

Introduction

A century is a considerable period of time in the development of any literary genre. This is especially true in the case of American poetry, which began the twentieth century as an enervated literary exercise and ended it as a vital form of cultural expression. American poets of the twentieth century pushed the limits of poetic composition, asking fundamental questions about what poetry is and how it should be written. Is poetry the product of an interaction between the real world and the artistic imagination? Or is it a self-contained artistic object with little relevance to the world outside its borders? Is the poem an intimate speech act linking poet and reader in a private encounter? Or can poetry contribute to new forms of social and political awareness?

This book will address such questions in an attempt to provide a better understanding of the poems, poets, and poetic movements of the last hundred years. The primary focus of the book is on the close reading of individual poems. These readings should provide keys to the understanding of each poet's work; at the same time, they should serve as examples of poetic explication and interpretation that can help the reader to articulate his or her own responses to poetry in general. The discussion of selected poems in each chapter will be supplemented by a presentation of the cultural, sociological, and intellectual contexts of twentieth-century American poetry.

As the twentieth century began, poetry was greatly overshadowed by the novel. During the period from the end of the Civil War until World War I, the United States experienced explosive population growth and a powerfully expanding economy. As a result, the nation was focused on pragmatic matters that absorbed its immediate attention: American society had little energy to devote to the cultivation of poetry, which was often relegated to the status of a "genteel" pastime with little relevance to modern-day life. The so-called "Age of Realism" (1870–1910) was a high point in the development of the American novel; American poetry, on the other hand, lingered in the twilight of the late nineteenth century, unable to enter the modern world or break with the conventional formulas and sentimental diction of earlier decades.

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It was not until the second decade of the century that poets began to come to terms with the important social and economic changes of the modern era, such as the introduction of new technologies into all areas of industry and commerce and the increasingly urban character of American life. The first generation of American poets to respond to this modern world included Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens, Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, T. S. Eliot, E. E. Cummings, and Marianne Moore. It was with this generation – all of whom published their first books between 1908 and 1923 – that the artistic achievement of American poetic writing was clearly established.

Among these poets, Pound was perhaps the most strident voice for a poetry that would serve as a central expression of the new “modernist” aesthetic. In a 1912 essay, Pound declared “the imminence of an American *Risorgimento*,” a renaissance in American intellectual and artistic life that would lift the country out of its “Dark Ages” and propel it into contemporary civilization. Such a renaissance was indeed to take place, largely as a result of the discovery of European culture by American poets. Those responding to American provinciality and cultural isolationism by leaving America for sojourns in Paris or London included Gertrude Stein, Pound, Eliot, Frost, Cummings, H. D. (Hilda Doolittle), and Langston Hughes. While Stein, Pound, Eliot, and H. D. became permanent expatriates, the others returned to the United States, bringing with them an enlarged sense of European culture. American poets found a more receptive audience for their works in Europe than in the United States: the first books of Pound, Frost, and Moore were all published abroad, where the public was more prepared for writing that did not conform to conventional nineteenth-century norms.

The experience of World War I, which brought many Americans into contact with Europe for the first time, further bridged the gap between American and European culture, and it prepared the ground for an international modernism in which Americans would play a crucial part. The war was traumatic not only for the soldiers in the trenches but also for artists and writers whose sensitivity to the effects of warfare made them, as Pound put it, the “antennae of the race.” In T. S. Eliot’s epoch-marking poem *The Waste Land*, he evoked a postwar world in which traditional systems of belief and established social structures had been radically altered. The changed understanding of human society and human nature brought about by the war contributed to the large-scale literary and artistic movement known as “modernism.” As James Longenbach suggests, the war “presented a generation of judiciously limited lyric poets with an epic subject.”¹ The realities of war caused a total rethinking of the purpose of poetry in the twentieth century. During the years 1920–26 alone, American poets produced an extraordinary body of work, including Pound’s “Hugh Selwyn Mauberly”

and *Cantos I-XVI*, Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Stevens' *Harmonium*, Williams' *Spring and All*, Moore's *Observations and Poems*, Hughes' *The Weary Blues*, H. D.'s *Collected Poems*, Cummings' *Tulips and Chimneys*, and Hart Crane's *White Buildings*.

