

THE CAMBRIDGE
HISTORY OF
AMERICAN LITERATURE

Volume 5
Poetry and Criticism
1900–1950

General Editor

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa
<http://www.cambridge.org>

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First published 2003

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeface Garamond 3 11/13 pt *System* L^AT_EX 2_ε [TB]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 0 521 30109 2 hardback

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PROLOGUE

THE American literary culture that Frost, Stevens, Eliot, and Pound grew to know, and despise, as young men of great literary ambition was dominated by values that hostile commentators characterize as “genteel.” The names of the genteel literary powers are now mostly forgotten: R. H. Stoddard, Bayard Taylor, G. H. Boker, Thomas Bailey Aldrich, E. C. Stedman, Richard Watson Gilder (Boston, Philadelphia, but mainly New York); at Columbia, Harvard, and Princeton, the academic reflectors G. E. Woodberry, Barrett Wendell, Henry Van Dyke. These were the men who shaped and ruled the literary culture of modernism’s American scene of emergence. They represented, in their prime, the idea of poetry and true literary value. What Willard Thorp said about them more than forty years ago still cuts to the heart of this matter of literary politics: “As the years went by, connections which the group formed with magazines and publishing houses multiplied until their names were spoken and seen everywhere, and they formed a kind of literary interlocking directorate.” In other words, they policed Parnassus by capturing and controlling the modes of literary publication. And not only did they “represent” the idea of poetry (“represent” is too weak, and they would have said the *ideal* of poetry): they enforced that representation from the 1880s through the first decade or so of the twentieth century; in particular, they enforced it by editing, in those pre-little magazine times, the period’s dominant magazines of culture – *Scribner’s*, the *Atlantic*, and *Century*.

America’s looming genteel directorate unleashed a culture-saturating wave of literature and criticism: appreciations, recollections, histories of English and American poetry, numerous volumes of their own verse, some novels, one major translation (Taylor’s of Goethe), travel books of considerable popularity, social reflections and criticism, decisive taste-making anthologies of American literature, coffee-table books of photos, illustrations, and light essays on great American writers “at home,” including one such volume featuring one of the group’s own, E. C. Stedman. The volume on Stedman ensured that his face, as well as his name, would be seen everywhere. And when his poems, like

those of his “Fireside” predecessors, finally made their way into a Houghton Mifflin “household” edition, Stedman’s cultural power received its ultimate enhancement.

“Household”: there’s a key word, an index to a culture that modernist writers would bury in scorn. “Fireside” poets, “schoolroom” poets (Bryant, Whittier, Longfellow, Holmes, Lowell): poets for the whole family, to be read around the fireside, sometimes out loud, with children and grandparents in comfortable attention. “Genteel” poets, successors to the Fireside group: nothing abrasive to family values here, either, but probably not much read around the fireplace. For bad reasons, they were difficult of access.

These genteel poets and critics formed our poetic nineties, not to be conflated with the Paterian nineties of British aestheticism. Our aesthetes valued purity above all, the rigorous evacuation from poetry of sensuousness and the sensual, and of any tendencies to social representation. Our aesthetes were ascetics of the circumambient gas. They flew from the world that capital was making (but so would the modernists), from what one of them called the “modern industry of prose fiction” (the metaphor reveals almost everything), a denigrating reference to the (then) avant-garde presence of realist and naturalist fiction and all the repulsive social references of this new writing: the classes, middle and lower, in uneasy relation and movement, America’s new (and swarthy) immigrants, business, money, power, sex, divorce, and other distinctly nonideal preoccupations of a post-aristocratic literary world. The new fiction carried the news of radical social change, and Thomas Bailey Aldrich, editor of the *Atlantic*, poet and novelist, took notice:

The mighty Zolaistic movement now
Engrosses us – a miasmatic breath
Blown from the slums. We paint life as it is,
The hideous side of it, with careful pains,
Making a god of the dull commonplace.

Of course, they were attacked for being out of touch: hopelessly nostalgic, prudish, feminine, all enervated lyric inwardness. They certainly *felt* themselves to be attacked. Aldrich’s easy slip from a defensive “us” to the “we” which was painting the “hideous side” is a grammatical hint at how inexorable the poetic genteel believed the realist movement to be, an astute if inadvertent prophecy. Here was the progress of a post-Enlightenment elite giving way to social and aesthetic regress, from the pure breeze of poetic inspiration to the ghetto’s sweaty stench. The verb telling of the realist absorption of the genteel also tells of the genteel reaction to uncouth art – they were being “engrossed,” and it grossed them out.

