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978-1-107-00336-1 - The Cambridge History of: American Poetry

Edited by Alfred Bendixen and Stephen Burt

Excerpt

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## Introduction

ALFRED BENDIXEN AND STEPHEN BURT

*The Cambridge History of American Poetry* explores the development of poetry in the United States of America from its beginnings to the end of the twentieth century. As a literary history, it aims to provide an informative and reliable narrative of the crucial events, movements, authors, and works that mark the creation of poetic expression over several centuries. Its focus is on both historical context and artistic achievement: thus, the discussions of poetry here illuminate the ways in which verse mattered to different groups at various times as well as the ways in which individual poems exemplify particular values, achieve specific effects, and sometimes form artifacts of enduring power. The narrative thus assesses the aesthetic achievements of numerous works, paying appropriate attention to the artistic details that transform the arrangement of sounds and visual shapes into poetic forms that possess the capacity to move us emotionally, inspire us intellectually, or provoke us into action. Poetry can be pleasurable and it can be powerful. It can entertain and it can educate. At the foundation of this literary history is an inquiry into the many roles that poetry has played in the development of American democracy in the course of several centuries and in the private and public life of the American people. The essays here discuss poems that served political purposes, expressed religious convictions, explored philosophical ideas, detailed uniquely American experiences, celebrated triumphs, mourned personal tragedies, and expressed the entire range of human experience from love to loss.

In our time, literary history is a matter of multiple contexts, and we are committed to recognizing the complexity of historical forces and the multiplicity of audiences who found meaning in different kinds of poetic forms and experiences. This means a commitment to the popular as well as the elite, and to forms and writers excluded from previous discourse. There have been surprisingly few attempts to provide a literary history of poetry in the United States, and those have tended to focus on a relatively small number of major voices and movements. Typical treatments might give attention to a

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[More information](#)

ALFRED BENDIXEN AND STEPHEN BURT

couple of Puritan poets and then leap over to the nineteenth century with a nod to Poe and the Transcendentalists and a dismissive shake of the head for the old Fireside Poets and a declaration that the two poets from this century who mattered – Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson – achieved greatness by writing poetry in ways that poetry had not been written before. Even very perceptive critics such as Hyatt Waggoner and Donald Stauffer offered surveys of American poetry that treated the last half of the nineteenth century largely by providing lists of poets who were once popular and deemed important but could now safely be declared not worth reading. The twentieth century received a bit more generous treatment, but the focus was again on major authors and movements – especially the giants of high modernism. Although it has clearly been impossible for us to cover every poet who published verse during the past four hundred years, *The Cambridge History of American Poetry* has been designed to provide the most comprehensive study of the practice of poetry in the United States.

Recent challenges to literary canons, and to even the idea of a literary canon, have raised questions about figures who once seemed unassailable. Literary history is now marked by an increased recognition of the achievements of women writers and a greater attention to minority voices, especially African American ones. Moreover, there is also a deeper suspicion of the artificial wall that has separated popular from academic verse and a greater willingness to examine the roles that poetry has played in various aspects of American life. *The Cambridge History of American Poetry* seeks to capture many of the insights into the place of poetry in American culture that have developed in the past two decades. While avoiding the idea of a grand narrative into which all poetic works must either fit or be labeled idiosyncratic, we attempt to offer a literary history that is both coherent and capable of recognizing the multiplicity and diversity of roles that poetry has played and continues to play in the United States.

The editors have consulted with each other throughout the process, but Alfred Bendixen has assumed primary responsibility for the chapters focused on work from before the twentieth century, and Stephen Burt, for chapters on twentieth-century poetry. Instead of attempting to define a narrow tradition that can be traced back to Emerson or Whitman or some other single voice, *The Cambridge History of American Poetry* joins current scholarship in attempting to define and explore multiple traditions and multiple trajectories. For instance, the current process of canon revision is developing a fuller and richer sense of what nineteenth-century American poetry meant and what it achieved. Paul Laurence Dunbar, Emma Lazarus, Frances Harper, and others

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## Introduction

have found a place in college classrooms and textbooks and in this history. Whitman and Dickinson are in conversation with a variety of other voices, voices that represent the wide variety of verse forms that shaped our literary past, and some voices that speak as passionately and persuasively to us as they did to their own time.

