

The Harvard Book of

CONTEMPORARY
AMERICAN
POETRY

edited by

Helen Vendler

The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press
Cambridge, Massachusetts

The Harvard Book of

CONTEMPORARY
AMERICAN
POETRY

edited by

Helen Vendler

The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press
Cambridge, Massachusetts

Selection and editorial matter copyright © 1985

by Helen Vendler

All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3

This book is printed on acid-free paper, and its binding materials have been chosen for strength and durability.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Main entry under title:

The Harvard book of contemporary American poetry.

Includes indexes.

1. American poetry—20th century. I. Vendler, Helen Hennessy.

PS615.H37 1985 811.5'08 85-5473

ISBN 0-674-37340-5 (alk. paper)

Pages 425–430 constitute an extension of this copyright page.

Designed by Gwen Frankfeldt

The Harvard Book of

CONTEMPORARY
AMERICAN
POETRY

Contents

Introduction: Contemporary American Poetry 1

Wallace Stevens	19	Adrienne Rich	275
Langston Hughes	41	Gary Snyder	294
Theodore Roethke	49	Sylvia Plath	299
Elizabeth Bishop	59	Mark Strand	316
Robert Hayden	77	Charles Wright	328
Randall Jarrell	81	Michael Harper	345
John Berryman	85	Charles Simic	350
Robert Lowell	93	Frank Bidart	357
Howard Nemerov	113	Robert Pinsky	364
Amy Clampitt	118	Dave Smith	369
Richard Wilbur	125	Louise Glück	379
James Dickey	132	Albert Goldbarth	387
A. R. Ammons	139	Michael Blumenthal	392
Allen Ginsberg	153	Jorie Graham	395
James Merrill	189	Rita Dove	404
Frank O'Hara	213		
John Ashbery	222	<i>Biographies</i>	413
W. S. Merwin	251	<i>Credits</i>	425
James Wright	256	<i>Index of First Lines</i>	431
Anne Sexton	264	<i>Index of Titles</i>	437

Contemporary American Poetry

But sometimes everything I write
with the threadbare art of my eye
seems a snapshot,
lurid, rapid, garish, grouped,
heightened from life,
yet paralyzed by fact.
All's misalliance.
Yet why not say what happened?

—Robert Lowell, "Epilogue"

The charm of poetry, the command of poetry, move us sometimes alternately, sometimes in unison. The intimate linguistic charm of poetry stops at the frontiers of its original language; the intellectual and moral command of poetry survives translation. This anthology of American poetry will be able to extend its charm only to those who genuinely know the American language — by now a language separate, in accent, intonation, discourse, and lexicon, from English. But the poems collected here can extend their command to anyone able to read English. And just as European and Asian and African writing has entered into the bloodstream of American literature, so the poems in these pages may have a second, transformed life in new poems in Chinese or Bengali or Hebrew.

It is tempting to represent poetry, with its oral origins, as a chorus of voices rising from the abyss of history. Our greatest American poet, Walt Whitman, urges us to understand poetry through that vocal model. But against the ear, the eye makes its case — for the jagged edges of a Berryman dream song, for the minimalist shapeliness of an Ammons stanza, for the weighty block of a Lowell sonnet. These signs of writing construct poetry too; and the play of light and shadow in the

text — now a haunting voice, now a calligraphic curve — awakens part of the nameless happiness of reading. Poetry is the most speaking of written signs; it is the most designed of spoken utterances; it inhabits, and makes us travelers in, a place where every phrase of the spoken language would be as outlined as an urn, and where each sentence of the written language would ring like “church bells beyond the starres heard.” Such a place exists nowhere in life. In life, most written language is deliberately processed into neutrality so as to be forgotten as fast as possible in favor of the deposit of information it leaves behind; and the spoken language melts into air, unshaped and unremembered — except by writers. Only the ear of the writer is, as Keats said, “open like a greedy shark” to catch the tunings of historical language. Though no writer ends there, that is where all writers begin.

