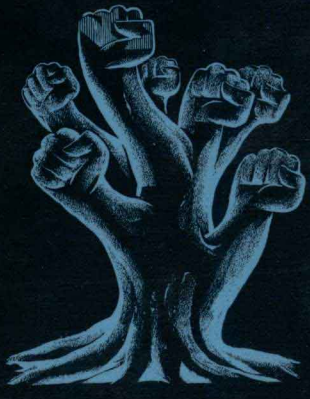
Revolutionary Memory

Recovering the Poetry of the American Left



Cary Nelson

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Advance praise for *Revolutionary Memory*

"Poetry of the American Left???! Damn straight. What Cary Nelson has done in this revolutionary book is to demonstrate that the old, contemptuous cold-war dismissals were based on plain ignorance. And he has turned the quite fascinating poetry of the American Left into a weapon to demolish the unexamined assumptions of high modernism, low pedantry, and middle-brow indifference to the power of political verse to engage memory and move people to act on their values."

—Paul Lauter, editor of the *Heath Anthology of American Literature*

"*Revolutionary Memory* bravely seeks to remember a truly *lost generation* of modernists—partisan poets who protested working conditions in the 1920s, the rise of fascism in Spain, the McCarthyite witch hunts. Cary Nelson makes the unfashionable claim that poetry makes something happen in history, and in the process restores the poetry of the Left to central stage in American culture."

—Michael Davidson, author of *Ghostlier Demarcations: Modern Poetry and The Material World*

"Cary Nelson, bad-boy avenger of our lost radical poets, is an angry critic; that's what makes him so good. Like Zarathustra, he hurls invective at complacent professors who systematically ignore, exclude, and deride American poetry's lively margins while they exploit both over-worked graduate students and tired critical practices to secure their careers.

Reading broadsides and ballads, wall carvings and leaflets, uncollected and even unpublished poems, he reconstructs crucial episodes in twentieth-century American left-wing history. *Revolutionary Memory* offers a who, what, when, where, and why of forgotten poets and poems: Anti-imperialist rhymes written to denounce America's war on the Philippines, lyrics celebrating workers' solidarity, doggerel mocking corrupt businessmen, verse exposing vicious racism – circulated in newspapers, poem cards, scrapbooks, and posters, as well as many leftist little magazines. Nelson offers a wealth of compelling examples and demonstrates how to read them.

Why has this tradition been lost? Laziness and political timidity and an inattention to the living history of poetry—its meaning to the lives of the dispossessed. Like an ace reporter, searching archives, attics, and used bookstores for evidence, Nelson locates the material culture of this tradition in the objects, life stories, and collective struggles of the poets; they offer the way to regain revolution's poetic memory."

—Paula Rabinowitz, author of *They Must Be Represented: The Politics of Documentary.*

Revolutionary Memory

About the Author

Cary Nelson is Jubilee Professor of Liberal Arts and Sciences and Professor of English and Criticism and Interpretive Theory at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. In addition to *Revolutionary Memory*, he is the author of *The Incarnate Word: Literature as Verbal Space* (1973), *Our Last First Poets: Vision and History in Contemporary American Poetry* (1981), *Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory, 1910–1945* (1989), *Shouts from the Wall: Posters and Photographs Brought Home from the Spanish Civil War by American Volunteers* (1996), *Manifesto of A Tenured Radical* (1997), and the coauthor of *Academic Keywords: A Devil's Dictionary for Higher Education* (1999). His edited or coedited books include *Theory in the Classroom* (1986), *W.S. Merwin: Essays on the Poetry* (1987), *Regions of Memory: Uncollected Prose by W.S. Merwin* (1987), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (1988), *Edwin Rolfe: A Biographical Essay and Guide to the Rolfe Archive at the University of Illinois* (1990), *Cultural Studies* (1992), *Edwin Rolfe's Collected Poems* (1993), *Higher Education Under Fire: Politics, Economics, and the Crisis of the Humanities* (1994), *Madrid 1937: Letters of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade from the Spanish Civil War* (1996), *Disciplinarity and Dissent in Cultural Studies* (1996), *Will Teach for Food: Academic Labor in Crisis* (1997), *The Aura of the Cause: A Photo Album for North American Volunteers in the Spanish Civil War* (1997), *Anthology of Modern American Poetry* (2000), and *The Wound and the Dream: Sixty Years of American Poems About the Spanish Civil War* (forthcoming). He is Vice President of the American Association of University Professors and serves on the Executive Council of the Modern Language Association.

