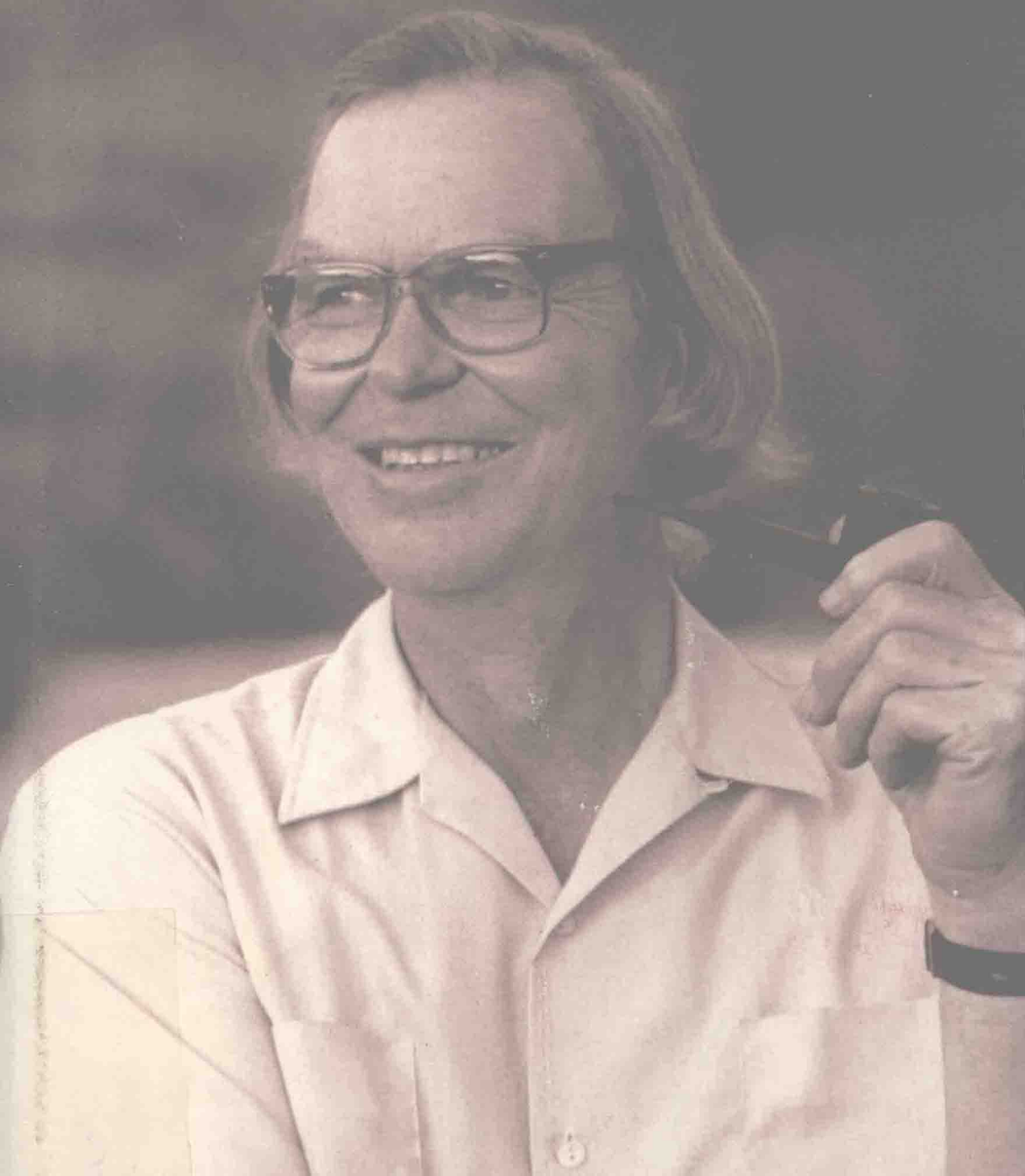


# PAUL METCALF

COLLECTED WORKS • VOLUME THREE • 1987-1997



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Dustwrapper photograph by Steven Trubitt. Dustjacket design by Jinger Peissig. Book design by Allan Kornblum. Text preparation by Becky Weinberg, Abby Pelham, and Kelly Kofron.

