



# CRITICISM

VOLUME

1

# Poetry Criticism

*Excerpts from Criticism of the Works  
of the Most Significant and Widely  
Studied Poets of World Literature*

## VOLUME 1

Robyn W. Young  
Editor

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## Preface

At various points in literary history, poetry has been defined as “jigging veins of rhyming mother wits” (Christopher Marlowe); “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” (William Wordsworth); “the opening and closing of a door, leaving those who look through to guess about what is seen during a moment” (Carl Sandburg); and “a momentary stay against confusion” (Robert Frost). The study of poetry produces a natural curiosity about the political, social, moral, and literary trends of a particular time period and is an essential element of a well-rounded liberal arts curriculum.

*Poetry Criticism (PC)* was created in response to librarians serving high school, college, and public library patrons who noted an increasing number of requests for critical material on poets. Like its Gale predecessor in genre-oriented studies, *Short Story Criticism (SSC)*, which presents material on writers of short fiction, *PC* is designed to provide users with substantial critical excerpts and biographical information on the world’s most frequently discussed and studied poets in high school and undergraduate college courses. Each *PC* entry is supplemented by biographical and bibliographical material to help guide the user to a greater understanding of the genre and its creators. Although major poets and movements are covered in such Gale Literary Criticism Series as *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)*, *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism (TCLC)*, *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism (NCLC)*, *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800 (LC)*, and *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism (CMLC)*, *PC* offers more focused attention on individual poets than is possible in the broader, survey-oriented entries on writers in these Gale series.

### Scope of the Work

In order to reflect the influence of tradition as well as innovation, poets from various nationalities, eras, and movements will be represented in every volume of *PC*. For example, the present volume includes commentary on Emily Dickinson, one of the most popular and widely read American poets of the nineteenth century; Charles Baudelaire, considered one of the world’s greatest lyric poets, whose *Les fleurs du mal* continues to elicit scholarly attention and debate; Langston Hughes, the Harlem Renaissance poet whose verse reflects the aspirations and disappointments of modern African-Americans; and John Donne, the English scholar and artist whose secular and divine poems have generated contrasting critical opinion during the past four hundred years. Since many of these poets have inspired a prodigious amount of critical explication, *PC* is necessarily selective, and the editors have chosen the most important published criticism to aid readers and students in their research.

Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the generous excerpts and supplementary material provided by *PC* supply them with vital information needed to write a term paper on poetic technique, examine a poet’s most prominent themes, or lead a poetry discussion group. Twelve to fifteen authors will be analyzed in each volume, and each author entry presents a historical survey of the critical response to that author’s work. Some early reviews are included to indicate initial reaction and are often written by the author’s contemporaries, while current analyses provide a modern view. The length of an entry is intended to reflect the amount of critical attention that the author has received from critics writing in English and from foreign critics in translation. Critical articles and books that have not been translated into English are excluded. Every attempt has been made to identify and include excerpts from the most significant essays on each author’s work. In order to provide these important critical pieces, the editors will sometimes reprint essays that have appeared in previous volumes of Gale’s Literary Criticism Series. Such duplication, however, never exceeds fifteen percent of a *PC* volume. Finally, because of space limitations, the reader may find that some important articles are not excerpted. Instead, these pieces may be found in the author’s further reading list, with complete bibliographic information followed by a brief descriptive note.

### Organization of the Book

A *PC* author entry consists of the following components:

- The **author heading** cites the name under which the author wrote, followed by birth and death dates. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and his or her legal name given in parentheses on the first line of the biographical and critical introduction. Uncertainty as to a birth or death date is indicated by question marks.