This collection preserves, then, some of the American language of the twentieth century. It is a language that has assimilated the syncopation of jazz, the stylishness of advertising, the technicalities of psychoanalysis, the simplicities of rural speech, the discourse of the university disciplines, the technology of the engineer, the banalities of journalism. These have been recorded in our novels too, where the vernacular thrives and where the rhythms of American life — urgent and noisy and irregular in the cities, more long-breathed in the countryside — have found a place. But poetry offers us something different from the novel, because it engages constantly in a strange process of self-interruption, its pause at the end of each line.

While the novel, unstoppable, wants to keep reeling us into its labyrinth, the unjustified margin of poetry pulls us up, even if gently, at the end of each line. (Even the prose poem, by its sheer density, forces an interruption on us at the end of each sentence, a practice that would be fatal to a novel.) In the perpetual self-halting of poetry must lie the ground of its peculiar attraction. It insists on a spooling, a form of repetition, the reinscribing of a groove, the returning upon an orbit already traced. Lyric poetry — for all its plot, its logic, its conclusions — is profoundly unlinear. It does not advance. (Perhaps it does not advance even in the way Coleridge thought it did, like a snake doubling back on itself at each motion.) Poetry, instead, looks — and looks again. Its second look may

be different from the first, but it looks again at the same thing. It does not progress to a new vista. Every poem is, in Wallace Stevens' phrase, "one last look at the ducks."

In this way, poetry is at odds with the optimistic American dream of an ever-unrolling frontier, of "a land still vaguely realizing westward / But still unstoried, artless, unenhanced, / Such as she was, such as she would become" (Frost, "The Gift Outright"). That epic dream of realizing westward opposes the lyric poet's calling—to look over and over at the one place where the eye or the mind alights: to read "a text, albeit done in plant," with the same stubbornness as Frost's exemplary mountain climber. Stevens' version of poetic intensity of regard appears in "Credences of Summer": "Let's see the thing itself and nothing else . . . Burn everything not part of it to ash."

The optic concentration announced by Stevens and other modernists becomes a general duty in the latter half of the twentieth century. Stevens and Williams had taken as their model the visual concentration of painters; but as photography put into question the illusionistic values expressed in painting, the snapshot (rather than the art-photograph) began to seem a necessary, if threatening, model for the poet. And the cultural skepticism first taken as total subject by Stevens pervades the work of his successors. For them, Wordsworth's two axiomatic points of beginning—perception and memory—have become two points of suspicion. They become points of annihilation, even, in the writing of poets who insist on the degree to which perception is socially conditioned and who refuse the nostalgias of memory.

The poets of the second half of the century cannot quite take the work of the great modernists for granted. For personal and sometimes political reasons, they must repeat in their own poetry the experiments of their predecessors—experiments in perception, in memory, in language. Replication of the great modernists—in homage, in quarrel—marks the poetry of these later poets. Yeats reappears in Roethke and Berryman, Moore in Ammons, Auden in Merrill, Williams in Rich, Stevens in Ashbery, Eliot in Lowell. The list could be rewritten, equally truly, in different ways: we can see Auden in Berryman, Williams in Ammons, Stevens in Merrill, Frost in Rich, Eliot in Ashbery, Pound in Lowell. (And a comparable

set of lists could be made for the younger poets: we can find Lowell in Bidart, Bishop in Graham, Hayden in Harper, Winters in Pinsky.)

The areas of intersection between generations are both partial and multiple. And the history of the rewriting of the modernists by their successors sheds light on each half of the juncture. One can imagine Ammons (trained in the sciences) thinking of Frost: "Yes, he noticed natural things; but why did he not want to know their inner laws? If instead of Calvinist design, one thought in terms of inner biological and physical design, how would one respond to nature, what would one say about it?" This is of course not how poets write poems. Still, if in Ammons one sees a Frost thoroughly secularized, one sees both poets more clearly. Lowell — to take a second case — was as interested in history as Pound was. But Pound thought of himself an archaeologist reassembling shards of culture, while Lowell took on the role of a chronicler in whom the past assumes the integral form of a single psyche. Implicitly, Lowell's project calls into question the artificial helplessness of Pound before the pieces of the past, and suggests that we cannot avoid, even against our will, forming a gestalt of what we inherit. Pound is all nominal phrases; Lowell is all syntax. When the history of the relation between the two halves of the twentieth century is written, the second half will be seen, as in these cases of Ammons and Lowell, to be a long critique of the first, as well as a long absorption of it.