The treatment of a drastically changing literary canon must be both sophisticated and sensitive. Although it recognizes that the criteria by which we distinguish important poetry from mere verse have changed (and will likely continue changing), this literary history does not shun the task of distinguishing major works from minor ones, while also respecting selected popular forms, such as poetry for children (which, it turns out, cannot be disentangled from the history of poetry for adults). In the process, we engage some of the most important questions about the ways in which poetry works and the ways in which poets matter. Definitions of poetry – like definitions of literature, of verse (or “mere verse”), and of art – change over time and vary at any one time, and we have tried to attend to that variation, without making the volume impossibly ambitious, or unmanageably long.

Selected bibliographies for each chapter, all at the end of the present volume, give recommended critical works (and, especially where such works are scarce, anthologies) for readers who want far more depth than we can provide here. Although our focus on poetry in the United States requires specific attention to the development of distinctively American literary traditions, including the role poetry played in the work of nation building and in shaping the social and political life of the United States, we also recognize that poetry crosses borders and boundaries, and that American verse has always existed in the context of the transatlantic, the transnational, and the international.

*The Cambridge History of American Poetry* emphasizes the complex roles that poetry has played in American cultural and intellectual life, detailing the variety of ways in which both public and private forms of poetry have met the needs of different communities at different times. The volume thus begins with a chapter – “Remembering Muskrat: Native Poetics and the American Indian Oral Tradition” – that is neither a survey of ancient nor of contemporary texts but instead a guide to the distinctive values that poetry possesses in Native communities. The second chapter moves on to a treatment of poetry’s role in the age of exploration and conquest with attention to the major non-English traditions. The rest of this history focuses on poetry in English, but the inclusion of this chapter recognizes both the interest that present-day scholars take in the early non-English traditions and the basic fact that the land that is now occupied by the United States of America began as a multilingual

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[More information](#)

ALFRED BENDIXEN AND STEPHEN BURT

and multicultural site of contest. The Puritan tradition receives emphasis in Chapter 3, which focuses on the major poets, and Chapter 4, which examines the development of the Puritan elegy. Early poets of what is now the American South receive attention in Chapter 5, which defines a colonial tradition quite different from its New England counterpart. The next two chapters survey the roles poetry played during the American Revolution and the early national period, with appropriate emphasis on the development of poetic forms, particularly the epic, directly related to the work of democratic nation building.

The complex process by which the principles of Romanticism emerged and were fashioned into a variety of poetic forms is the focus of Chapter 8, which also serves as an introduction to the chapters that follow on Emerson and his contemporaries, on Poe, and on Longfellow. Longfellow and the Fireside or Schoolroom Poets dominated the field of American poetry for decades, and no literary history can pretend to do justice to the nineteenth century without examining the appeal they once held. The implications of a process of canon formation that distinguishes between major and minor voices receives attention in Chapter 13, "Other Voices, Other Verses: Cultures of American Poetry at Midcentury." In addition to chapters on Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman, we provide informative chapters on the poetry of the Civil War, postbellum Southern poetry, the genteel tradition, children's poetry, comic traditions, and the political poetry of the late nineteenth century. Our hope is that this volume will provide the foundation for further exploration of our poetic traditions.

As our volume shifts into the twentieth century, we again confront the need to recognize a canon in flux. "When the history of American poetry in our time comes to be written," F. O. Matthiessen decided in 1950, introducing the *Oxford Book of American Verse*, "its central figures will probably be Frost and Eliot."<sup>1</sup> Richard Ellman, revising the *Oxford Book* in 1976, proposed an all-male modernist quintet (Frost, Stevens, Williams, Pound, and Eliot), adding that "the labels which many recent poets have adopted, such as Black Mountain, projectivist, New York, beat, are not likely to survive."<sup>2</sup> (We think he was wrong.) Hugh Kenner declared his century the Pound Era; Marjorie Perloff followed up with "Pound-Stevens: Whose Era?" Readers in 1965 were told that they lived in the Age of Lowell, while a more recent scholar calls the postwar decades the Age of Auden; other readers have made it possible to believe that the early twentieth century shaped the late twentieth principally through the delayed influence of Gertrude Stein.<sup>3</sup> Harold Bloom, on the other hand, has announced that we live in the Age of Ashbery, and indeed John Ashbery's hard-to-interpret works have become lodestars, or touchstones, for writers who agree on little else.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## Introduction

All these accounts have some power; none can be allowed to control a literary history that aims to respond at once to many strands of argument about American poetry, to many accounts of its past, and (inevitably) to its contributors' sometimes divergent senses of what matters now.