World War II represented another watershed in the development of American poetry, marking a definitive historical and generational break with modernism. The postwar poets of the 1950s and 1960s took a number of different guises: there were the academic formalists following the tenets of the New Criticism; there were the "confessionals" with their more intensely personal approach to the poem; and there were the Beats and other countercultural movements which sought to liberate poetry from what they saw as the rigidity of academic verse. Against the political, social, and cultural conservatism of the postwar era, the poetry of the New American Poets took on a subversive aura in the 1950s, serving as a forerunner to the larger social movements of the 1960s.

In the 1970s and 1980s, American poetry entered its third generational phase. During this period, the number of published poets continued to grow, bolstered by a burgeoning network of journals, presses, and academic creative-writing programs. Despite worries about the "death of poetry," movements such as the avant-garde "Language Poetry" and the "New Formalism" helped revitalize American poetry. In the final decades of the century, two other tendencies emerged in American poetry. The first of these was the turn toward oral and performance poetics; the second was the increasing use of computer-assisted technologies for generating poetic texts. The new performance poetry, or "Spoken Word," as it is sometimes called, began as a localized movement in the 1980s and gained tremendous popularity in the 1990s, with readings and "poetry slams" held at venues like the Nuyorican Poets Cafe in New York's lower east side. The use of computers and the internet in what has variously been called "cyber-poetry," "e-poetry," "digital poetry," or "new media poetry" was in the early stages of its development at century's end, and it is still too soon to say what its long-term significance will be.

The first fact to be remembered in any assessment of American poetry is that it has had a relatively short history. Though poetry has been written in North America for over 350 years – since Anne Bradstreet first penned her verses about life in Puritan New England – it was not until the almost simultaneous appearance of Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson in the mid-nineteenth century that American poetry began to rival European national poetries in originality and literary significance. Until Whitman and Dickinson, American poets were generally paler imitations of their English counterparts, and few of them thought of seeking an original language or form in which to express themselves.

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The term “American poetry” is itself something of an oxymoron, juxtaposing the idea of “America” as a new-found land of pure potential and the concept of “poetry,” a literary genre defined over hundreds of years of European civilization. One of the central projects for American poets – from the seventeenth-century Puritans to the twentieth-century modernists – was to determine their relation to English and other European poetic traditions. In his 1825 “Lectures on Poetry,” William Cullen Bryant argued against the attempt to formulate a new poetic language for American poetry: “If a new language were to arise among us in our present condition of society, I fear that it would derive too many of its words from the roots used to signify canals, railroads, and steamboats.” Even as late as 1891, Walt Whitman declared in his provocatively titled essay “American National Literature: Is There Such a Thing – Or Can There Ever Be?” that “the United States do not so far utter poetry, first-rate literature, or any of the so-call’d arts, to any lofty admiration or advantage.”

Writing in an inherited language but on a new continent, American poets have always been forced to make difficult decisions about language, form, and subject matter. The poet in England, France, Germany, or Italy has a lineage established throughout the centuries by the corpus of “great works” that constitutes the “canon” of a national literature. In England, for example, a twentieth-century poet could look back through the work of Victorians like Robert Browning and Matthew Arnold to the poetry of Romantics like William Wordsworth and John Keats, and from there back to the even more firmly established canon of John Milton, William Shakespeare, and Geoffrey Chaucer. American poets lack such an easily identifiable canon: with the exception of Whitman and Dickinson, there were few poets before the twentieth century who could serve as important models for modern and contemporary writers.

What, then, is the significance of tradition for American poets? On the one hand, American poetry is formulated as a rejection of the tradition of self-consciously literary writing associated with English poetry. Whitman exemplified this anti-traditional stance, calling for a “national, idiomatic” poetry free from the “genteel laws” of Anglo-European verse. On the other hand, tradition can function as a chosen lineage for an American poet in which he or she can discover sources of inspiration and the presence of kindred spirits. We often speak of a Whitmanic tradition (open, democratic, celebratory), a Poundian tradition (modernist, experimental) or a Dickinsonian tradition (woman-centered, personal, formal), using these terms as a shorthand for an entire stance toward the writing of poetry.