So they refused to swallow such unwashed fare. Maybe – in Santayana’s unfair phrase for Emerson – they digested vacancy. (A great lyric poet, Wallace Stevens, could make such an act the poignant and persistent substance of his work, a lyric drama of inwardness.) In fact, it’s hard to say what the genteel poets digested. They would have agreed, at any rate, that they were out of touch: they intended to be out of touch; it was the nature and function of poetry to be out of touch. Thus: “Language is colloquial and declarative in our ordinary speech, and on its legs for common use and movement. Only when it takes wing does it become poetry.” Invested with the Swinburnean “trinity of timebeat, consonance, and assonance,” language manages to “rise to the upper air,” free of the vernacular voice in worldly situation, afloat over a dimly perceived pastoral terrain:

The Woods that Bring the Sunset Near

The wind from out the west is blowing
The homeward-wandering cows are lowing,
Dark grow the pine-woods, dark and drear, –
The woods that bring the sunset near.

When o’er wide seas the sun declines,
Far off its fading glory shines,
Far off, sublime, and full of fear –
The pine-woods bring the sunset near.

This house that looks to east, to west,
This, dear one, is our home, our rest;
Yonder the stormy sea, and here
The woods that bring the sunset near.

Richard Watson Gilder

The genteel poets reduced the limited virtues of their Fireside predecessors to forceless gestures. The formal strength of Longfellow becomes in the hands of Gilder a dullness of form that overdetermines the content – cows whose “lowing” is no doubt elicited by the “blowing” of the western wind (that tired cause of predictable lyric “effects”); the distinct topography of Bryant’s American pastoral is now generic landscape; Whittier’s sharp abolitionist stance becomes a weak cultural politics of “fading glory,” complete with nostalgic trope (the declining sun). In a characteristic finale, Gilder sequesters himself and a “dear one” from “yonder” stormy sea amidst the walls of a restful domestic space: “our home.” “Far off, sublime, and full of fear,” indeed – were the irony of “sublime” intentional, the phrase as self-assessment would be both accurate and (grudgingly) admirable.

Genteel poetry was a poetry of willfully dissociated sensibility; its odor was distinctly one of mildewed and dusty old books. The library needed proper

ventilating, but these poets didn't know it, and would never know it. The initial chapter of this part of the volume surveys two important turn-of-the-century fields on which the battle for cultural centrality was being waged, two sites of cultural production – anthologies and magazines – which give strong evidence in material form of the aesthetic and ideological differences between the genteel powers and the burgeoning avant-garde. Through the examples of Pound and Frost, the first chapter offers a view of a key inaugural moment: the founding of the so-called “little magazines” in the setting of emergent mass culture. Just as these little magazines offered a space for the dissemination of what would become known as modernist poetry, a space which had been denied by the era's dominant magazines of culture, so did Louis Untermeyer's groundbreaking anthology offer a challenge to the cultural dominance of the exceedingly popular genteel anthologies of Francis Palgrave and Jessie Belle Rittenhouse. The first chapter concludes in studying the commercial pressures and personal commitments driving the taste-making arguments manifested in these important anthologies, and in telling the story of the literary historical effects of Untermeyer's editorial success. The chapters that follow – on Frost, Stevens, Eliot, and Pound – are intended to give four angles of vision on modernist experiment; the inclusion of Frost in modernist company will seem odd only if the heterogeneity of modernist literature is forgotten: Ibsen, Strindberg, Chekhov, Hardy, Shaw, the Joyce of *Dubliners*, and Frost, as well as the usual (and glorious) suspects who knew how to ventilate the library. In the setting of four “modern” lives, these chapters present four individual efforts to create a new poetry against the restrictive standard established by the poetics that encouraged the practice of a writer like Richard Watson Gilder. These chapters on the poets, though multi-intentioned, are united in the purpose to evoke the genteel environment as cultural origin of modernist reaction, one important (though not the only) historical ground of experiment.