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FROM
EDWARD TAYLOR AND WALT WHITMAN
TO
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OSCAR WILLIAMS
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WITH AN INTRODUCTION
AND NOTES ON THE POETS

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Edwin Honig's introduction (pp. xiii-xxiv) was published in substantially the same form in *The Virginia Quarterly Review,* Summer, 1960 (Vol. 36, No. 3), pp. 416-429, under the title "American Poetry and the Rationalist Critic."

SPECIAL NOTE FROM THE EDITORS

The reader of this volume will undoubtedly wonder why certain poets, such as T. S. Eliot, Robinson Jeffers, and Gene Derwood, who are quoted or mentioned so favorably in Edwin Honig's introduction, are not, after all, represented in this anthology. Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc. will not allow the use of Mr. Eliot's poems in paperback anthologies selling for "less than $2.50." (Just before this volume went to press two other communications were received from this publisher. In a letter dated April 19, 1962, the permissions department wrote: "It is our policy not to allow Mr. Eliot's poetry to appear in paperback books selling for less than $1.75." On April 30, 1962, this same department wrote: ". . . we must refuse permission for Mr. Eliot's work to appear in paperback books intended for the mass market.") Random House refused permission for the printing of a selection of Robinson Jeffers' poems. And the Editor of New American Library, while he admired the work of Gene Derwood, prohibited the use of her poems in this anthology on the basis that she was not yet considered a major poet. Finally, it should not go unnoticed that the poems of W. H. Auden were limited and the editors were able to use only about one half of their choices of his work. Robert Frost, too, is represented by about two thirds of his poetry originally selected for this volume. The responsibility for the book's other shortcomings, inclusions and omissions, rests, of course, exclusively with the editors.

CONTENTS

EDGAR ALLAN POE (1809-1849)

WALT WHITMAN (1819-1892)

EMILY DICKINSON (1830-1886)

EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON (1869-1935)

STEPHEN CRANE (1871-1900)

ROBERT FROST (b. 1874)

VACHEL LINDSAY (1879-1931)

WALLACE STEVENS (1879-1955)

WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS (b. 1883)

EZRA POUND (b. 1885)

MARIANNE MOORE (b. 1887)

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JOHN CROWE RANSOM (b. 1888)

EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY (1892-1950)

ARCHIBALD MacLEISH (b. 1892)

E. E. CUMMINGS (b. 1894)

HART CRANE (1899-1932)

W. H. AUDEN (b. 1907)

INTRODUCTION

There are several useful anthologies representing American poetry from Colonial times to the present. But they invariably include much secondary material, for where the aim is comprehensiveness anywhere between sixty and a hundred poets must be exhibited. The same thing often happens when the anthologist limits himself to American poetry of the past hundred years: too many poets are included, so that the bulk of those barely in mid-career tend to crowd out the few older poets who really count. Profusion brings confusion, and the reader who makes his way through such a book feels like the circus spectator who has been distracted from the superb high-diving acrobats by the white mice or the lewd mandrills: he goes off wondering what the cheering was all about. There is some need, then, for a compact anthology restricted to sizable selections from the works of only the proven and best American poets.

To make such a collection, the editors had free range, at least hypothetically, over a period of three centuries. In English literature this is the period from 1660, which began as the metaphysical poets and the taste for their flamboyant style were being displaced by the makers of the boxed couplet and the rule of decorum. After a hundred years of the Augustan age, a renewed interest in landscapes and external nature emerged, leading to the Romantic revival. Then came the long Victorian age with its incredible appetite for didactic, historical, and sentimental verse. Around 1900 this was succeeded by a movement of reaction and revolt—soon dominated by the young transplanted Americans, Eliot and Pound, and by a middle-aging Irishman, W. B. Yeats—which introduced a new poetry, stripped of pieties, rhetoric, and rhyme, that we have been calling the modern style for sixty years. In Puritan America there was little time and less occasion for the practice of poetry, so that during Colonial times and for several decades after the Revolution not much first-rate poetry was or could be written. Until Whitman, in fact, what was thought to be of any merit usually reflected the prevailing tastes in London—or Boston, which looked to London for approval. Consequently one cannot expect to distribute equally among the centuries major poets who did not begin to appear in force

until rather recently. And so to give a true picture of the best poetry in America means to put the emphasis where it belongs: on the steadier and more vital work produced since Whitman.

American poetry burst through its provincial shell with the publication of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855. But it took Americans a full century to recognize the fact, and to understand that Whitman was our first significant major poet. Not till quite recently was it possible to see that the emergence of Whitman's book—grown to four times its original length by the time he died in 1892—showed how a genuine poetic voice could find its full range and subject on native grounds.