American poetry has a complex heritage, deriving from both literary and popular sources. If the roots of American poetry can be found in Puritan meditative writing, eighteenth-century verse satire, and the Romantic lyric,

they can equally well be discovered in slave songs, captivity narratives, and Protestant hymns. Lacking a ready-made literary tradition, American poets have gone far and wide in search of their influences and inspirations. Whitman sought material for his poetry in popular oratory, journalism, and street slang. The modernists found sources in Egyptian mythology, the Hindu Upanishads, and Chinese ideograms. More recently, eclectic sources have become the norm rather than the exception, as poets have found inspiration for their work in various forms of music (jazz, blues, rap), in the visual arts (Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art), and in alternative philosophical and spiritual traditions (Zen Buddhism, Native American mythology).

Poetry in America has rarely been granted the cultural importance it enjoys in countries such as England, France, and Germany. For this reason, as Roy Harvey Pearce observed, the American poet has always felt a compulsion “to justify his existence as poet.”² Poetry, at least as it is traditionally conceived, deals with the imagination, the emotions, and the appreciation of beauty rather than with a realistic treatment of everyday life. Americans have tended to view the novel, rather than poetry, as the literary genre best suited to the experience of a newer, more pragmatically minded nation. The familiar model of the young writer setting out to write the “Great American Novel” (never the “Great American Poem”) is emblematic of this fact. In American literary life, novelists are the celebrated “stars” of the profession while poets are too often relegated to the cultural sidelines.

In many cases, Americans have failed even to recognize the genius of their own best poets. Whitman, later embraced as “America’s Bard” and the “Good Gray Poet,” was throughout most of his life villified by critics, shunned by his fellow writers, and excluded from contemporary anthologies. Dickinson – profoundly misunderstood even by those closest to her – published only a handful of poems during her lifetime and did not receive a complete edition of her work until nearly seventy years after her death. William Carlos Williams, now recognized as one of the leaders of the modernist movement and one of the central poets of the first half of the twentieth century, was underappreciated and rarely taught until the 1960s. Even Wallace Stevens, now probably more secure in his literary status than any other American poet of this century, was generally regarded during his lifetime as a quirky literary eccentric rather than a major poet. In fact, apart from T. S. Eliot, it is difficult to think of an American poet of the past two centuries whose reputation has not at some point fallen undeservedly low.

With the passage of time, it becomes easier to make definitive judgments about the relative importance of different poets. We can now say with some assurance that Whitman and Dickinson are the two centrally important American poets of the nineteenth century. That is, while it is still possible that a currently underrated poet will rise in our critical estimation, there is

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general consensus on the part of most poets, critics, and readers about the unique literary value of Dickinson's and Whitman's poems. In the first half of the twentieth century, such critical consensus becomes somewhat more difficult, though there is still a relatively small group of poets who dominate critical discussions of American poetic modernism. There may be admirers of Stevens and Frost who think less highly of the work of Pound and Eliot, and vice versa, but by and large the study of modernist American poetry has focused on a "canon" of five or six central poets.

As we approach the present day, however, there is far less consensus about who the major poets are. It is still difficult at this juncture to refer to a "canon" of postwar American poetry, although poets like Robert Lowell, Elizabeth Bishop, and John Ashbery would certainly come close to qualifying. Not only are there more poets writing and publishing than ever before, but there is also a far more diverse mix of poetic subcultures dividing the available attention of readers. No other country has produced a comparable range of poetry by writers with a greater diversity of backgrounds. Each region of the country celebrates its own school of poets, as does each ethnic and racial group. Poetry anthologies are now devoted to African American poetry, Latino poetry, Asian American poetry, and Native American poetry. Poets of other ethnic identities – including Italian American, Jewish American, and Arab American – are celebrated for their alternative visions of American life, and poetic groupings are made on the basis of such factors as sexual preference and life and work experience (Vietnam veterans, prisoners, children of Holocaust survivors) as well as stylistic and formal considerations (formalist poetry, experimental poetry, mainstream lyric poetry, spoken-word poetry, visual poetry). Although no introductory guide of this length can do justice to both the range and the artistic achievement of American poetry in the twentieth century, my goal in this book has been to include a broad enough spectrum of poets to demonstrate the diversity of American poetic writing, while still providing a useful guide to the achievements of individual poets.

