitable choices, but all of them know the extreme difficulties that are involved when contemporary poetry is analyzed. I am aware that eleven of these twenty-eight essays are by Richard Howard, John Hollander, and myself, but I did not set out to achieve such a result. Howard on Swenson, James Wright, and Feldman; Hollander on Warren, Koch, and Hine; Bloom on Fitzgerald, Dickey, Am-

mons, Merwin, and Feinman, seemed the most appropriate I could find, particularly in regard to considerations that balanced length and range.

That there is some diminishment in the course of American poetry since the death of Wallace Stevens in 1955 is a sadness, but the arts, as Hazlitt observed, are not progressive. Warren and Bishop, Ashbery and Merrill, are not of the eminence of their precursors, Eliot and Stevens, Frost and Hart Crane, but then Stevens and Frost, in the longest perspective, are shadowed by Whitman and Dickinson, the greatest of our poets. I have been accused by some of being a contemporary Thomas Love Peacock, writing another version of *The Four Ages of Poetry*. But, like Peacock himself, we come after Wordsworth, and to follow the only authentic inventor of a modernist poetry is necessarily to be haunted by a permanent sense of belatedness. Wordsworth, in relation to the European tradition from Homer through Goethe, was a true original. No one since Wordsworth, in any language, has been able to achieve such discontinuity again. Himself shadowed by Shakespeare and Milton, Wordsworth nevertheless triumphantly made it new. In comparison, Pound and Eliot stand under the mingled long shadows of Browning and Whitman, and Tennyson and Whitman, respectively. As the discoverer of a poetry that had no subject but subjectivity, Wordsworth permanently both saved and ruined poetry.

But originality itself becomes different after Wordsworth, and so remains different in the Age of Ashbery. It is fascinating though sad to see Ashbery omitting from his recent *Selected Poems* so many of the poems one loves best: "Evening in the Country," "Fragment," "The One Thing That Can Save America" among them. Evidently he does not regard them as original enough, or perhaps they are exquisitely painful to him. But, together with "Soonest Mended" and "Wet Casements" and "Tapestry" and perhaps a dozen more, they remain his best poems and will not be discarded by anyone except himself. Poets and critics alike seem compelled to regard literary survival as ever more problematical, and the shadows are longest in the evening-land that is America.

Whitman and Dickinson had Emerson, the Bible, and the British High Romantics as both hindrances and resources, but only Emerson was American, and his essays were far superior to his poems. After Whitman and Dickinson, Frost and Stevens, Eliot and Pound, W. C. Williams and Hart Crane, the American tradition in poetry becomes so strong as both to inspire and inhibit fresh creation.

This volume opens with an introduction written by the editor in collaboration with David Bromwich. It is reprinted here as a guide to American poetic schools and techniques, as relevant now as it was in 1974.

Essays on the individual poets are arranged here according to the age of the poets, starting with Robert Penn Warren. John Hollander offers an appreciation of Warren's poetry, setting it in the broad contexts of poetic form, upon which Hollander is an acknowledged authority. My own appreciation of the work of the late Robert Fitzgerald sets that superb classical poet in the line of Virgil and of Landor. The late Elizabeth Bishop is analyzed by David Bromwich in terms of her "dream-houses," remarkable and ramshackle structures that are metaphors for her poems themselves.

Gwendolyn Brooks, the foremost living black woman poet, is discussed by Gary Smith in the double context of the Harlem Renaissance and of male myths about black women. Denise Levertov, in a tribute to Robert Duncan, both frees him from false myths and restores the poet to his own mythic concerns. A neglected and highly original writer, May Swenson is acutely surveyed by Richard Howard. Then two distinguished poets of high civilization, Richard Wilbur and Anthony Hecht, are sketched in the large by Robert B. Shaw and Ashley Brown, respectively.

My essay on the demonic bard James Dickey considers only what he himself calls his "early motion," culminating in the volume *Helmets*. Denise Levertov returns, this time as the subject of Diana Collecott's meditation on dualism and its healing in Levertov's work. John Hollander then makes a reentry with his exuberant appreciation of Kenneth Koch, the most exuberant of all contemporary poets.

I have chosen my own essay on the Transcendental, earlier A. R. Ammons, certainly the legitimate living representative of the American Sublime. J. D. McClatchy, poetic disciple of James Merrill, ponders the elegant dialectics of the lesson of the master, after which, in a violent juxtaposition, Diane Middlebrook follows with Allen Ginsberg, who is for many the legitimate bardic figure at this time, but for others (myself included) a bard too much resembling James Macpherson's "Ossian."