By 1855 Poe's work was done; almost unnoticed at home, it was soon to undergo a surprising transformation through Baudelaire's translations, which made it the sacred cow of the French Symbolists. Meanwhile Longfellow's poetry was already being overrated. Dickinson had just begun to write, and the poetry of Edward Taylor was unknown; neither was to be conclusively discovered till the next century. In Emerson, Hawthorne, Thoreau, and Melville we had a distinguished group of imaginative writers who had much to do with releasing Whitman's voice. As Whitman put it in a famous acknowledgment, "I was simmering, simmering, simmering; Emerson brought me to a boil." But if he was liberated by Emerson, Whitman himself was to have little direct influence on the extraordinary poetry to come a decade or so after his death. Actually the immediate effect of *Leaves of Grass* was to stimulate both good and bad poets to a garrulous, often insipid expressionism wherever it was taken as a guide. Yet it was Whitman who first made poetry interesting as the full-time concern of an American concentrating on a native and contemporaneous subject matter. And as we have learned to assess his accomplishment, we have begun to understand the type of vision, with all its exaltation based on common but minutely observed instances, which had to establish itself before a major poetry could flourish in America. This is why Whitman is crucial to the history of American poetry. By his example we discover how to recognize our major poets and how to estimate the expense of imagination that has had to work against the difficult conditions of nurture in American life. Whitman's real influence has been cumulative, inundant, but underground, having indirectly fed a number of excellent and very different poets of our era—Hopkins, Laforgue, Perse, Yeats, Eliot, Frost, and Pound. Though rejecting his "democratic vistas," they sought through him the courage and sustenance by which to work out their own experiments in idiomatic language and "the prose tradition." "It was you that broke the new wood," Pound acknowledges. "We have one sap and one root—Let there be commerce between us."

These comments will turn on the common inheritance and aims of the major American poets which have made their activity significant. Occasionally the presence of a stubborn intruder will be detected in the foreground. He is the ubiquitous type of popular critic (more stony-headed preacher than critic) who somehow gets in whenever poetry is discussed nowadays and presents his anachronistic cause by misrepresenting the nature of poetry. He must be reckoned with because his is the voice of the confusionmonger magnified by the traditional solemnity of the rationalist and the intensity of the man with fixed ideas. Though he thinks himself on the side of the angels, he serves here as the devil's advocate; by consciously opposing him we get to know what we value and believe, and to make such things intelligible to ourselves.

Against such an antagonist stand the major poets, and they are harder to characterize because they differ so much from one another. Certain traits, nevertheless, they do have in common. A major poet contributes to the development of the art of poetry by the magnitude or the implacable center of gravity of his vision and craft. The energy of his expression withstands close scrutiny, sustaining its power and effect over the years. Just as everyone owns his particular face and voice, so the major poet owns his particular style and makes it do what he wishes it to do in a way that is rarely mistakable. For his manner of treating a subject invariably remakes it so that it appears to be presented for the first time.

But, having said this much, we must quickly add that such qualifications are ideal. Though the major poet often fulfills them, he sometimes loses rank by failing to do so in one poem or another—particularly, among more ambitious poets, in the longer poem. In defense of such lapses, it may be agreed that when Whitman nods we *know* that it is Whitman nodding and not Eddie Guest. And if he falls short of the mark, it is often because poetic exuberance requires a prolonged exhibition before some special excellence can emerge. In the greatest imaginative works, manner frequently succumbs to matter. And where such diverse interests and ambitions are at work as in American poetry, one expects many lapses.

2.

The technical diversity of our poetry is so prodigious it is bewildering. The free rhythms and long cadenced lines of Whitman, Jeffers, and Lindsay confront the intricate formal stanzas of Taylor, Poe, and Ransom. Millay's conventional sonnetry opposes the openhanded, deceptively free sonnetry of Robinson and Frost. Dickinson's light but sinewy quatrains have little in common with Auden's heavily freighted ballads

where a traditional English measure often merges with the American cowboy song. The dense, eccentric linear developments of Marianne Moore's stanzas convert essayistic prose rhythms into original verse patterns; though starting from documentary and other prose interests she shares with William Carlos Williams, her style is completely opposed to his loose-jointed lines that are dyed in the colloquialisms of modern speech. Both the exultant formalist and the word-splitting, jargonish, tough-guy informalist are united in E. E. Cummings, who finds his models in Pound and Joyce as well as in Whitman's swelling line and Poe's echolalia. Pound's linguistic obsessions in the *Cantos,* his ragpicking accumulations of historical "exhibits" and his celebration of autocrats, cranks, and bigots nearly swamp one's patience just at the point where a good lyrical sail, urged on by a nice rhythmic wind, quickens it again. Whitman's sense-withering catalogues are just as trying; they show a similar need to embrace the reader's total sympathies with what barely escapes becoming a death grip but for some beguiling sense, emerging at the last moment, of the poet's sheer beneficences. No poetry is better finished than Wallace Stevens'; his elegant diction conventionalizes the unpredictable adjective or noun and shuns rhyme for verbal texture and intricate sound patterns until each poem becomes an airy, clean, and self-fulfilling structure, like a house by Frank Lloyd Wright. MacLeish's gift for euphony is strengthened by what he borrows from Pound, Eliot, and Perse, though at times suggesting a closer temperamental affinity with the nostalgias of Longfellow and the *longueur* of Swinburne, Gene Derwood and Hart Crane respect the hard resilient line of the English Metaphysicals and the French Symbolists; but as a result their language often suffers from overcompression—Derwood's on the side of archaisms and Crane's on the side of technical modernisms; still, no other contemporary poets have written so magnificently of the raw pity of death.

Even more striking than their technical and temperamental diversity is the coherence of aim that links poets of different sensibilities and periods. This is most pronounced in their addiction to the realistic portrayal of objects and the language of common speech. English poetry, which experienced a sharp break between the Metaphysicals and the Romantics because of the intervening rule of Neoclassical tastes and the formidable prose masters of the eighteenth century, had to struggle into the present century with the burden of a deteriorated poetic style. American poetry, which was still unrooted, fared better; its problem was not to shake off an unpromising manner, but to discover its own matter. One thing in its favor was that the source of the vivid, inventive common language of the seventeenth century, which it shared with England, was never too

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