This formulation is both true and false when we apply it to poets who are women. Bishop, Plath, Sexton, Rich, Clampitt — and such later poets as Glück, Graham, and Dove — have, as notable predecessors who were women, only Dickinson and Moore. One tradition against which poets of our century have rebelled is the "woman's voice" as it took acceptable conventional form. Poetry written by women was limited both in subject (love, God, children, death) and in expression (self-deprecatory, whimsical, supplicatory, resigned). Modern poets had no models to speak of in writing about being mothers, daughters, or wives. They had scarcely any models for political expression. Their aim, topically speaking, was to chart the unexplored territory of untouched subjects. Their aim, expressively speaking, was to find new tones of voice. A certain satire on previous tones, and on social expectations,

was necessary to clear the air: Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton were savagely satiric toward the voice of the "nice girl"; Elizabeth Bishop coolly took on a "man's subject"—exploration and discovery of foreign lands; Adrienne Rich assumed a "man's role"—the denunciation of social and political evil. As a result of the expansion of topic and expression achieved by these women, later poets feel free to speak in wide-ranging voices. Art, race relations, cultural mythology, metaphysics—written about without self-deprecation or apology—are now available subjects for any younger woman.

Though of course influenced by predecessors, each of the writers here has found an uninhabited place in the zodiac of poetry and has printed a new sign there. It may help to mention how, in some notable cases, that work has been done. The staking out of an imaginative claim is the single most interesting act by each powerful poet. Elizabeth Bishop, as I have said, staked out travel, in all its symbolic reaches of pilgrimage, exile, homelessness, exploration, exhaustion, colonializing, mapping, and being lost. Travel is not an unusual topic—but because it had been considered a Byronic narrative subject rather than a lyrical one, Bishop had a free hand and an open field. Lowell, to take another example, staked out history—again, not an uncommon preoccupation for epic or narrative, but less common in lyric (traditionally a private, not a public, genre). Because his ancestors the Lowells, the Starks, and the Winslows had helped to make American history, history had, for Lowell, a right to appear in the privacy of lyric. He is also the first American poet of the family romance—not the Freudian archetype unadorned, but that archetype tethered by the infinitely many fetters of particular occasions. Whereas Freud had summoned up detail only to reach the Oedipal shape beneath, Lowell, accepting the primal scheme, delighted in reanimating it within the triviality and absurdity of its manifestation in family life. A worldly irony tinges Lowell's history, where the superego always betrays the id.

But in Berryman—to take yet another example of the imaginative claim to a personal territory—the id is the subject of real interest. Berryman gives it a voice, and names it Henry; it sings, in his *Dream Songs*, its plaintive, outraged,

impetuous, suicidal, childlike, and harrowing desires. The superego still does the writing (and has its unnamed and reproachful minstrel-show black-face voice in the *Dream Songs*), but it cannot accomplish its writing without quoting the id. It argues, implicitly, that any writing that does not quote the id is concealing its darker twin. Berryman learned the language of the id from Roethke; but Roethke, after his astonishing discovery of that language, repudiated it. As a ghost of himself, he lived out his life imitating Yeats in bad poems.

Ginsberg provides another example of new subject matter. In seeking out an authentic voice for himself (after a youthful period of imitating Marvell and Donne), he found with exhilaration the proletarian ground cleared by Williams, the first American poet after Whitman to treat the urban poor in a language technically appropriate to the subject. But Ginsberg had a new area to claim as his own — the Jewish milieu, already well represented in the novel but as yet without a memorable poetry of its own. In the long elegy for his mother, “Kaddish,” Ginsberg made a founding gesture comparable to that made in the black vernacular by Langston Hughes. Through the work of such poets, the poetry of the second half of this century begins to be ethnically representative.