Four authentic descendants of Whitman—Galway Kinnell, John Ashbery, W. S. Merwin, and the late James Wright—are analyzed in their characteristic strengths by Charles Molesworth, Alfred Corn, myself, and Richard Howard, respectively. Howard returns immediately with his rich meditation upon Irving Feldman, a poet whose disciplined development begins to establish real importance. Adrienne Rich, an important poet for many current readers, receives a generous tribute from Helen Vendler, who nevertheless shrewdly notes echoes and overtones that I would say sort oddly with Rich's fiercely feminist stance.

Robert Pack, a distinguished poet of the middle way, is described by Paul Mariani as an instance of rare experiential maturity in contemporary

poetry. David Lehman eloquently studies John Hollander's diverse works, astonishingly neglected in proportion to their achievement, after which I analyze a very difficult and esoteric poet, Alvin Feinman.

Crunk (Robert Bly) follows with an apt tribute to the originality of Gary Snyder, admirable laureate of ecology and a humane anthropology.

Mark Strand, a lyric artist of superb finish, whose metaphysical dark-nesses are constant, is discussed by Linda Gregerson as the contemporary instance of a Keatsian "negative capability." Two very different black poets, the polemical Amiri Baraka and a subtle quietist, the splendid Jay Wright, are then depicted by Nate Mackey and Robert B. Stepto, respectively. Finally, John Hollander concludes this book with an erudite appreciation of the erudite Daryl Hine, a great and greatly neglected artist.

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HAROLD BLOOM AND DAVID BROMWICH

Introduction

“Ask the fact for the form,” Emerson said, but the history of American poetry has tended to illustrate a rival quest, which is to beg the form for the fact. Emerson urged the American bards to emulate his Merlin, who mounted to paradise by the stairway of surprise, but even the greatest among Emerson’s immediate progeny, Whitman and Dickinson, chose to present their poetic selves through repetitive modes of continuous and overwhelming formal innovation. American poetry since the end of World War II is an epitome of this reverse Emersonianism: no other poets in Western history have so self-deceivingly organized themselves along the supposed lines of formal divisions. The mimic wars of “closed” against “open” formers have masqueraded as conflicts between spiritual stances and ideological commitments: closed form, governed by metric and stanza, could thus be writ large as a settled insulation from experience, whereas open form, free-style and full of vatic self-confidence, reduced all experience to a chaos. And yet if we stand back now, after a quarter-century, we behold mostly a welter of wholly shared anxieties that unite the feuding camps.

The poets who were gathered together at their first full strength circa 1945 would include Robert Penn Warren, Richard Eberhart, Theodore Roethke, Elizabeth Bishop, Robert Lowell, John Berryman, Delmore Schwartz, J. V. Cunningham, Randall Jarrell, Richard Wilbur, Charles Olson, and Robert Duncan. They had as predecessors the most formidable group of poets in the American tradition, one that began with Edwin Arlington Robinson and Frost and proceeded through Pound, Eliot, Moore, Williams, Stevens, Ransom, and Jeffers down to a somewhat younger trio of e. e. cum-

mings, Hart Crane, and Allen Tate. Almost all the poets born in the first two decades of the twentieth century seem diminished today when juxtaposed very closely with those born in the last two or three decades of the nineteenth. Great achievement by the fathers sometimes exacts a price from the children, and something of the current strength of American poets born during the 1920s may derive from the sorrows and sacrifice of the middle generation of Roethke, Berryman, Jarrell, Lowell, and others.

We can distinguish two formal strains in the important American poets born during the closing decades of the nineteenth century. If we examine American poetic practice as opposed to theory in the nineteenth century, we see that the main British line of Spenserian-Miltonic poetry, which emerges as the romantic tradition, was carried on through Bryant, Poe, Longfellow, Timrod, and Lanier, while native strains were invented most plainly by Whitman, and more subtly by a gnomic group that includes Emerson, Thoreau, Melville, and, most grandly, Dickinson. The two strains, those of the English Romantic and the Emersonian gnomic, met and mingled in Robinson and Frost.

A third strain of Whitmanian innovation ended in the major outburst of 1915 and afterwards. The immediate influence of Whitman here—on Edgar Lee Masters, Vachel Lindsay, Carl Sandburg—was not fructifying, though these poets continue to be popular and their simplified idiom has much to do with the recent development of a quasi-folk music. However, a Whitmanian element in Pound, Williams, and even Eliot today seems far more central and vitalizing than the European influences so directly exalted by Eliot and Pound themselves and by their followers. An even more elusive Whitmanian influence, wholly divorced from formal considerations, was crucial for Stevens, whose major formal inheritance is as close to Wordsworth, Keats, and Tennyson as ever Bryant, Poe, and Longfellow were.