*Where Do You Put The Horse?* was first published by Dalkey Archive Press. *Louis the Torch* was first published by CrossCountry Press. *Golden Delicious* was first published by Chax Press, and later reprinted by Membrane Press. *Firebird* was first published by Chax Press in association with Granary Books, and later reprinted by Membrane Press. *Three Plays* was first published by North Carolina Wesleyan College Press. *Mountaineers Are Always Free!* was first published by Bamberger Books. “. . . and nobody objected.” was first published by Paradigm Press. *Araminta and the Coyotes* was first published by the Jargon Society. Coffee House salutes the editors of these small independent presses for having presented these visionary works.

This project was made possible by major funding from the Lannan Foundation. Coffee House Press receives general operating support from the Minnesota State Arts Board, through an appropriation by the Minnesota State Legislature and the National Endowment for the Arts, a federal agency; The McKnight Foundation; Target Stores, Dayton's, and Mervyn's by the Dayton Hudson Foundation; General Mills Foundation; St. Paul Companies; Honeywell Foundation; Star Tribune/Cowles Media Company; James R. Thorpe Foundation; and the Butler Family Foundation.

Coffee House Press books are available to the trade through our primary distributor, Consortium Book Sales & Distribution, 1045 Westgate Drive, Saint Paul, MN 55114. For personal orders, catalogs, or other information, write to Coffee House Press, 27 North Fourth Street, Suite 400, Minneapolis, MN 55401.

Library of Congress CIP Data

Metcalf, Paul C.

[Works. 1997]

Collected Works, 1987-1997 / Paul Metcalf.

v. <III> cm.

Contents: v. III.

ISBN 1-56689-062-4 (HC: v. III)

1. Title.

PS3563.E83

1997

818'.5409—DC20

97-277

CIP

1 0 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*for Adrienne*

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**WHERE DO  
YOU PUT THE  
HORSE?**



## THE CATEGORIES

It is strange that, at all visible levels, American literature is so neatly organized into exclusive territories, Poetry and Fiction. Poets and Writers, Inc., has published two separate directories: American Fiction Writers and American Poets. Most universities hire a poet-in-residence and a fiction-writer-in-residence. Editors accept one or the other, poetry or fiction, and there is never a question as to which is which.

In practice, there are two warring tyrannies at work here: fiction writers make money . . . poets have class, or status, or altitude. As a fiction writer, I have a trade, a profession, I sell my wares, just about as fast as I can manufacture them . . . as a poet, I may have a job (poet-in-residence), but I'm above the marketplace, my gems are beyond price, and I look more than a little down on you.

All of this is more than a little ridiculous . . . particularly in view of the subliminal drive in two of our major forebears—Poe and Melville—to violate the questionable boundary between the two genres.

Poe and Melville wrote both poetry and prose. Poe's poetry was rhythmical and glittering, and, to the modern ear, too musical-mechanical to command respect. Melville wrote heavy-handed, laboring poetry. But both Poe and Melville wrote a prose that reached passionately toward the borders, prose full of feeling (both inward and outward), full of music, with the "higher sense," whatever you want to call it . . . Poe's and Melville's prose, almost without exception, is prose-poetry.

There are other examples, I'm sure, in our nineteenth-century heritage. Doesn't *The Red Badge of Courage* have that kind of passion? And Whitman, God knows, had to invent a poetry, a verse of his own—the raw goods of which were linsey-woolsey.

Perhaps this is what I'm after: that the reach in our literature, our tradition (and we have an example of this in as recent a writer as Carl Sauer), originates in prose, a dirt-prose, that in the power and



energy of its own passion forces the gates of poetry. No wooden horse, no gimmicks—just sheer force.

In the face of this tradition—which, to me, has the force of an avalanche—it seems strange to see our official, functional world falling back into the little inherited European boxes that so antedate what is happening today and what has been happening for so many years.

—1977

## BLAST-OFF

The first encounter in *Tropic of Cancer* involves Miller and a girl in an impatience of passion: they try it sitting down, they try it standing up, and the heat is too intense—he infuriates her by coming all over her dress while dancing, and this is the tipoff: the Whitman, the exhibitionist, the spraying of semen over exteriors, for the glitter of it—semen in place of ink, as the liquid of literature.

Everything, latterly, about the placing of European seed in virginal American soil has been external, exploited, public, the shoot-'em-ups are ever with us, we love nothing so much as exposé. Because they couldn't get into it, they had to get out to it: the West. (Latterly, that is, as opposed to the early West, the forested Appalachians that Jefferson contemplated at Monticello—this was a land to be penetrated privately, as Boone penetrated it.)