But originality in poetry makes for difficulty. It is the vice of distinctiveness, as Hopkins once remarked, to become queer, and original authors may at first sound odd or look odd on the page. Memorable language, in Roland Barthes’s terms, is always in some way “writerly” rather than “readerly.” Stevens said that the poem “must resist the intelligence almost successfully,” and he encountered that resistance in his readers almost from the beginning. To a colleague who complained that he could not understand Stevens’ poetry, Stevens replied, “It isn’t necessary that you understand my poetry or any poetry. It’s only necessary that the writer understand it.” If writing is genuine, and genuinely talented, it will eventually be understood.

While the new writing is transgressing the current codes for the understanding of art, it will bring the reader up short. But mystery, obliquity, allusion, linguistic play, and the assumption of new roles for the spirit, once accepted, buoy the reader into another, headier atmosphere, one proper to the

modern vista the author offers us. When language and vision coalesce in poetry, a new attitude is born. What do such new attitudes look like? To Moore, writing the poem "Poetry," they resemble nothing so much as the unforgettable and distinctive gestures of animals: "the bat / holding on upside down or in quest of something to / eat, elephants pushing, a wild horse taking a roll, a tireless wolf under / a tree." Thousands of people have written verse putting ideas into statement; but inept verse has none of the excess of distinctive manner ("elephants pushing, a wild horse taking a roll") common to all remarkable poetry.

That excess of manner can be minimalist (minimalism is a form of excess in concision) or maximalist (a form of excess beyond informational necessity). This brilliance of manner—even, and perhaps especially, in the art that conceals art—is the sign of verse that is on its way to becoming poetry. It is this excess which is the sign of the aesthetic dynamic in the poem, as form struggles into articulation—the brilliance of the surreal in Plath, of the nonchalant in Ammons, of the tragicomic in Ginsberg, of the unearthly in Glück, of the intense in Bidart. Though it is easy to find a feeling to express or a cause to espouse, it is next to impossible to find a stylization that succeeds: only a few poets in each century have done it. These are the poets who are elevated to canonical status by the envy and admiration of their fellow poets. As Hugh Kenner reminds us, it is poets—and not anthologists or professors—who eventually decide which poets are read after their own generation has disappeared. All poets envy that authority of style on the page which says, even in a few lines, "Milton" or "Tennyson," in the way that a few bars of music will say "Mozart" or "Wagner." It is perhaps too early to tell which American poets will belong, hundreds of years from now, to the common music of our century and which ones will survive as major figures. Both destinies are honorable ones.

Each of our poets preserves some part of culture that would lapse unrecorded were it not for art. The social genres—drama and the novel—preserve our life with others; the private genre, lyric, preserves our inner life. In that sense, poetry has a historical function; it is, as Wordsworth said, the history of feeling. But his definition is ampler than that:

poetry is, he said, the history *and science* of feeling. Poetry is analytic as well as expressive; it distinguishes, reconstructs, and redescribes what it discovers about the inner life. The poet accomplishes the analytic work of poetry chiefly by formal means. A poem composed of only two stanzas, for instance, is almost always occupied with binary terms—choice, contrast, comparison. It would falsify the subject of such a poem to have more than two stanzas; the two-stanza form insists that one must occupy one room or the other of the poem. (See Stevens' "The Emperor of Ice-Cream," where one room holds concupiscence, the other, death.) A poem full of appositions suggests that its subject is one that must be incremental, qualified, explained; a poem full of lists announces formally that its subject is plenitude, good or bad; a poem presenting a tale within a tale suggests the ever-receding planes of truth in life. In the best poems, there is no such thing as separable form or content; form is content-as-arranged, or content is form-as-exemplified. No proposition in poetry is detachable from its functional expression.