- The **biographical and critical introduction** contains background information designed to introduce a reader to the author and to the critical discussions surrounding his or her work. Parenthetical material following the introduction provides references to other biographical and critical series published by Gale, including *CLC*, *TCLC*, *NCLC*, *LC*, *CMLC*, and *SSC*, *Children's Literature Review*, *Contemporary Authors*, *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, and *Something about the Author*.
- A **portrait of the author** is included when available. Many entries also contain illustrations of materials pertinent to an author's career, including holographs of manuscript pages, title pages, dust jackets, letters, or representations of important people, places, and events in the author's life.
- The list of **principal works** is chronological by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The first section comprises poetry collections and book-length poems. The second section gives information on other major works by the author. For foreign authors, the editors have provided original foreign-language publication information and have selected what are considered the best and most complete English-language editions of their works.
- The **critical excerpts** are arranged chronologically in each author entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over the years. All individual titles of poems and poetry collections by the author featured in the entry are printed in boldface type to enable a reader to ascertain without difficulty the works under discussion. For purposes of easier identification, the critic's name and the publication date of the essay are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the journal in which it originally appeared. Publication information (such as publisher names and book prices) and parenthetical numerical references (such as footnotes or page and line references to specific editions of a work) have been deleted at the editor's discretion to provide smoother reading of the text.
- Critical excerpts are prefaced with **explanatory notes** as an additional aid to students and readers using *PC*. The explanatory notes provide several types of useful information, including: the reputation of a critic, the importance of a work of criticism, and the specific type of criticism (biographical, psychoanalytic, historical, etc.).
- Whenever available, **insightful comments from the authors themselves and excerpts from author interviews** are also included. Depending upon the length of such material, an author's commentary may be set within boxes or boldface rules.
- A complete **bibliographical citation**, designed to help the interested reader locate the original essay or book, follows each piece of criticism.
- The **further reading list** appearing at the end of each entry suggests additional materials for study of the author. In some cases it includes essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights.

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When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume in the Literary Criticism Series may use the following general formats to footnote reprinted criticism. The first example pertains to material drawn from periodicals, the second to material reprinted from books:

- <sup>1</sup> David Daiches, "W. H. Auden: The Search for a Public," *Poetry* LIV (June 1939), 148–56; excerpted and reprinted in *Poetry Criticism*, Vol. 1, ed. Robyn V. Young (Detroit: Gale Research, 1991), pp. 20–2.
- <sup>2</sup> Pamela J. Annas, *A Disturbance in Mirrors: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath* (Greenwood Press, 1988); excerpted and reprinted in *Poetry Criticism*, Vol. 1, ed. Robyn V. Young (Detroit: Gale Research, 1991), pp. 289–301.

### **Suggestions Are Welcome**

Readers who wish to suggest authors to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editors.

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## Authors to Be Featured in *PC*, Volumes 2 and 3

**Anna Akhmatova**, 1888–1966 (Russian poet, translator, and essayist)—Generally considered Russia's finest female poet, Akhmatova is often regarded as Boris Pasternak's successor in the Silver Age of Soviet literature. Although her life under Stalinism was marred by tragedy, Akhmatova is acclaimed for her ability to recreate her experiences in poems which reveal a love of nature and humankind.

**Robert Browning**, 1812–1889 (English poet and dramatist)—One of the most prominent poets of the Victorian era, Browning is chiefly remembered for his mastery of the dramatic monologue and for the diversity and scope of his works. In "Fra Lippo Lippi," "Andrea del Sarto," and his masterpiece, *The Ring and the Book*, Browning advanced the art of the dramatic monologue to new levels of technical and psychological sophistication.

**Hart Crane**, 1899–1932 (American poet and essayist)—Often compared to William Blake, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Charles Baudelaire, Crane sought salvation through art from the spiritual torment of human existence. His major work, *The Bridge*, has undergone substantial critical reevaluation since its publication in 1930.

**Federico García Lorca**, 1898–1936 (Spanish poet, dramatist, critic, and essayist)—One of Spain's most important twentieth-century poets, García Lorca combined his knowledge of Spanish and classical literature with folk and gypsy ballads to create an idiom at once traditional, modern, and personal. His verse attests to the beauty and excitement of life experienced close to a natural order.

**Horace**, 65–8 B.C. (Roman poet and prose writer)—Horace served as Principal Poet of Rome and the Imperial Court during the reign of Emperor Augustus. His *Satires* and *Epodes* remain among the most renowned verse in world literature.

**Claude McKay**, 1889–1948 (American poet, novelist, short story writer, journalist, essayist, and autobiographer)—The first prominent writer of the Harlem Renaissance, McKay searched among the black working class for his subject matter and for a means of preserving the creativity of the African spirit in an alienating world. McKay was successful in converting anger and racial protest into such poems as "If We Must Die," an eloquent piece which reaffirms the African-American's willingness to die for freedom.

**Arthur Rimbaud**, 1854–1891 (French poet)—Rimbaud is regarded as an important forerunner of the Symbolist movement and a major influence on twentieth-century poetry and poetics. His major works, *Les illuminations* and *Une saison en enfer*, demonstrate his contributions to the development of the prose poem and his innovative use of the subconscious as a source of literary inspiration.