To Paula

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Introduction

Every poem presents itself to us in company with a history of its reception. For literary scholars that history may include a massive set of commentaries and interpretations, textual companions that help establish not only a poem's value but also its meaning. The general reader may recall interpretations encountered in high school or college. Even a reader largely unfamiliar with a poet's critical history will notice which authors are readily available in bookstores, sometimes in multiple editions. Less canonical authors are often enough nowhere to be found.

For much of the poetry of the American Left, which is the focus of *Revolutionary Memory*, the accompanying public context is silence. The poets' names may stimulate no memories. The poems present themselves without much prior interpretation except a stamp of disapproval, typically a generic one without any specificity. To read progressive poetry now without reflecting on that problematic history is, in effect, to read it ahistorically, to sever the poetry's original aims and ambitions from its subsequent impact. If we are to follow Fredric Jameson's infamous dictum, "always historicize," we must actually historicize in several registers: from the perspective of the period under consideration; from within a critique of the enabling and disabling conditions of current culture; with awareness of the institutional history of our interpretive practices. To have any chance of recovering even a simulacrum of the poetry's original historical meaning, itself typically conflicted and plural, we must especially work through the barriers that block our access, or at least those we can learn to recognize. That is part of what I try to do in the following chapter. It is the first chapter because, I believe, reflection on our own historicity is a necessary precondition for any further knowledge. Contextualization is grounded simultaneously in efforts to understand our own contemporaneity and that of the past.

The form of the "Poetry Dossier" section of chapter 1 is that of a list, which

signifies that it represents but notable fragments of a history that cannot yet be written. Or, more accurately, if it were to be written, if I were to write it now, it would be anything but comprehensive or thorough. Not, I am sorry to say, that many would notice the lack. In twenty years of collecting the poetry of the American Left, I have acquired scores of books that never appear in modern poetry bibliographies or literary histories. And every month or so I find additional examples. We are not, in short, even ready to produce a complete bibliography of American poetry of the Left, let alone a reasonably comprehensive account. That is not to say that perfectly persuasive comprehensive narratives could not be written. It is rather that the better course for now is to resist the temptation. By far the largest gaps in our knowledge, however, are not from the Red decade of the 1930s, which is the major focus of this book and for which good accounts can be given, but rather from the half-century that leads up to the 1930s. For the 1930s the process of recovery is well under way, and for numerous other historical moments it is possible to construct rich local narratives. Yet whole traditions of American Left poetry, including some written in other languages by and for recent immigrants, remain invisible. Thus, as I have written elsewhere,

> Although the archive is not without Left artifacts, there is another sense in which we have reason to doubt that they exist. To the extent that Left culture exists only so long as we continue to tell stories about it, to the extent that Left poetry and politics have meaning only when we speak of them, that otherwise Left culture falls silent, unable to be spoken of and unable to speak to us, to that extent, indeed, it will seem as though the Left did not exist. There is a quite practical sense in which a forgotten culture seems never to have existed and in which the effort to recover it thus feels like phantasmatic invention. In failing to tell appropriate stories—both in academia and in our public culture—we have in a very real sense driven the Left out of existence. Reaching out to it from the vantage point of the dominant culture's coercive silence requires breaking through that aura of the improbable and the impossible.[1]

Recovery alone, therefore, is incomplete without a serious interpretive effort, preferably in the form of a dialogue among numerous critics. The necessity for interpretation is particularly strong with many of the poems by women, minority writers, and poets on the Left reprinted over the last several decades. For these poems not only deal with topics unfamiliar to many readers but also employ rhetorical strategies and embody aesthetic principles different from those long valorized in canonical poems. Central to much of the political poetry of the 1930s is an aesthetic of the differential field, through which we read poems not only as discrete objects but also as varied contributions to collective

discourses, taking pleasure in both reoccurence and variation, in repetition and transformation. Recovered poems cannot have a full cultural life, cannot do the cultural work they might otherwise do, unless people are taught such new ways to read them. Many of the meanings poems acquire are granted them by critical prose. Without those supplementary meanings the poems themselves may be strangely silent or substantially curtailed. In the first chapter and throughout the book I begin that work for a representative group of texts. Other critics at work on parallel projects include Rita Barnard, Nancy Berke, James Bloom, Michael Davidson, Alan Filreis, Barbara Foley, Lee Furey, Joseph Harrington, Walter Kalaidjian, Paul Lauter, William Maxwell, Paula Rabinowitz, James Smethurst, Michael Thurston, Mark Van Wienen, and Alan Wald.[2] As my quotations from some of these critics will demonstrate, a community of scholars working on progressive literature has gradually emerged over the last decade.