In what Richard Wilbur has called the "mad *instead*" of poetry, things have their meaning only in the context of the world that they there create. The world of the poem is analogous to the existential world, but not identical with it. In a famous created world of Blake's, for instance, there is a rose doomed to mortal illness by the love of a flying worm who is invisible. We do not experience such a poem by moving it piecemeal into our world, deciding what the rose "symbolizes" and what the worm "stands for." On the contrary, we must move ourselves into its ambience, into a world in which a dismayed man can converse with his beloved rose and thrust upon her, in his anguished jealousy, diagnosis and fatal prognosis in one sentence:

O Rose thou art sick.
The invisible worm
That flies in the night,
In the howling storm:
Has found out thy bed
Of crimson joy:
And his dark secret love
Does thy life destroy.

After living in Blake's world for the space of eight lines, we return to our own world, haunted and accused.

This truth—that we live in the poem's world, not it in ours—applies not only to “symbolic” poems. One can equally well inhabit, and be haunted by, the world of 91 Revere Street where Lowell lived as a boy, a house seen through the myopic and baleful lens of the Freudian memory. Or one can live in the ignited air of Plath's “Lady Lazarus”; or in the somber bus ride from New York to Ohio in Clampitt's “Procession at Candlemas,” where the poet reviews the cultural images of femaleness from Athena to Mary. A successful poem is, as Williams said, a machine made out of words; if it is properly constructed it cannot fail to perform its function, which is so to control its reader, by its selective and stylized processional means, that the reader “cannot choose but hear.” A reader enters and joins—like Keats's spectator of the urn—the procession of forms that give access to an imagined plane of projected existence.

Of course every accomplished poem has both an illusionistic and a self-conscious status; it is both imagined and made. It could not attain its illusionistic ends—that this is “a cry from the heart” or “a diary entry” or “a letter to the world”—without shaping its language to convey spontaneity, intimacy, a heart laid bare. When we first read a poem we read it illusionistically; later we may see its art; and these remain as figure and ground, each to the other, constructing part of the chiaroscuro of poetry.

These qualities are to be found in all poetry. But there are national differences among poetries as well as linguistic differences, and American poetry has added something new to the store of poetry in the world. The mixed poverty and riches of the United States have brought into being a poetry that differs from that of England. In England—a tiny country, agriculturally cultivated for centuries, architecturally and historically rich, uninvaded in battle since 1066, with a small, homogeneous educated class—a coherent poetry was possible for a number of centuries. In America—an enormous wilderness only recently settled, educationally and ethnically diverse, made and remade by waves of immigrants—poetry was bound to be diffuse, heterogeneous, and, vis-à-vis England, defensive. Although the victories won by American

modernists were indisputable, they were won chiefly by Americans who had Europeanized themselves with a vengeance. Pound and Eliot became expatriates; Frost went deliberately to England for three years and published his first book there; Stevens said that French and English constitute a single language. And Williams made himself so pointedly American only because he was by birth and education so European (his father was English, his mother Puerto Rican, and he had been educated in part in Switzerland). In spite of their American origins, each of these authors had to come to terms in some way with Europe.

For our second-generation modernists, a less embattled relation with Europe — and consequently with America — was possible. American poetry was for poets writing after 1940 a splendid present reality, not (as it had been for the early modernists) a luminous possibility. Younger poets turned away from England and France, and found poetic models in South America, Italy, Germany, Poland. Robert Bly's journal *The Fifties* (later *The Sixties*) brought Neruda, Machado, Vallejo, and others into American writing; Montale was translated by Lowell and Charles Wright; Rilke and Trakl from Germany, Herbert and Milosz from Poland, have suggested new structures, tones, and procedures to American poets. The practice of translation was given further impetus by Lowell's powerful and idiosyncratic example in *Imitations* (1961) and *Near the Ocean* (1967). By rewriting poets from Horace to Pasternak in his own irregular, idiomatic, and forceful American voice, Lowell announced that American poetry henceforth would possess the past in a commanding, not subordinate, manner.

