

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-43021-0 - The Regenerate Lyric: Theology and Innovation in American Poetry

Elisa New

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CAMBRIDGE STUDIES IN AMERICAN LITERATURE AND CULTURE

*The Regenerate Lyric**Theology and Innovation in American Poetry*

In her book *The Regenerate Lyric*, Elisa New presents a major revision of the accepted historical account of Emerson as the source of the American poetic tradition. New challenges the majority opinion that Emerson not only overthrew New England religious orthodoxy but founded a poetic tradition that fundamentally renounced that orthodoxy in favor of a secular Romanticism. In the years between the Unitarian controversy of early to mid nineteenth century and the rise of Neo-Orthodoxy a century later, New argues, the very orthodoxy that Emerson pronounced moribund found new life and sanctuary in the unlikelyst of places: the American poem. She contends that Emerson's reinvention of religion as a species of poetry was tested and found wanting by the very poetic innovators Emerson addressed, and that a countertradition is evident in his major heirs – Whitman, Dickinson, Crane, Stevens, Frost, and Lowell. Emerson's own poetry failed to live up to his poetics and revealed instead an inherent paradox: the renewal of religion as, or in, poetic theory alienates religion from its life principle – theology – and disables the poem as well. Elisa New examines the poems in great detail, offering searching readings and concluding finally that “it is ‘regeneracy’ rather than ‘originality’ that is the American poet's *modus operandi* and native mandate.”

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