Our account of the twentieth century begins, as the century did, just before the advent of the "New Poetry," the preferred term in the 1910s for a verse self-consciously modern (and, often, urban) in subject or style: we move from the belated articulations of Santayana and Moody through the austerities of Edwin Arlington Robinson and the vigor of Carl Sandburg. Robert Frost's New England people and places, his tragic sense, and his mastery of received forms made his poetry modern and American and classical all at once; we look at his career, and at some of his heirs. Later accounts of modernism as such often started with the early poetry and the later dictates of T. S. Eliot: we focus here on his earlier work, which is more influential and more informed by his American youth.

Despite the neglect that he felt early on, William Carlos Williams has turned out to be the most broadly influential of modernists, the one whose work built the greatest number of paths for later generations; we consider him as linguistic innovator, as craftsman, and as physician, along with that other innovator, Stein. Mina Loy and H.D. became unquestionably modern poets who led contrasting transatlantic lives; Marianne Moore's work allows us to look at paratexts and publishers, applying book history to modern poetry, while also considering how she invented her forms.

Other poets, among them the popular, sometimes scandalous Edna St. Vincent Millay and the exacting yet passionate Louise Bogan, adapted already extant forms. Wallace Stevens brought the philosophical problems of the Romantics and the emotive dilemmas of his own troubled, quiet life into his own compositions, at first apparently bountiful, later austere. While these poets transformed nineteenth-century legacies, Pound and Williams and their inheritors were making lines, forms, and modes that could sound wholly new; we discuss those inheritors, among them the charismatic Charles Olson and his colleagues at Black Mountain College. The 1920s saw a flood of new literary production by African Americans, some of it also traditional in form, some of it drawn from Black music and speech; preeminent was Langston Hughes, whose international, as well as national, accomplishments we highlight.

The writers of the 1930s were the first to ask what came after modernism: some wrote clear poems meant to alter public opinion, while others, such as Louis Zukofsky and his sometime allies, built a leftist politics into their work in

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

ALFRED BENDIXEN AND STEPHEN BURT

more demanding ways. After the Second World War, poets who emphasized technique and tradition, who had learned from Stevens and Auden and Eliot, dominated tastes at many universities and centers of publishing (especially on the East Coast); some of those poets rejected their early styles for more obviously personal voices. Robert Lowell led that journey, and we look at him beside his contemporaries. Lowell's close friends Randall Jarrell and Elizabeth Bishop looked back to the Romantics, and at each other's work, to find paths of their own. These writers learned their craft among older, self-consciously Southern poet-critics such as John Crowe Ransom, Robert Penn Warren, and Allen Tate, whose regional tradition remains productive – and divided – to this day. Those poets represented – however uneasily – a postwar establishment, with roots not only in modernist attitudes but also in the British past. Their ways of writing and reading would face challenges from poets linked with youth culture, with the West Coast, with visual artists and musicians, and with a European avant-garde.

Especially as it approaches the present day, our history makes room not just for several so-called canons, several tastes and senses of what poets matter most, but also for several ways to write literary history. Some chapters organize themselves around single authors we see as major; others stay focused on authors in self-conscious groups, such as the Beats and the San Francisco Renaissance. Still other chapters organize themselves around a theme or an idea. We consider the so-called New York School, postwar poets who learned from the Continent and from painters; we then look at the political and cultural changes of the 1960s, seeing how some poets turned away from society, toward “authenticity,” and others made their practice more public (in part to oppose the conflict in Vietnam). We look at deflections, riddles, and playful evasions throughout the work of James Merrill, a poet both epic and lyric, who set his elaborations against the raw fact of the age; we then look at facts and ideas from science and technology as poets have used them, focusing on A. R. Ammons. We look at the social fact and the social cohesion imagined – or denied – by poets who made their style, and their fame, in the 1970s, using (sometimes by antithesis) the model of that West Coast moralist, Yvor Winters; and we look at the strands of U.S. Latino/a poetics, including but hardly limited to the Puerto Rican poets and the Chicano *movimiento* in Texas and on the West Coast.