Some of these critics are working in other genres and cultural domains. Barbara Foley has studied the proletarian novel; James Bloom has written about the careers of radical journalists and cultural commentators; Michael Denning has written broadly about Popular Front cultural analysis; Paula Rabinowitz has chronicled the documentary traditions that flowered in the 1930s. There is even some evidence of more contextualized political readings of canonical figures long thought to be writing outside politics and history, Alan Filreis' work on Wallace Stevens being perhaps the most notable example. Finally, among the several literary movements of the period needing a more contextualized and politically nuanced analysis is Objectivism. George Oppen and Carl Rakosi were party members, while Charles Reznikoff and Louis Zukofsky were fellow travelers. Their formal experimentation was often linked to social causes. Mark Scroggins and Michael Davidson are among the scholars doing that important work on Objectivism.

My aim here has not been to cover all these subjects but rather to teach by example. Following chapter 1, I demonstrate by example what are, I believe, the other two most important ways of thinking about American poetry of the Left. I see these two models of reading and recovery less as competing approaches than as two sides of the same coin, necessary dimensions of understanding that balance, complement, and challenge one another. The first approach, exemplified in the chapter on Edwin Rolfe, combines biography and history. The second, embodied in the two "poetry chorus" chapters, focuses on community and continuity in the collective enterprise of progressive poetry. The two poetry chorus chapters come last in the book to suggest that in some of the key constitutive moments of political poetry a collective literature is a destination and an overriding value; it triumphs over the individual voice.

It would be easy enough to blur the distinctions between the historicized biography of the chapter on Rolfe and the collective erasure of individual careers in the poetry chorus chapters. I could insert extended comparisons with other poets into the Rolfe chapter and add detailed comments about individual poets' work to the last two chapters. That would, however, lessen what I believe, at least for now, are the productive tensions between these approaches, tensions without which they cannot compensate for and balance one another. These tensions, of course, represent historical necessities; they are a product of the history of literary studies and embody its current needs.

Revolutionary Memory is both a case study of poets and poetry communities and an attempt to model the major approaches I recommend for the recovery of progressive poetry. None of these approaches is free of controversy. Arguing that our understanding is shaped and limited by its historicality runs counter to the still dominant assumption that we can master the past and make final judgments about the quality and nature of its artifacts. Literary biography, on the other hand, has had its slavish devotees and its unqualified opponents. Some believe it answers all important questions, while others believe it has ruined modern criticism. Hugely popular outside academia, biographical approaches to literary history have long been despised in the academy, primarily since the New Criticism rejected biography in favor of immanent textual analysis. My aim here is not to reject such close readings, since I employ them myself, but rather to show what a properly conceived biography can add to them. Of course one could write essays similar to this one focusing on Rolfe about dozens of poets on the Left, which is precisely my point—to provide a model for what others can do.

From a period when biography was uncritically taken to tell us everything we need to know about a literary text, professional literary studies moved in the 1940s and thereafter to a conviction that biography could tell us nothing, that it blocked properly textual knowledge, which was knowledge about a self-sufficient and independent artifact. Meanwhile, in recent decades, popular taste has reinvested in biographical narrative and thus convinced readers that literary criticism is irrelevant. These twin categories of eager devotion and principled rejection are in their ways equally impoverished. In neither of these models does the study of the dynamic relations between texts and history fare well.

At least for the Left, I would argue that biography is often both necessary and inescapable. Yet biography on the Left is almost never primarily a personal story. Writers on the Left live their lives in a conscious struggle with historical conditions and historical ambitions. They write at the intersection of personal experience and contemporary events. Indeed many of them find their lives

taken up and transformed by contemporary struggles. It is the explicit fusion of biography and history in Left poetry that makes the personal lives of these poets relevant.

Of course every human life is lived in an historical context, its fears and dreams shaped by what it is possible to imagine in a given time. Even poets who turn inward live within historically constituted horizons. And poets who turn inward often enough have their lives dramatically transformed by historical forces they thought they could ignore. When war swept across Europe in the 1940s, few lyrical or transcendentalizing poets could avoid its impact. But poets whose life and work is formed by meditation on the possibility of historical and political agency bring these issues to the foreground. For them historical contingency is the very marrow of their work.

The only alternative to acknowledging these issues is to impoverish the poetry, to deny it contextual meanings that may enrich it immeasurably. In the chapter on Rolfe, I talk about a poem he wrote beside the battlefield grave of a college friend shot dead but three days earlier. That is not the only meaning the poem has—indeed Rolfe reaches for a generalized message not dependent on biographical knowledge. Yet knowing that he puts his personal feelings at a distance—or perhaps uses them differently—enriches our appreciation of what is at stake. Part of what is at stake is the historical significance of the war Rolfe and his college friend were fighting in—the first phase of the century's defining struggle between democracy and fascism. Yet biography here does not provide any definitive or unmediated answers. Here I am trying to build a case based on a *depersonalized* autobiographical poem, a poem grounded in the struggle to transform personal experience into something else. Thus biography is part of the picture, but it is no less problematic than any other form of relevant knowledge.