Chapter 1

A new century: from the genteel poets to Robinson and Frost

With the deaths of both Walt Whitman and John Greenleaf Whittier in 1892, an era in American poetry came to a close. Practically the entire generation which had defined American poetry in the latter half of the nineteenth century was now gone, such grey eminences as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and James Russell Lowell having passed away in the preceding decade. Yet if the major American poets of the nineteenth century had departed, the first important generation of twentieth-century poets was still far from its maturity. Edwin Arlington Robinson was an undergraduate student at Harvard, four years away from publishing his first book of verse; Robert Frost was two years away from his first published poem and over two decades from his first volume; and Wallace Stevens was a thirteen-year-old schoolboy, three decades from the publication of his first book.

The years from 1880 to 1910 were something of a dark age for American poetry. During a time when the novels of Mark Twain, Henry James, William Dean Howells, Theodore Dreiser, Stephen Crane, and Edith Wharton established the undeniable importance of American fiction, poetry was pushed to the margins of the literary world. Not able to compete with novelists in terms of popularity, and not willing to risk moving beyond the familiar models of nineteenth-century verse, poets settled for an uncontroversial mediocrity of idea, form, and rhetoric. As Ezra Pound later put it in his harshly critical appraisal of the era, it was a time of “pseudo-artists” working under a stultifying system of control by the major publishers. Indeed, under the editorial reign of the large-circulation magazines that published poetry – such as *Harper's*, *The Century*, and *The Atlantic* – the prevailing poetic style progressed little between the 1870s and the early 1910s. There was no room in America for a poet who sought to become, in Pound's terms, a “serious artist.”

In order to embark on a modern poetic career, poets like Frost, Pound and T. S. Eliot would be obliged to go abroad. To a great extent, as David Perkins has suggested, it was still London and not New York or Boston that served as the cultural capital of the United States: it was the poems of the London avant-garde and not those of the American magazines that “commanded

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the attention of American literary undergraduates.”¹ Still more provocative for young Americans was the literature of France, including the fiction of Gustave Flaubert and Emile Zola, the essays of Théophile Gautier, and the poems of Charles Baudelaire, Paul Verlaine, Arthur Rimbaud, and Stéphane Mallarmé.

However, the number of American poets of the period who looked to the contemporary literature of London or Paris for inspiration was still relatively small. On the whole, younger poets embraced the dominant poetic mode of the American “genteel tradition.” The genteel poets – whom E. A. Robinson called the “little sonnet men” and Whitman derided as the “tea-pot poets” – wrote sonnets, odes, and dramatic monologues in imitation of English Victorian poetry, expressing what Pound would characterize as “nice domestic sentiments inoffensively versified.” According to Henry Adams – one of the more astute cultural commentators of his day – poetry had become so artificial and removed from social reality that it no longer served as a “natural expression of society itself.”² Instead, poetry now functioned both as a refuge from contemporary society – with its growing cities, massive immigration, capitalist greed, and political corruption – and as a reaction against the realist and naturalist fiction that attempted to depict that society.

The most prominent of the genteel poets were those of the so-called “Harvard School,” which included George Santayana, William Vaughan Moody, Trumbull Stickney, and George Cabot Lodge. The Harvard poets were an extremely cultivated and erudite group: Santayana was a Harvard professor and one of the most prominent American philosophers of his day; Moody taught literature at both Harvard and the University of Chicago; Stickney was the first American ever to earn a doctorate in letters from the Sorbonne in Paris; Lodge, the son of the prominent United States senator Henry Cabot Lodge, studied Schopenhauer in Berlin as well as classics and Romance languages in Paris. Cultivated as they were, however, these poets displayed little true originality; they were, as Larzer Ziff suggests, a school of poets “held in suspension,” still tied to past models and unable to articulate a viable American poetics for the next century.³ Though they were skilled versifiers, the Harvard poets had nothing new to say: as a result, their poems quickly fell into a relative obscurity.

The Harvard poets were dedicated to what they considered a “balanced” attitude in art and literature and to an avoidance of all extremes. While they respected Whitman, they did not attempt to imitate the power of his style. Instead, they emulated the dominant style of Victorian poetry: earnest, traditional, elegiac, formally crafted, and often highly sentimental. Santayana’s most famous poem, the sonnet “O World, thou chooseth not the better part” (1894) concludes with the following lines:

Our knowledge is a torch of smoky pine
 That lights the pathway but one step ahead
 Across a void of mystery and dread.
 Bid, then, the tender light of faith to shine
 By which alone the mortal heart is led
 Unto the thinking of the thought divine.