Despite its enormous range and power, Stevens's poetry has waited until the late 1960s and early 1970s to find a strong disciple in John Ashbery, whose own work took a turn away from surrealism and automatic writing in *The Double Dream of Spring*, *Three Poems*, and a number of uncollected lyrics. In Ashbery's best poems we look back through Stevens to Whitman in the employment of a long line, and in a rather oblique use of the cataloguing effect. There is a similar background for poets whose middle range of ancestry and poetic temperament appears to be occupied by Eliot. For instance, W. S. Merwin began during the mid-1960s to experiment with a celebratory kind of neoprimitivism: in *The Moving Target* and *The Lice*, broken syntax is making the dissociation Eliot saw as historically unfortunate but necessary. Yet Merwin has recovered the consolatory strain that belonged

to Whitman and decisively affected *The Waste Land* and *Four Quartets*, though Eliot in his own quite ambivalent public pronouncements had tried to eliminate Whitman from the acceptable "tradition" of poetry in the English language.

These cases illustrate the emergence during the past few years of a transcendentalism that has always been essential to American poetry but was for a time anxiously rejected by its surest descendants. The poets of the generation of Roethke-Lowell-Wilbur began with the sober admonition of Eliot and Auden; they were to return to closed forms, and forsake metrical innovation. They, together with their younger followers in the 1950s—Ashbery, Merwin, James Dickey, James Merrill, Anthony Hecht, James Wright, Louis Simpson, Richard Howard, John Hollander—discovered in their various ways that neither closed nor open forms could be anything but an evasion. Poets who came into their force somewhat later, such as Gary Snyder, A. R. Ammons, Galway Kinnell, and Mark Strand, were less troubled by constraints of form and so could start more comfortably from the fact. In short, never having labored under the illusion that there was some cross-cultural modern idiom to which they ought to aspire,⁵ they declared themselves from the first to be successors of Emerson and Whitman.

Among the closed formers it is Auden rather than Eliot who has been the steadiest influence. His idiom is still going strong in the most recent work of Merrill, Howard Moss, and Wilbur, had a determining effect on the early efforts of Hollander and Howard, and never left Jarrell. What separates the American disciples of Auden from many of their British counterparts is a revision of Auden's characteristic irony, which (as Donald Davie has remarked in a slightly different context) begins to realize in it the attitude that nature strikes in confronting man: not merely a man's own pose in confronting himself. This shift is evident also in matters of detail. Wilbur can be representative: his early and late poems look very nearly the same, but their technical evenness covers a progress away from the metaphysical conceits which used to lie thick on his pages. Similarly, Jarrell in his last work moved to the Wordsworthian pathos that had been his theme all along, and wrote increasingly in a loose iambic that allowed for much of the "inclusiveness" he had explicitly admired in Whitman. Howard in his most recent volumes has written dramatic monologues after the manner of Browning, while Hollander has tended to favor syllabics or else a highly enjambed accentual verse. Such a list might go on: the point is that poets who had their beginning in Auden, and whose early work can often be mistaken for Auden's, have by whatever route found a resting place in the native tradition.

Our emphasis ought to fall on a Wordsworthian-Whitmanian *subjec-*

tivity that is just and inevitable. Against this stands the mode of confessional verse, a matrix that has produced W. D. Snodgrass, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and many other figures. Confessional poetry owes its genesis to Lowell, whose earliest writing looked like a late metaphysical pastiche for which his only precursors might be Edward Taylor and Allen Tate. In *Life Studies* Lowell opened himself to the type of free verse pioneered by Williams, while using the form, as Williams had not done, to write his own life's story by way of the strictly clinical facts. In later works Lowell has put the same subject, himself, under a still more minute examination, reverting to the format of a diary and adopting the form of a fourteen-line entry written in flat pentameter. He is certainly the poet central to this movement, or tendency, in American poetry, and, though he has been a less imposing as well as a less domineering presence, he seems to be the logical successor to Eliot in the poetry of belief or anxious unbelief which ranges itself against the poetry of vision. Although the issue of form is as always bogus, the larger opposition here will probably be lasting.

Critics have ordinarily associated Lowell in this phase with the later work of Berryman, which belongs more appropriately to a consideration of Pound's influence. Berryman's *Dream Songs* have much of the terseness that Pound asked to be communicated from the tone of a poem to its prosody, and their way of setting an expressionistic personal stance over against imagistic hardness was also anticipated by Pound. It is only in his last and less individually realized songs that Berryman approaches Lowell.

Iris Murdoch has observed that imagism itself was never more than a fantastically stripped down version of late romanticism: personality was being reduced to its smallest points of perception without ever being expunged, so that a large claim for the self was at all events implicitly maintained. There was never any "extinction of personality," in Eliot's phrase. Pound recognized this when he embarked on his own private quest poem, the enormous and deliberately uncompleted *Cantos*, and his followers have taken roughly the same path. The Black Mountain School, including primarily Olson, Duncan, and Robert Creeley, can be counted among his most faithful. Olson's own epic was composed largely in Poundian cadences, though he professed to write according to a different rationale. Thus, projective verse is the name given to his exhortation to future bards to write by "field"—that is, using all the resources of a typewriter to complicate what the eye sees on the written page—and at the same time to plan their metric according to breath—that is, with a respect for the full and varied possibilities of exhalation helped by the human voice. Olson felt that he was licensed in principle as in practice by the metric of Shakespeare's later plays.