Like Rolfe, poets of the Left often involved themselves in progressive causes, then wrote about them; indeed the writing was a form of public action. So their poetry and their personal lives are inescapably entangled with contemporary events. They are not the only poets about whom that can be said—it is true, for example, of virtually every wartime poet—but it is a decisive factor in their work, often throughout their careers. It is important to realize in Rolfe's case, for example, that his searing and sardonic poems about McCarthyism grow out of the struggles he and his friends had as they were blacklisted, lost their jobs, and saw their progressive causes demonized. Rolfe's effort to turn his anguish into effective action, to control his rhetoric while giving full force to the demonic character of the inquisition, is embedded in the poems themselves.

Because the Left has been marginalized in the United States and cast out of the dominant culture, progressive poets are typically highly conscious of their

cultural and historical positioning. Other poets who belong to marginalized groups, notably African-American and Native American poets, are similarly preoccupied with social and political issues. I have thus found that biography is particularly important in the recovery of texts outside the dominant cultures of their day, but not biography of the wholly private and idiosyncratic sort. Writers on the margins of American culture—whether women, minorities, or writers on the Left—often live and work through a particularly intense, sometimes anguished, relationship with the social, political, and subcultural realities of their time. For many oppositional writers, politics, history, and cultural conflict are partly source, cause, and *raison d'etre*. What one encounters in their work is often a biographically inflected reaction to a subcultural experience of current history. Biography and history thus interact in a way that defines their enterprise; of course these marginalized groups sometimes overlap, as poets of the Left and African-American poets did from the 1920s through the 1950s, or feminist poets and poets of the Left did in the antiwar movement of the century's second decade.

The final two essays in the book take much the opposite approach. They focus on the collective enterprise of progressive poetry, on moments when poetry becomes part of a broad social or political movement. Since much progressive poetry has been faulted precisely for its thematic similarity, for its lack of defining difference, much of the first phase of critical recovery has had to emphasize the distinctive contributions individual poets made. That was what I did in my own *Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory, 1910–1945* (1989).[3] Conservative critics have for decades claimed all this poetry was both undistinguished and indistinguishable. Since neither they nor virtually anyone else in academia read it, that was a safe evaluation to make.

Our first defense has thus been to begin making the distinctions scholarship has ignored for half a century. But there is another important aspect to the poetry of the 1930s—its common political purpose and shared subject matter and imagery—that has as a result been placed in the background. It is thus in a deeper sense that these chapters go against the grain of widespread critical opinion. For I believe it is time to take on the most despised, even reviled, feature of proletarian poetry, its commonality and shared cultural mission. I am therefore trying to reformulate a perceived weakness as a genuine strength. The unifying historical and rhetorical elements of progressive poetry give it special power and meaning.

That is not to say that the poets of the Left all wrote with one voice. No one would be likely to mistake Kenneth Fearing's frenetic collage poems for anyone

else's. Muriel Rukeyser's mysticism is distinctly her own. Langston Hughes's witty and decidedly vernacular debunkings of Christianity are one of his unique achievements. Yet in moments of particular crisis or public inspiration progressive poets wrote as part of a collective enterprise. For some years the very need to differentiate has blocked us from either theorizing or describing the poetry's collective power. That is what I try to do in my third and fourth chapters.

We are accustomed to grouping poets within literary movements, but thereafter we tend to read and understand their work individually. Yet on the Left the historical conditions of both production and reception are sometimes fundamentally interactive, reactive, and responsive. A poet who seeks in part to be an instrument in a larger musical composition is not pursuing the same aesthetic as one who thinks only of a solo performance. That does not disallow a distinctive voice but rather turns it toward collective aims and effects. As I try to show in the last chapter, more than sixty years of elegies about Federico García Lorca form a tradition with its own rhetorical devices and reasons for existence. The individual poems are chapters in a larger story, one whose end is not yet in sight.

Here too I imagine this project as a representative and heuristic one. If *Repression and Recovery* tried to give people reasons to expand the modern poetry canon dramatically, *Revolutionary Memory* tries to suggest key ways in which that work needs to be done. As I suggested in *Repression and Recovery*, modern poetry is not only a verbal but also a visual phenomenon. *Revolutionary Memory* gathers together a new collection of now little-known or rare illustrations to establish the case for progressive poetry still more fully.