**Walt Whitman**, 1819–1892 (American poet, essayist, novelist, short story writer, journalist, and editor)—One of America's seminal poets, Whitman sought to reach the common people whom he felt were ignored by a literature written for the elite. His masterpiece, *Leaves of Grass*, remains a classic in American letters.

## Additional Authors to Appear in Future Volumes

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# W. H. Auden

1907-1973

(Full name: Wystan Hugh Auden) English-born American poet, critic, essayist, dramatist, editor, translator, and librettist.

Auden is recognized as one of the preeminent poets of the twentieth century. His poetry centers on moral issues and evidences strong political, social, and psychological orientations. In his work, Auden applied conceptual and scientific knowledge to traditional verse forms and metrical patterns while assimilating the industrial countryside of his youth. He thereby created an allegorical landscape rife with machinery, abandoned mines, and technological references. Commentators agree that Auden's canon represents a quest for a systematic ideology in an increasingly complex world. This search is illuminated in its early stages by the teachings of Sigmund Freud and Karl Marx and later by philosopher Søren Kierkegaard and theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. Auden's poetry is versatile and inventive; ranging from terse, epigrammatic pieces to book-length verse, it incorporates the author's vast knowledge and displays his efforts to discipline his prodigious talent. Affirming Auden's influence on twentieth-century poetry, Seamus Heaney commented: "Auden was an epoch-making poet on public themes, the register of a new sensibility, a great sonneteer, a writer of perfect light verse, a prospector of literature at its most illiterate roots and a dandy of lexicography at its most extravagant reaches."

Auden was born and raised in heavily industrial northern England. His father, a prominent physician whose knowledge extended into the mythology and folklore of his Icelandic ancestry, and his mother, a strict Anglican, both exerted strong influences on Auden's poetry. Auden's early interest in science and engineering earned him a scholarship to Oxford University, where his fascination with poetry caused him to change his field of study to English. His attraction to science never waned, however, and scientific references are frequently found in his poetry. While at Oxford, Auden became familiar with modernist poetry, particularly that of T. S. Eliot, which was to influence his early writing. It was also at Oxford that Auden became the pivotal member of a group of writers that included Stephen Spender, C. Day Lewis, and Louis MacNeice, a collective variously labeled the "Oxford Group" or the "Auden Generation." These authors adhered to various communist and anti-fascist doctrines and expressed in their writings social, political, and economic concerns, all of which are evident in Auden's work of the 1930s.

In 1928, Auden's first book, *Poems*, was privately printed by Stephen Spender. During the same year, T. S. Eliot accepted Auden's verse play *Paid on Both Sides* for publication in his magazine *Criterion*. This play, along with many poems from the 1928 collection, appeared in an early revision of Auden's *Poems* that was published on Eliot's urging in 1930. Critics noted that these early poems display the influences of Thomas Hardy, Laura Riding, Wilfred Owen, and Edward Thomas and commended the collection for its ability, in M. D. Zabel's words, to "evoke a



music wholly beyond reason, extraordinarily penetrating and creative in its search for significance behind fact." Stylistically, these poems are fragmentary and terse, relying on concrete images and colloquial language to convey Auden's political and psychological concerns. In his next volume, *The Orators: An English Study*, Auden implemented modernist and surrealist techniques to detail and satirize fascism and the stagnation of British life and institutions, although much of the work consists of private allusions, jokes, and references to his friends. Despite its abstruseness, *The Orators* was praised for its adventurous experimentation with literary styles and lively and original use of English verse and prose. During the next few years, the pieces Auden published in periodicals and anthologies evidenced a gradual change in his verse style. Many of these poems are collected in *Look, Stranger!* (published in the United States as *On This Island*), in which Auden's development of a highly disciplined style is expressed in the volume's dedication to Erika Mann: "Since the external disorder, and extravagant lies, / . . . What can truth treasure, or heart bless, / But a narrow strictness?" These poems are written in an intensely formal style that appears to eschew Romantic idealism and modernism and is seemingly intended to offset contemporary chaos. The change in Auden's approach prompted Gavin Ewart to comment:

"Mr. Auden's verse has undergone a considerable simplification and a more severe formal discipline, emerging both concise and emotive, in the political poems of very great powers and in the love poems . . . of very great sympathy and tenderness."