This is the problem, what Pound recognized as our failure to distinguish between the public and the private: the most private act being the placing of seed exactly, goddammit, where it belongs.

Now . . . with the conquest of the West, the Cowboy—the hero of the shoot-'em-ups—has been replaced by the Astronaut, who embodies for the American male the old dream of perpetual ejaculation, a fountain, one's own, a fountainhead, Old Faithful . . .

(peripheral,  
off target,  
dispersed & exposed,  
[solo,  
hetero, homo])

shooting up into space!

## PLAY IT AGAIN, SAM

*Following is a reconstruction of a conversation I held May 7, 1976, with my daughter Adrienne.*

ADRIENNE—I think I know what your problem is. You know, everybody has a problem.

PAUL—Oh?

ADRIENNE—You're a frustrated musician. I think if you'd been brought up in a musical household you'd have become a musician or composer, but because it was a literary household you turned to writing.

PAUL—You've been reading some of my books?

ADRIENNE—Yes. *Apalache*.

PAUL—That's funny. Because as a child I was forced to take piano lessons. I hated it, wouldn't practice. They tried me on a clarinet and that didn't take either.

\* \* \*

PAUL—Perhaps you can say I've brought music to literature.

ADRIENNE—Uh-uh. You've got it backwards. You've brought literature to music.

\* \* \*

ADRIENNE—You know, I really can't handle it. When I think that you're my father—and you wrote this book—and you're this guy I know—and I'm so moved by the book—all this, all together, I can't handle it, it's more than I can take.

---

\* \* \*

ADRIENNE—I think the reason some people have difficulty reading your writing, they're looking for a beginning and an end, and there isn't any. It's like listening to a piece of music, it's what's happening right now. . . . I'm not musically inclined, but music has been a part of some of the most important things in my life.

—N.D.

## THE POET AND HISTORY

*The following was prepared as a lecture for a class at the University of Massachusetts.*

The late poet Charles Olson could at times become absolutely obsessed with some given period of history. It has been said of him that he could read Herodotus like a daily newspaper.

I can understand this because I have had similar experiences myself when I have become immersed—I think of it as just short of drowning—in, say, the pre-Columbian Indians of Peru, the early Michigan days of Henry Ford, the life of Christopher Columbus or of Herman Melville. Some time ago I wrote a documentary history of the Potomac River watershed, everything, from the Indians—John Smith—Lords Delaware, Calvert, and Fairfax—the early adventurers, explorers, and surveyors—George Washington and the Federal City—John Brown, the Civil War, John Wilkes Booth—the flora and fauna—on up to the latest disastrous report from the Environmental Protection Agency. I was, for a year of my life, swimming in the Potomac. The book is just now being prepared for publication, and as I go back to it, to any given point in it, touching again the results of my research, when I was soaked in it, and combining this with my sense of the area from various visits I have made there, I can enter an ethos, a precise local quality, that may include the people, the past, the landscape, the geography, the geology, the climate, the natural ecology, the innumerable human and man-made changes, with the dynamics of each—so that I see it, feel it, think it, sense it, today, as a totality of *was/is*. And I think the success of the writing, insofar as there is success, is the result of this permeation.

Perhaps because of my own ancestry and upbringing, I was set up for these attitudes and methods. As a great-grandson of Herman Melville and the son of his literary executrix, I was exposed early to an atmosphere of both literature and history, the past. For many

years, as a youngster, I rebelled against all this, refused to have anything to do with it. The Boston Red Sox certainly had a greater place in history than *Moby-Dick*. I think this was all very healthy. It was only later that I discovered that rebellion is a form of love.

The uses of history are not without danger. It's an easy trap. We're all familiar with the stodgy professor-type who retreated thirty years ago into, let's say, the eighteenth century and hasn't been heard from since. The retreat was okay, but the dynamics, the will, the energy, perhaps simply the imagination, were lacking to bring it all back to the here and now.

Of course the present may also become a trap: the man or woman, the newspaper reader, victimized by the topical; the person for whom language becomes a blunt instrument, who responds like Pavlov's dogs to the emotional and visceral, so that meretricious appetite and irritation spring from him when he is beaten with words like *communist*, *ecology*, *energy*, *Watergate*.

I would think of history—and the varieties of language that ride with it—as a vast resource into which one plunges with energy, comparable to sexual energy, demanding and focusing all one's vitalities. Following this, there is the second phase, which I learned absolutely from Charles Olson: History is important only insofar as it impinges on the present. First, the plunge, the descent into hell, the near-drowning, if you wish; then the return to the surface. Because, if you drown, who cares? And if you don't plunge, who cares?

