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978-1-107-02524-0 - American Poetry After Modernism: The Power of the Word

Albert Gelpi

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AMERICAN POETRY AFTER MODERNISM

Albert Gelpi's *American Poetry after Modernism* is a study of major poets of the postwar period from Robert Lowell and Adrienne Rich through the Language poets. He argues that what distinguishes American poetry from the British tradition is, paradoxically, the lack of a tradition; as a result, each poet has to ask fundamental questions about the role of the poet and the nature of the medium, has to invent a language and form for his or her purposes. Exploring this paradox through detailed critical readings of the work of sixteen poets, Gelpi presents an original and insightful argument about late twentieth-century American poetry and about the historical development of a distinctively American poetry. *American Poetry after Modernism* offers literary history and critical argument along with readings of many of the best and most important poems written in the last sixty years.

ALBERT GELPI is Coe Professor of American Literature, emeritus, at Stanford University. His previous books include *Emily Dickinson: The Mind of the Poet*, *The Tenth Muse*, and *A Coherent Splendor*. Gelpi has also edited the work of, and written criticism on, a wide range of poets, including Wallace Stevens, Robinson Jeffers, Adrienne Rich, Denise Levertov, Robert Duncan, and William Everson. *The Letters of Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov*, coedited with Robert Bertholf, received an award from the Modern Language Association as the best scholarly edition of a literary correspondence. Gelpi continues to teach in the Stanford Continuing Studies Program.

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This book is dedicated to my loved ones

BARBARA

CHRISTOPHER JANET MITCHELL GRACE

ADRIENNE PAUL BENNET

LUCIANA JOCELYN

and to the memory of my friend

ANDREW BROWN

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Preface

This book resumes and extends an argument that runs through two previous books of mine about the American poetic tradition: *The Tenth Muse*, which focuses on American Romantic poetry, and *A Coherent Splendor*, which studies American Modernist poetry. The defining issues of a distinctive American poetics, as I see them, are introduced in Chapter 1 and summed up in the brief coda. *American Poetry after Modernism* does not presume or require a knowledge of the earlier volumes, but it does extend the lines of argument into the second half of the twentieth century, a period whose poetry and “poetry wars” were overshadowed and informed by the horrors of World War II, the threat of nuclear holocaust, the anxieties of the Cold War with the communist bloc, and the conflicts in Korea and Vietnam.

My intention, as in the earlier volumes, is not a survey of the period and its groups and movements but a more detailed examination of those poets who most effectively helped me focus and substantiate my argument. Consequently I don’t discuss a number of poets whose work is less relevant to the questions of form and language that I am pursuing. In particular, I should note the emergence of African-American, Latino, and Asian-American poets in this period, but the strong focus on issues of ethnic identity in the dominant culture, important for all Americans as these issues are, mean that most of this poetry starts with and is sustained by a different set of questions. The poets examined in these chapters are all important figures in American poetry of the second half of the twentieth century, but among the poets I regret having to leave out I think particularly of Theodore Roethke, Langston Hughes, Richard Wilbur, James Merrill, J. V. Cunningham, Charles Olson, Sylvia Plath, Wendell Berry, Gary Snyder, Nathaniel Mackey, Robert Hass, and Mary Oliver.

This project encompasses the whole span of my scholarly life. It began to take direction in lectures for a two-semester course on American poets from the Puritans to the present that I taught as a beginning assistant professor at

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Harvard in the mid-1960s. Reading and teaching those poets over the years that soon took me to Stanford, I kept returning to the question of whether they came to represent a poetic tradition distinct from the British tradition, and, if so, what the defining issues and differences are. A number of good and enlightening historical surveys of American poetry have been published over the last fifty years, but nothing quite like my line of inquiry. As my thinking clarified and developed, what I had presumed would be a single volume evolved into two, and now into a third segment that carries the argument up to the contemporary scene. Looking back, I see how much my reading of American literature was influenced by the great intellectual historian Perry Miller; and I feel my indebtedness to him, as I have so many times before, for the courses I took from him, especially the one on American Romanticism, and for his guidance in writing my dissertation on Emily Dickinson, which became my first book. So I feel gratified and satisfied, and also a little wistful, at completing a project conceived almost a half-century ago at the beginning of my professional life. *Mirabile dictu et deo gratias.*

As I bring this book to completion, Andrew Brown is very much in my mind and heart. Among his many achievements in his career at Cambridge University Press has been his steady advocacy of American literature. Andrew asked me more than thirty years ago to be the first academic editor of a new series we called Cambridge Studies in American Literature and Culture, which is still actively publishing. During the decade of my editorship we became good friends. The Press published my two earlier volumes about the American poetic tradition, and Andrew and I were in conversation about this third installment since its inception three summers ago. On one occasion he remarked that the book would be a fitting culmination of our long association through the Press, and, in one of my last e-mails to him before his death in January 2014, I was able to report that I had just about finished the draft of the conclusion.

In closing I also want to thank friends and colleagues who read parts of the book and generously offered incisive and helpful suggestions, especially Robert Kiely, Marjorie Perloff, Gareth Reeves, Brett Millier, and Robert Grenier, who turned his sharp proofreader's eye and pencil to my typed text. Thanks also to Ryan Haas for his sure-handed assistance in the final preparation of the book manuscript. And, as always, to Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi, whose unfailing editorial eye and deep love of poetry have seen every chapter through.

Albert Gelpi
Stanford University
August 7, 2014