We then survey the poetry of Asian Americans, which began about a century ago and flourishes now. Midcentury poets were labeled “confessional” when they revealed private shames, but a better label for the most thoughtful among them is “psychoanalytic”; we look at the legacy of psychoanalysis and

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## Introduction

autobiography from Sylvia Plath to the end of the century. Two poets who gained fame in the 1980s, Charles Bernstein and Thylas Moss, show how stories about careers and institutions can at once shape and misshape our views about poems. African American poetry belongs at once to the broader history of American writing and to a history of its own: since 1960, that history incorporates the Black Arts Movement along with dissenters from it and the synthesis found in poets of recent vintage. Though the late century could seem hostile to inherited high culture, some poets continued to embrace it; we look at them, and then at modern authors who wrote for the least sophisticated, perhaps most demanding audience: children. American writing has always used more than one language, just as it has (in the words of Marianne Moore) “never been confined to one locality”: we look at poets from Connecticut to Hawai’i who are creating new polyglot, hybrid work.

For periods when we can count all the books that got published, it is easy to say which ones were influential, but the modern writers we view as significant influences are likely to be the ones most important to the contemporaries whom we already like. Pick another set of contemporaries, and you will have another account of the moderns; and such accounts have proliferated since about 1960, in tandem with the exponential growth in publishing. We have tried to do justice to several such accounts, and to several ways of telling a story, without mistaking variety for indecision. Our history endorses a kind of pluralism without attempting to be all things to all people; it must embody judgments of value, because it allocates a limited space. The rise of self-skeptical and self-conscious pluralism – the once controversial, now unavoidable notion that no one story can encompass everything significant – is a story in itself. We conclude with poets who consider that story, among them Jorie Graham, Rae Armantrout, and C. D. Wright, along with the challenges to all historical thinking posed by Stein and by that other late modernist, Hart Crane.

“There is singularly nothing that makes a difference a difference in beginning and in the middle and in ending,” Stein declared, “except that each generation has something different at which they are all looking. . . . The only thing that is different from one time to another is what is seen and what is seen depends upon how everybody is doing everything.”<sup>4</sup> Everything might have been done another way; as T. S. Eliot also explained, each generation of literary creators rearranges the story of its predecessors in order to create the contexts it calls its own. This plural approach, in method as well as in canon, has made for exclusions and emphases that could easily have gone other ways. We might, for example, have organized entire chapters around Frank O’Hara,



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Excerpt

[More information](#)

ALFRED BENDIXEN AND STEPHEN BURT

or around Stein, whose teasing, provocative, repetitive prose about imaginative writing captures the difficulty if not the necessity of doing literary history in the first place.

Other currently available stories make clear other directions we could have chosen, especially as we approach the present day; some have been chosen, and covered very effectively, by critics whose work we note. We might have devoted another chapter to antimodernist poet-critics such as Robert Hillyer, and another to the poetics of disability, with Larry Eigner at its center.<sup>5</sup> We might have had another chapter on religion and spirituality, connecting the later T. S. Eliot to Gary Snyder, Fanny Howe, and Donald Revell; a chapter on wilderness and farm in modern verse, on pastoral and antipastoral, linking Snyder to Robinson Jeffers, and to Wendell Berry; a chapter on visual form, from Cummings to Ronald Johnson; or a chapter on modern Americans abroad, with accents on Bishop, August Kleinzahler, and Claude McKay, himself both Jamaican and American.<sup>6</sup> We might have devoted an entire chapter to the post-1970 poetry and poetics of Native Americans, which we address instead diachronically in the first chapter and synchronically in the next-to-last. Earlier histories of modern poetry have often put all the Black poets they discuss into one or two chapters in which they rarely interact with non-Black ones; we present African American writers in conversation with one another, but also in chapters connecting them to non-Black work.

We might also have had whole chapters on poetic reactions to the First World War, to the Second World War, or to other military action abroad.<sup>7</sup> We might have examined the narrative impulse – and the resistance to it – among modern long poems, from Stephen Vincent Benét's once-popular *John Brown's Body* through Ed Dorn's *Gunslinger* and Anne Carson's *Autobiography of Red* (although Carson, influential in the United States, considers herself Canadian). We might have pursued the modern poetry best seller from the Benét's through Billy Collins and Maya Angelou.<sup>8</sup> Gender and its consequences, which some literary histories segregate into chapters on women or feminism, appear and reappear throughout our book. So do questions about the fate of premodernist forms, about meter and rhyme and stanza shape, in a postmodernist world. We might have given the Imagists or the Black Arts Movement or the language writers or the Iowa Writers' Workshop chapters of their very own. Instead, they are discussed – as are almost all the poets and topics named above – under other rubrics, with other connections, inevitably subsets of those that an infinitely long volume could have made.