The metaphor of human or worldly knowledge as a smoky torch unable to light the way through life is quite effective, but the overall power of the image is weakened by the sentimental language and the artificial syntax of the subsequent lines. Constructions such as “void of mystery and dread,” “the tender light of faith,” and “the thinking of the thought divine” express what were relatively hackneyed ideas by the end of the nineteenth century.

Edwin Arlington Robinson

Robinson was born in 1869, making him the oldest of the American poets who successfully made the transition into the twentieth century. Robinson’s poetry was, as the poet Louise Bogan later observed in an essay entitled “Tilbury Town and Beyond” (1931), “one of the hinges upon which American poetry was able to turn from the sentimentality of the nineties toward modern veracity and psychological truth.” Robinson’s poetic output was considerable, and not all of it was of the highest quality, but his best poems are masterpieces of concision and rhetoric. Though he is often ignored in discussions of modern American poetry, Robinson was certainly America’s most important poet during the period from the 1890s until the mid-1910s.

Robinson grew up in Gardiner, Maine, which became the model for “Tilbury Town,” the fictional setting of many of his poems. Though he spent two years at Harvard University in the early 1890s, Robinson never became part of the Harvard School of poets. Instead, he returned to Gardiner after the death of his father and began to write the poems that would eventually be published in *The Torrent and the Night Before* (1896) and *The Children of the Night* (1897). Robinson had a difficult, lonely, and depressing life, which surely contributed to the underlying pessimism of his poetry. A keenly sensitive individual (born “with my skin inside out,” as he liked to say), Robinson experienced neither love nor marriage. He suffered from chronic mastoiditis, a painful malady that ultimately left him deaf in one ear. Further, his family was highly dysfunctional: his father died bankrupt, leaving him in desperate financial straits and obliging him to take a series of demeaning jobs; one of his brothers was addicted to morphine and another

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to alcohol. Robinson's own road to poetic success was a long and hard one, and it was not until his poems were discovered by President Theodore Roosevelt in 1905 that he began to be recognized as an important poet. The townspeople of Gardiner on whom his poems are based appear to have suffered from many of the same problems as Robinson himself: suicide, alcoholism, tragic loneliness, and a general sense of failure and unfulfilled promise.

While he was an admirer of Wordsworth, Robinson was by no means a nature poet. Commenting on the hackneyed natural imagery of most contemporary verse, he wrote to a friend in 1896 that his first volume contained "very little tinkling water, and . . . not a red-bellied robin in the whole collection." Instead, Robinson was interested in the personal histories of the people he encountered, and in using these portraits to reflect the hypocrisy and spiritual void of his times. In Robinson's most famous poem, "Richard Cory" (1897), we find one of his characteristically ironic portrayals. A paragon of material success, admired and envied by the townspeople, Cory went home one "one calm summer night" and "put a bullet through his head." The ironies here are verbal as well as dramatic: the language used to describe the town's adulation of its first citizen ("imperially slim" and "admirably schooled in every grace") is undercut by the sudden and unadorned description of Cory's suicide.

Robinson established his career with his next three volumes: *Captain Craig* (1902), *The Town Down the River* (1910), and *The Man Against the Sky* (1916). While he was also skilled at longer narrative poems in blank verse, such as "Isaac and Archibald" (1902), Robinson's fame rests on his shorter, metrically formal lyrics. A poem like "Miniver Cheevy" (1910) uses both its metrical form and allusions to classical, medieval, and renaissance life for highly ironic effect, anticipating the ironic use of stanzaic form by modernists like Pound and Eliot. The poem's first stanza introduces the subject of the portrait in brilliantly understated fashion:

Miniver Cheevy, child of scorn,
 Grew lean while he assailed the seasons;
 He wept that he was ever born,
 And he had reasons.

The final line of the stanza, with its anticlimactic five beat rhythm and its deflatingly colloquial turn of phrase, presents an ironic contrast to the exaggeratedly dramatic presentation of Cheevy in the first three lines. After the somewhat enigmatic first line (what exactly is a "child of scorn"?) and the hyperbolic diction of the second ("assailed the seasons") we find the melodramatic cliché of "He wept that he was ever born" (a line that may also