For many of you, as students, it is a matter of conscience to study history. You are not "educated" unless you know history. But the words *conscience* and *consciousness* are close in sound, and in my sense of history, particularly as matter for the poets, the barrier between these words is shattered and they become one.

The plunge, and the return. This uniting of history and the present makes the historian himself, as a physical being living in the present, an integral element of the material he is handling. What material is pertinent (or, in that ugly word, "relevant")? The answer: *anything*—anything with which the poet-historian, by the dynamics of his presence, by the intensity and authenticity of his researches, by the passion of his caring, can so engross us in

his periods of history as to make them at least twenty times more powerful than today's newspaper—by making them more *present*.

Einstein tells us that time is circular—and Marshall McLuhan explicates what we already know, that, thanks to the marvels of electronics, all information, past and present, is now instantly and ubiquitously available. All this would seem to make history illusory or superfluous—if time is circular, then old-fashioned linear time, historical time, evolutionary time cannot be important. This is a great temptation, and today there is a vast world—I find it a weird world—inhabited by scientologists and science fictioneers, UFO seekers and Brooklyn Buddhists, evangelical Christians and homestudy astrologers—an odd lot, to be sure—God knows what Einstein would make of them—but all of them, in this uncertain and corrupt world, escaping into constructs that avoid the hard and/or glorious realities of their own genetic and cultural heritage. History and evolution may appear to disappear—and it may be comforting to believe in the imminent end of the world. But the world, manifestly, does not end. And all that you are, past and present, once more comes into focus, every morning, when you awaken.

So you awaken. You've left college, gone into the world, taken a job, and you come home at the end of the day, tired. On the coffee table are *Playboy*, *Time*, *The Enquirer* and *The Springfield Republican*. On TV, Walter Cronkite, and Sonny and Cher. In the bookshelves—those impressive floor-to-ceiling mausoleums (above-ground burial)—are Literature and History. What do you pick up?

Some years ago the poet Jonathan Williams was given a short-term teaching assignment at the University of Illinois. He had a free hand to do as he pleased, so in preparation he began to think about downstate Illinois, rural Illinois: what is it that characterized the area? And the answer, obvious and everywhere, was corn. Illinois is the damndest corn-growing area anywhere in the world. So he generated this enterprise on corn, involving students from any number of disciplines: poets, historians, plant biologists, agronomists, anthropologists, ethnologists, dancers, artists. A whole segment of the university just went sort of corn-crazy for a while. They found out about themselves, their place, their history, their inherited and

---

current culture, their *was/is*. I imagine he must have given them—and they themselves—a terrific experience.

It's all there—all these endless and fascinating determinants in your lives.

It's just a question of what *you* do with them.



## BUTTING HEADS WITH THE TRANSCENDENTALISTS

I have difficulty dealing with philosophy because I view it as conclusions, or distillations, derived from experience—and, for purposes of philosophy, I am too directly involved with experience itself.

Whenever I find myself reaching a conclusion, or a meaning, or a philosophic concept, I instinctively plunge it back into the day-by-day, rebury it.

Answer a question not with an answer, nor with a question, but with an unthinking, demanding physical activity.

That too is a philosophy—*mens sana in corpore sano*—but I don't view it as such: I view it as the Head blotted out, at least for a time, in the sweat of the Body (and that, too, is a false dichotomy, Head and Body: the two are one).

The head ignites, produces its illuminations, and then reburies, not just questioning itself, but incarcerating, risking itself, totally.

This is one of the dangers of the Age of Literacy in which we live: the Head can escape, live a life of its own (the Age of Literate Affluence or Affluent Literacy)—the Head in orbit, circuiting the Earth of the Body.

Hitherto, this has been a luxury of the aristocracy: the priesthood of primitive cultures, and the first true philosophers of ancient Greece—a slave-supported society.

Now, everyone has a Philosophy of Life, and if he doesn't, he can go out and get one.

But I find myself thrown back, or throwing myself back, into pre-thought, into plain experience. Which is why I dismiss Emerson—and am suspicious of Thoreau (I don't believe in transcending *anything*)—the Head will always rise, the world is full of Heads—what's difficult is the Body: Whitman's persistent lists, Melville's cetological details . . . it's difficult to hold onto that, to persist in that, when the Head wants to talk—as, God knows, it always does.