As our collection approaches the third century of these United States, as it addresses the ever-increasing diversity of models and influences within



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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## Introduction

American poetry, we move away from some questions that gave structure to earlier literary histories; these questions loom large in our own coverage only when they loomed large for the poets involved. We do not always ask (because our poets have not always asked) what makes American poetry first and last American, nor do we attempt to construct (as previous literary historians have constructed) a unitary national tradition. Asked what makes American poems American, Randall Jarrell said that “when we read it, we are at home”; but some American poets have not felt at home, and we listen to their inventions too.<sup>9</sup> Nor do we take the poetry’s ambition to be self-consciously American (as opposed to international, or local, or Californian, or Latino, or innovative, or musical) as an index of its value. We look instead at what poets and groups of poets have tried to do. “Some books are undeservedly forgotten,” Auden remarked; “none are undeservedly remembered.”<sup>10</sup> Some left out here will be remembered later elsewhere.

We end our history not at the moment of writing – we go to press in 2014 – but instead at the year 2000; poems written afterward appear here only sparingly, in order to illuminate what came before. The events of September 11, 2001, may or may not constitute a sharp break in American culture, but they certainly generated voluminous response; so did such later developments as Hurricane Katrina, the election of President Obama, the omnipresence of digital social media, and the rise of the awareness, among nonscientists, of the grave threat posed by global climate change. All these topics should merit sustained attention in the next generation of literary histories; for us, however, they are still current events.

We leave, as well, for the next generation to chronicle two more developments that most readers who encountered American poetry in books and paper magazines would not have noticed during the 1990s. The first is the rise of poetry in American Sign Language, in live performance and through video recordings; the second is the rise of poetic texts that depend on new digital and computational media. Both of these important phenomena began before the year 2000, but a responsible history of either would require its own chapter, with a *terminus ad quem* closer to the present day.<sup>11</sup>

Much older than – but integrally related to – these developments are other ways to see, hear, and create poetry not dependent on conventionally printed words, nor on verse lines. Questions about visibility and poetry, about material texts and of shapes that words make on a page, come up in several chapters. So do questions – thousands of years old – about poetic recitation, performance, and the status of the spoken word. We do not discuss song lyrics, conceived and reproduced as such, because they have their

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

ALFRED BENDIXEN AND STEPHEN BURT

own history, inextricable from the history of American music, on record and in performance. Nor, for the same reason, do we give rap and hip-hop compositions much attention on their own, although we do consider their interplay with other poetic traditions. To include American music history from the sheet music era to the MP3 would have strained our remit beyond bearing. We do, however, discuss work for oral performance where it pre-dates, and where it has proven inseparable from, a written tradition, as in the case of Native American poetries, and of the Nuyorican Poets Café. We also omit the poetic prose of works that are usually discussed as prose fiction, or as rhetoric, even when they have had an inarguable effect on American poetry: we do not examine (although another history might) *Walden*, *The Making of Americans*, *On the Road*, or the Gettysburg Address. We do consider, more generally, the status of recitation, of printed or memorized poems read aloud: American poems, in the seventeenth and in the twentieth century, emerge from pages, but need not remain there, and address both the eye and the ear.

This volume, like all such volumes, is responsible to its era, to the expectations of its likely readers, and to our own sense of what matters and why. The unsettledness of such questions, the difficulty of deciding what matters, has toward the end of the twentieth century become one of the topics that American poetry characteristically takes up. To take part in – to edit, to write for, and indeed to read with attention – such a volume as this one is to consider a set of readers “back then,” in the poets’ own day, in 1666 or in 1999; to consider another set of readers, with settled opinions and expectations, today; and, not least, to consider an individual reader, with her overdetermined, unpredictable, even unique response to a poem heard aloud, memorized, rewritten, examined silently on a screen, or contemplated quietly on a page. We have tried to do justice to that experience too.

## Notes

1. F. O. Matthiessen (ed.), *The Oxford Book of American Verse* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1950), p. xxx.
2. Richard Ellman (ed.), *The New Oxford Book of American Verse* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), pp. xxv, xxix.
3. Irvin Ehrenpreis, “The Age of Lowell,” in Michael London and Robert Boyers (eds.), *Robert Lowell: A Portrait of the Artist in His Time* (New York: David Lewis, 1970), p. 155; Aidan Wasley, *The Age of Auden: Postwar Poetry and the American Scene* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2011); Douglas Messerli (ed.), *The Gertrude Stein Awards in Innovative Poetry* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon, 1994).