As the high tension of American modernism subsided, other tensions, of a different sort, replaced it. The poets included here write — as the earlier modernists did not — from a Freudian culture, one in which a vaguely Freudian model of the soul has replaced an older Christianized Hellenic model. In the Freudian world, motives are doubted, the unreliability of memory (with its self-servingness) is taken for granted, the significance of peripheral detail is magnified, and truths of human relation and human frailty take on an unlovely explicitness. These poets also, many of them, write within a post-Marxist clouding of the American self-image: voices of

protest rise from women (Plath, Sexton, Rich), from blacks (Hayden, Harper, Dove), from the dispossessed (James Wright), from the counterculture (Snyder), from self-declared homosexuals and lesbians (Ginsberg, Rich), from Americans in opposition to American foreign policy (Lowell, Merwin). Finally, all of these poets write within a culture in which physical science has replaced metaphysics as the model of the knowable. The epistemological shift toward scientific models of verification has caused the usual throes of fundamentalist reaction in American culture, as elsewhere; but there is no significant poet whose work does not mirror, both formally and in its preoccupations, the absence of the transcendent.

It is the social consciousness of American lyric (from Whitman to the present) that perhaps strikes the foreign reader most strongly. Pound's great failed effort in the *Cantos* — to turn the lyric radically toward historic and social reality — has borne results in all our recent poets, no matter how un-Poundian their style. The inner life can no longer be insulated from the political and social life of the state: World War II ended, perhaps forever, any hope that the American continent could ignore Europe and Asia, and the Vietnam War ended any delusion that America could claim a permanent moral superiority to the "Old World." Even our most inward poets — Stevens, Bishop, Merwin, Merrill, Graham — find themselves drawn into the social vortex, as Stevens confronts the Depression, as Bishop writes about the poor in Rio or the sins of the Conquistadors, as Merwin protests the Vietnam War, as Merrill composes fantasies of nuclear disaster, as Graham thinks about Buchenwald. In incorporating social reality, the lyric repossesses — especially in the work of our most socially detailed poets, Lowell and Ginsberg — much of the terrain of the novel, continuing that historical consciousness in lyric begun in this century, in English, by Yeats.

The lyric poet has had to evolve new strategies of representation in order to become a social voice. Ginsberg revived the Blakean prophetic voice that confirmed the psalms and prophecies of his Jewish upbringing; Lowell borrowed the Poundian heaping up of detail but marshaled it within a magisterial categorical system; Rich turned to the voice of Protestant homiletic so native to American sermons and political exhortations but less familiar in lyric; Hayden and

Goldbarth (among others) learned from Pound an allusiveness that takes for granted a common possession of historical narrative; Nemerov returned to the voice of Latin social epigram, jaunty and morose at once; Bidart revived the dramatic monologue, putting his own voice at the service of historical figures from Ellen West to Nijinsky. These ventures strain the capacities of lyric almost beyond its own strengths. When these poets lose control, it is sometimes because their unwieldy social material has overwhelmed the single sensibility bearing it. The poem diffuses its strength into randomness and multiplicity of detail. Or, in a different error, the poet, intimidated by the sheer mass of social and historical freight, subjects it too readily to a single political or moral view.

The poem that best sums up the aesthetic predicament of our present poets is Lowell's great "Epilogue," the last poem in his last book, a conscious envoy to his lifelong poetic effort. There, the poet, no longer an illusionistic painter in oils, no longer a poet of "plot and rhyme" (Lowell had forgone these in his last book), must confront the frightening randomness of the moving camera lens that is now his own eye.

Those blessed structures, plot and rhyme —
 why are they no use to me now
 I want to make
 something imagined, not recalled?
 I hear the noise of my own voice:
The painter's vision is not a lens,
it trembles to caress the light.
 But sometimes everything I write
 with the threadbare art of my eye
 seems a snapshot,
 lurid, rapid, garish, grouped,
 heightened from life,
 yet paralyzed by fact.
 All's misalliance.

The poem collapses, helpless. But then it gains a second wind by saying, rebelliously (as Lowell rebukes those critics who accused him of cannibalizing his life for his art, of lurid detailing of what should remain private), "Yet why not say what happened?" This "accuracy with respect to the structure of reality" (Stevens' phrase) is for Lowell the saving motive