I offer two chapters on the great collective meta-poems of the 1930s—the Depression-era revolutionary intertext of 1929–1936 and the international outpouring of poetic support for Spain of 1936–1939. In the second of these essays I also look at the way this subject continued to haunt the Left in the decades to follow. Chapters 3 and 4 demonstrate the importance of historicizing and differentiating the distinctive phases of a choral poetics. This sort of collectivity has considerable historical specificity; it is an ongoing transformative ensemble of responses to emerging conditions. From the vantage point of American New Criticism's political perspective, 1930s political poetry seems largely undifferentiated. Yet the revolutionary poetry of the first half of the decade actually takes up very different topics than the popular front poetry of the decade's second half. The field of reference for the poetry focused on the Great Depression, moreover, was primarily national. The focus in the next phase of choral poetry was European fascism and the Spanish Civil War. The sense of poetic community became decidedly international.

Some poets, among them Angelina Weld Grimké, Langston Hughes, and

Edwin Rolfe, appear in multiple chapters; that is partly a way of showing that political poets merit readings by way of all the approaches mustered here—from the vantage point of their reception history, through the conjunction of biography and history in their work, and as participants in group processes. This also makes available the play of difference and similarity in their work. And the reoccurrences are partly corrective. We first read a Grimké poem in the context of her personal isolation and then in the context of a wider discourse about race. We first read Rolfe's poems in the context of his own life and career and then in the context of a revolutionary movement.

The same poems, therefore, instantiate difference and similarity. Yet the poetry of the Left is not about difference for its own sake but rather about difference as a contribution to community. In that regard a choral poetics is certainly not a mirror of all progressive political and cultural action, for it tends to address common aims and ideals rather than sectarian differences. Even among Spanish poets of the war years, communist and anarchist poems could coexist in a way political advocates of equivalent positions could not. The enemy in Left poetry tends to be the common enemy—capitalism for the poetry of chapter 3, fascism for the poetry of chapter 4.

That said, the notion of difference as a contribution to community will be substantially foreign to many modern poetry scholars. Eliot and Pound may be rooted in modernist experimentation, each in his own way cobbling together a collage of historical and literary allusions, but their shared preoccupations recede for most scholars so far into the background as to become merely preliminary to everything that makes each poet who he is. For progressive poets, on the other hand, difference has to be understood as partly celebrating, enhancing, and advancing a collective project. To relearn such values many readers will have to unlearn others, including the sacramental devotion to exceptionalism that has shaped the dominant culture's literary memory. Throughout the book, notably, subjectivity is the ground of a negotiation with history, not a radical alternative to it. It signals how a writer internalizes and responds to contemporary events.

Revolutionary Memory is overall a book about continuities. That is a product of my focus on the poetry of the Left, whose traditions have their own relative autonomy. It is an autonomy produced at once by common goals and aspirations and by opposition to the dominant culture. Yet one could easily cast a wider net and conceptualize a body of political poetry inclusive of all positions. This could be done either diachronically or synchronically. Then progressive poetry would be in dynamic dialogue and conflict with more conservative poetry. The continuities foregrounded when we think about subcultures would then be set against difference as conflict.

Much the same pattern obtains for other subcultural traditions. If feminist poetry is subsumed within the larger category of poetry about gender, as I have sought to do in an essay, "The Fate of Gender in Modern American Poetry," then continuity is set against discontinuity.[4] Then women's efforts to redefine gender are played off against conservative resistance to that very project. Rather than the subcultural progressive impulse, the whole modernist obsession with the struggle over gender occupies center stage. Similarly, if the poetry of the Harlem Renaissance is subsumed within the larger category of American poetry about race, a very long historical clash between progressive and racist poetry becomes the subject of a very different sort of history. Racist poetry published in newspapers or by the Ku Klux Klan itself may be set against the progressive poetry published by both white and black writers for more than a hundred years. If *Revolutionary Memory* is a book about community, then, there is a parallel book to be written about conflict. Indeed that is my next book project.

Part of what a book focused on difference cannot so easily inherit, however, is the long historical sweep that culminates in the collective poetry of the 1930s. From the abolitionist poets in the mid-nineteenth century through the anti-imperialist poets at the century's end, from nineteenth-century labor songs through the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) songbook of the early twentieth century, runs a revolutionary undercurrent seeking to enrich and empower the underclass with a vision of freedom and mutual responsibility. This multiform tradition culminates in the infamous red decade devoted to radical change that lies at the heart of this book. Its poetry is at once a scandal and a revelation. The scandal, as I try to show, is not only political but also epistemological. For poetry's political apotheosis comes in the form of collective knowledge and collective action.