Auden's poems from the second half of the 1930s evidence his many travels during this period of political turmoil. "Spain," one of his most famous and widely anthologized pieces, is based upon his experiences in that country during the civil war. *Letters from Iceland*, a travel book written in collaboration with MacNeice, contains Auden's poem "Letter to Lord Byron." This long epistle to the author of *Don Juan* derives from that work the metaphor of the journey for artistic growth and displays Auden's mastery of ottava rima, a stanza of eight lines of heroic verse with a rhyme scheme of *abababcc*. *Journey to War*, a book about China written with Christopher Isherwood, features Auden's sonnet sequence and verse commentary "In Time of War." The first half of the sequence recounts the history of humanity's move away from rational thought, while the second half addresses the moral problems faced by humankind on the verge of another world war.

Auden left England in 1939 and became a citizen of the United States. His first book as an emigrant, *Another Time*, contains some of his best-known poems, among them "September 1, 1939," "Musée des Beaux Arts," and "Lay Your Sleeping Head, My Love." *Another Time* also contains elegies to A. E. Housman, Matthew Arnold, and William Butler Yeats, from whose careers and aesthetic concerns Auden was beginning to develop his own artistic credo. A famous line from "In Memory of W. B. Yeats"—"Poetry makes nothing happen"—presents Auden's complete rejection of romantic tenets. Auden's increasing concentration on ethical concerns in *Another Time* points to his reconversion to Christianity, which he had abandoned at age 15. His reconversion was influenced by his disillusionment with secular political solutions, his reading of the works of Kierkegaard, and his personal friendships with Niebuhr and theological writer Charles Williams. These concerns are central to *The Double Man* and *For the Time Being*. *The Double Man* contains "New Year Letter," a long epistolary poem outlining Auden's readings of Christian literature, while *For the Time Being* features two allegorical pieces that present in prose and verse the author's views on art and life. The title poem of *For the Time Being* is a rendering of the Nativity that utilizes technical language derived from modern science and psychology in order to rationalize Christian faith. Even more ambitious is *The Sea and the Mirror: A Commentary on Shakespeare's "Tempest,"* considered by many critics to be Auden's best extended poem. Taking characters from *The Tempest*, *The Sea and the Mirror* represents, according to Herbert Greenberg, "Auden's conception of the true function of art; both mimetic and paradigmatic, its purpose is not only to show us as we truly are but also, by its example of order, to suggest that we might be different and better."

Auden's next volume, *The Collected Poetry*, in which he revised, retitled, or excluded many of his earlier poems, helped solidify his reputation as a major poet. *The Age of Anxiety: A Baroque Eclogue*, winner of the Pulitzer Prize for poetry, features four characters of disparate backgrounds who meet in a New York City bar during World War II. Written in the heavily alliterative style of Old En-

glish literature, the poem explores the attempts of the protagonists to comprehend themselves and the world in which they live. The characters fail to attain self-realization and succumb to their immediate desires rather than adhering to a spiritual faith. Auden's next major work, *Nones*, includes another widely anthologized piece, "In Praise of Limestone," and the first poems of the "Horae Canonicae" sequence. This sequence, and another entitled "Bucolics," are contained in *The Shield of Achilles*, for which Auden received the National Book Award. These works, though less overtly Christian in content, are serene meditations on human existence informed by the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, historical events of the Christian church, and elements of nature. *Homage to Clio*, in similar fashion, begins the sequence "Thanksgiving for a Habitat," which appeared in its entirety in *About the House* in 1965. In these poems, Auden expressed the conflict between the private and public spheres of an artist's life.

In his later years, Auden wrote three more major volumes—*City without Walls and Other Poems*, *Epistle to a Godson and Other Poems*, and the posthumously published *Thank You, Fog: Last Poems*. All three works are noted for their lexical range and humanitarian content. Auden's penchant for altering and discarding poems has prompted the publication of several anthologies since his death. The 1976 *Collected Poems* is faithful to Auden's last revisions, while *The English Auden: Poems, Essays, and Dramatic Writings, 1927-1939* includes the original versions of Auden's early writings as well as portions of his dramatic and critical pieces. Included in *The English Auden* is an uncompleted work, *The Prolific and the Devourer*, an epigrammatic piece written in the manner of Blaise Pascal and William Blake.

Auden's career has undergone much reevaluation through the years. While some critics contend that he wrote his finest work when his political sentiments were less obscured by religion and philosophy, others defend his later material as the work of a highly original and mature intellect. Many critics echo the assessment of Auden's career by the National Book Committee, which awarded him the National Medal for Literature in 1967: "[Auden's poetry] has illuminated our lives and times with grace, wit and vitality. His work, branded by the moral and ideological fires of our age, breathes with eloquence, perception and intellectual power."