As all the manifestos show, there is an obscure but profound spiritual kinship that binds together Williams, Pound, Olson, and a much younger poet, Allen Ginsberg. The self-discoveries of Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, William Everson, and a host of lesser eminences, who were first heard from in the mid-1950s, are occasionally referred to as making a San Francisco Renaissance. The advent of the Beat Poets and the writing Duncan issued out of San Francisco may be set under the rubric of this event. Since the Beat Poets were noisiest in being reborn, have stayed active through their connection with Ferlinghetti's publishing enterprise, and compose the largest subset of this group, they have a special claim on our attention. In one sense these poets are Whitman's authentic heirs: they have his expansiveness, his belief in the democracy of the spirit, his sexual frankness, and they sing of the open road. But the myth has become a mystique in their hands, which merely to invoke is apparently to justify. In much of Ginsberg's work during the late 1950s and early 1960s, the elliptical image-making faculty of Williams has also been brought to bear, and it is to be noted that Williams associated himself with this poet's Whitmanian incarnation at its most aggressive pitch. At least one current in Williams's own poetry, however, ran directly contrary to Whitman, for Williams tended to freeze any given image in order to isolate it for contemplation, rather than immersing its solitariness in some wider flow of reverie. This is where the style of a poet and the deepest facts of his personality intersect, and on this point of style a disciple far truer to Williams than any of the "Howl"-Whitmanians has been Denise Levertov.

Williams's habit of regarding a poem as "observations," enlivened by the colloquial diction of Pound, helped to encourage Marianne Moore in one generation and Elizabeth Bishop in the next. An ingratiating element in both of these poets is that they seem to claim nothing for their role, or for their craft. The type of syllabic verse invented by Moore makes the prose of life concede very little to the poetry and sets nervousness very high among the faculties that aid perception. Similar qualities, though with a certain loosening as to form and a less jagged conception of what a poem ought to be, are notable throughout Bishop's work. The "mad exactness" that has often been remarked in her poetry is itself an exacting discipline, and may eventually be viewed as a corrective reaction against the thaumaturgical excesses of the modern tradition.

Another kind of reaction against modernism accounts for the group of New York poets in which Frank O'Hara, Kenneth Koch, James Schuyler, and Ashbery figure as significant names. The *opéra bouffe* of American silent films as well as a native surrealism is at work in the writing of this school:

O'Hara's *Second Avenue* can be considered an exemplum of the new mode thereby brought into being, which might be described as comic phantasmagoria. Such a poetics is in the last degree an urban phenomenon, and will be found irrevocably at odds with the school of pre-Wordsworthian, or indeed—as it likes to be thought—prehistorical clarity which we connect with the names of James Wright and Robert Bly.

Sooner or later, as has been noted, the proliferation of schools and methods must be understood as an impediment, not an aid to appreciation. There are two innovations that have some importance: first, the definitive sloughing off of the Georgian diction by Pound, Frost, and a few others. That the advance took place at a certain time and place has come to seem a truism, yet it holds within it an essential truth. There is also, a bit later, Williams's reassertion in free verse of the full range of ambiguity made possible by enjambment, when, as John Hollander has indicated, the rhetorical flexibility of that particular feature of English poetry had been allowed to lapse after Milton in the poetry of the late romantics and the Victorians. But, once we have taken these into account, the arguments within and between self-proclaiming schools are at best misleading. In the strongest and most characteristic poetry of the late 1960s and early 1970s, a transcendental synthesis of the various native strains seems to be developing, and what is emerging is clearly an expressionistic and severe version of American romanticism. At any rate, that is our safest generalization as we trace the continuity of individual careers. Thus Simpson, who was once allied with Bly and the Midwest clarifiers, appears in his liveliest work to have been relatively free of their defining impulse. Ashbery, sometimes categorized quite simply as one of the New York poets, instead moves together with Schuyler in an enormous ambience that includes the otherwise very diverse Merrill, Wright, Hecht, Ammons, Merwin, Hollander, Alvin Feinman, Kinnell, Strand, and many others, who are visionary, as Emerson prophesied they must be. The *stance* of all these poets makes impossible an expression in either closed- or open-phrased fields, and each has been compelled, in order to escape the fall into the confessional, to perform a deliberate curtailment of the revisionary impulse toward an endlessly journalistic scrutiny of himself, while simultaneously asking the fact for the form.

For what, finally, can poetic form mean to an American? Every American poet who aspires to strength knows that he starts in the evening-land, realizes he is a latecomer, fears to be only a secondary man.

Solitary,

Patient for the last voices of the dusk to die down, and the dusk