(For further information on Auden's life and career, see *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, Vols. 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 9, 11, 14, 43; *Contemporary Authors*, Vols. 9-12, rev. ed., Vols. 45-48 [obituary]; *Contemporary Authors New Revision Series*, Vol. 5; and *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vols. 10, 20.)

## PRINCIPAL WORKS

### POETRY

- Poems* 1928; revised editions, 1933, 1960, 1965  
*Paid on Both Sides: A Charade* 1930; published in periodical *Criterion*  
*The Orators: An English Study* 1932; revised edition, 1967

- Look, Stranger!* 1936; also published as *On This Island*, 1937  
*Letters from Iceland* [with Louis MacNeice] 1937; revised edition, 1969  
*Spain* 1937  
*Selected Poems* 1938  
*Journey to a War* [with Christopher Isherwood] 1939; revised edition, 1973  
*Another Time* 1940  
*Some Poems* 1940  
*The Double Man* 1941; also published as *New Year Letter*, 1941  
*Three Songs for St. Cecilia's Day* 1941  
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*Collected Shorter Poems, 1930-44* 1950  
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*Thank You, Fog: Last Poems* 1974  
*Collected Poems* 1976  
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## OTHER MAJOR WORKS

- The Ascent of F6: A Tragedy in Two Acts* (drama) 1931  
*The Dance of Death* (drama) 1934  
*The Dog beneath the Skin; or, Where Is Francis?* (drama) 1936  
*The Oxford Book of Light Verse* [editor] (anthology) 1938  
*The Rocking-Horse Winner* (radio play) 1941  
*The Enchafed Flood* (essays and criticism) 1950  
*The Dyer's Hand, and Other Essays* (criticism) 1962  
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*A Certain World: A Commonplace Book* (annotated personal anthology) 1970  
*Forewords and Afterwords* (essays and criticism) 1973

## Malcolm Cowley (essay date 1934)

[An American critic, editor, poet, translator, and historian, Cowley prepared critical editions of the works of Nathaniel Hawthorne, Walt Whitman, and Ernest Hemingway. He also contributed literary essays to the *New Republic* and other periodicals. In the following excerpt, he briefly examines the early poetry of Auden and Stephen Spender, noting particularly the "damnable and perverse obscurity" of Auden's work.]

There has been a great beating of drums and clashing of cymbals to announce [Stephen Spender and W. H. Auden]; perhaps there has been more noise than is justified by their work so far. . . . [Neither poet] has yet written a long poem that belongs with the English classics, even with those of the second rank. But they have done something else, something that seemed next door to the impossible: they have brought life and vigor into contemporary English poetry.

They appeared in a dead season when all the serious young men were trying to imitate T. S. Eliot and weren't quite bringing it off. Eliot himself, after writing *The Waste Land*, had entered a territory that was supposed to be watered with springs of spiritual grace, but most travelers there found that the waters were subterranean and the soil brittle with drought. Reading his new poems was like excavating buried cities at the edge of the Syrian desert; they were full of imposing temples and perfectly proportioned statues of the gods, but there was nothing in the streets that breathed. Say this for Spender and Auden: they are living in an actual London; they walk over Scotch moors that are covered with genuine snow; they are not in the British Museum pressed and dried between the pages of a seventeenth-century book of sermons.

Still more important, they do not stand alone. They are merely the vanguard of a group that includes Charles Madge, John Lehmann, Cecil Day-Lewis (in some ways the most promising of all), Richard Goodman, Julian Bell and others. All of these poets are young, gifted in their various fashions, and seem to know what they are doing. All of them are able to write about political issues, not dryly or abstractly, but in terms of human beings. Most of them are radical without being proletarian. It is a matter of simple good sense that a proletarian poet ought to begin by being proletarian, just as a Catholic poet ought to be Catholic; otherwise he runs the risk of becoming as empty and affected as the hangers-on of the Oxford Movement. These young men, graduates of the English universities, don't pose for the newsreel men in the role of mechanics, dressed in greasy overalls; but nevertheless their sympathies are with the workers, and their sympathies have sharpened their perception of what is going on in the world around them. They are able to convey the sense of violence and uncertainty that we gulp down with the headlines of our morning papers, and of disaster waiting, perhaps, outside our doors.

So far Auden and Spender are the only members of the group whose work has appeared in this country (and incidentally their publisher deserves credit for giving them two handsome volumes). In a curious way they remind me of two recent American poets. Auden suggests E. E. Cummings: he has the same crazy wit, the same delight in playing with words and the same indifference to whether he