

ALFRED BENDIXEN AND STEPHEN BURT, eds.
The Cambridge History of American Poetry
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As Alfred Bendixen and Stephen Burt note in their introduction to *The Cambridge History of American Poetry*, there have been “surprisingly few attempts to provide a literary history of poetry in the United States” (1-2). While there are several useful introductions to twentieth-century American poetry, not a single comprehensive one-volume history has been published since Jay Parini’s *Columbia History of American Poetry* (1998). The much-awaited *Cambridge History of American Poetry* impressively fills this gap and provides today’s readers with a resource encyclopedic in scope yet organized in a clear, accessible manner.

The book consists of 50 chapters, each by a different contributor, that cover the major figures, movements, and trajectories in American poetry from its beginnings in the Native American oral tradition to the turn of the twenty-first century. These chapters are organized in four sections: “Beginnings” (to 1800), “A New Nation” (1800-1900), “Forms of Modernism” (1900-1950), and “Beyond Modernism” (1950-2000). While the first and fourth sections foreground general trends and developments, the middle sections tend to focus on individual poets and elucidate broader developments by contextualizing these poets against their literary and historical backgrounds. What all chapters have in common is that they are written to be read independently of one another. Each provides a well-rounded discussion of the topic at hand and repeats information introduced in previous chapters if necessary. This approach helps the volume avoid the unifying claims and grand narratives of classic literary histories—a strategy that, as Burt points out in the concluding chapter, is typical not only of contemporary scholarship but of contemporary American poetry as well (1144). While this strategy results in occasional inconsistencies—the work of Yvor Winters, for example, is repeatedly cited for its influence on later poets but never discussed in itself—it produces a remarkable diversity of opinion, especially on controversial figures like Allen Tate. It is a commonplace in contemporary scholarship that any critical assessment of a writer is influenced by the critic’s own socio-cultural perspective. *The Cambridge History of American Poetry* puts this idea into practice.

Yet most of the contributors seem to share a set of basic methodological principles. While some chapters merely enumerate poems or poets relevant to their topic, most offer an instructive combination of close reading and contextual information. Attempts to fit a poet into a preconceived theoretical framework are refreshingly rare. Almost all contributors attend to questions of style and formal organization, and many take on the literary historian’s task of evaluating the lasting significance of individual poets. They ask which poets advanced the development of American poetry and how they did so; where they succeeded and where they failed; and to what degree they achieved a distinct, original poetic style. Outstanding chapters on individual poets include Christoph Irmscher on “Emerson and His Contemporaries,” Michael C. Cohen on “Whittier, Holmes, Lowell, and the New England Tradition,” and Charles Altieri on “T.S. Eliot” and modernism. In the section on contemporary poetry, where central figures are more difficult to identify, the most successful chapters tend to focus on a widely shared concern or topic—science, authenticity, the ‘poetry of the center’—and compare the techniques different poets developed in response.

The dialogues engendered by this comparative approach are instructive in that they expose similarities as well as differences. They reveal surprising overlaps between poets not usually covered under the same rubric while at the same time accentuating the distinct vision each poet brings to the subject. Where other histories isolate Phillis Wheatley and Samson Occom under the anachronistic heading of ‘ethnic’ literature, for example, *The Cambridge History of American Poetry* situates them in the literary scene from which their work emerged (chapter 6, “Poetry in the Time of Revolution”). Contemporary African American and Hispanic poets are examined against the background of their specific cultural heritage but also in the context of wider poetic trends to which they contributed. Mary Loeffelholz’s chapter on “Other Voices, Other Verses: Cultures of American Poetry at Midcentury” puts into dialogue the work of Emily Dickinson and Frederick Goddard Tuckerman but also, more surprisingly, of Lydia Sigourney and George Moses Horton. Similarly, Nick Halpern’s “The Uses of Authenticity: Four Sixties Poets” establishes an unconventional but intriguing dialogue between Adrienne Rich, James Wright, Robert Duncan, and Denise Levertov that elucidates

not only their shared vision but also their divergences and disagreements.

At times such dialogues evolve across chapter boundaries. The very first chapter, for example, traces the interplay between early Native American chants and the efforts of colonial poets to preserve and build on the Native American tradition. This dialogue continues in the third chapter, on Puritan poetry, which examines how writers like Roger Williams negotiated their relationship with the native population in their work. The following chapter outlines the trajectory that led from the Puritan elegy to successors like William Cullen Bryant's "Thanatopsis," and shows that these elegies increasingly displaced Native Americans to the realm of nature. The subsequent chapter on early Southern poetry in turn reveals the volatility of this binary approach by recounting an outside perspective on the colonies: to the British speaker of Ebenezer Cooke's *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1708), the white settlers seem more Native American than European. The dialogue incited by the poetic negotiation of these intercultural encounters weaves through the book and resurfaces some 300 years and 1,000 pages later: the penultimate chapter, "Multilingualism in Contemporary American Poetry," begins with a discussion of late-twentieth-century poets that include Narragansett language in their work—language they take from Roger Williams's *Key Into the Language of America* (1643).

Many such conversations can be traced with in *The Cambridge History of American Poetry*, but they require diligent reading because the individual chapters are not cross-referenced. Given that, as noted above, the chapters are written to be read on their own, such references would enhance the connectivity and diachronic scope of the volume. They could also help avoid redundancies like the reintroduction of poets who have been discussed at length in a previous chapter (Washington Allston, John Howard Payne, Randall Jarrell, Jorie Graham). For future editions, then, cross-references would be a desirable complement to the editorial apparatus, which already includes further reading suggestions for each chapter and a useful index.

Any comprehensive literary history is likely to trigger questions about the selection and grouping of writers. The first and second sections of *The Cambridge History of American Poetry* generally try to side-step this problem by mentioning a wide variety of poets. They offer a much broader picture of American poetry before modernism than comparable histories,

but sometimes at the price of merely enumerating poets instead of conveying a sense of their specific approach. The third section, on modernism, devotes more space to the discussion of individual oeuvres, which allows for a more detailed discussion of poetic styles and strategies but at the same time results in some notable omissions. The Harlem Renaissance, for example, is reduced to the oeuvre of Langston Hughes and Helene Johnson, while influential figures like James Weldon Johnson, Countee Cullen, and Claude McKay only receive passing nods. Imagism is mentioned in several chapters but never examined as a movement, and while the other modernist luminaries receive chapters of their own, Ezra Pound is only discussed as a precursor to the objectivists and to projective verse. In the section on contemporary poetry, James Merrill gets more space than any other poet, whereas the New Formalists only receive a half-sentence that labels them "right-wing populism" (1086). For a volume of this scope, however, these are minor objections. On the whole, the editors admirably succeed in presenting a balanced, comprehensive overview of American poetry.

Above all, *The Cambridge History of American Poetry* traces the manifold connections poetry establishes across discursive boundaries of nation, ethnicity, gender, and the like. Many of the chapters are designed to include and compare poets from different socio-cultural backgrounds, and despite its national framework, the volume conveys a sense of the transnational range of American poetry. From the seventeenth century to postmodernism, it portrays poets whose lives and works permeate national boundaries. James Kirkpatrick, the eighteenth-century Scottish émigré who adapted neoclassical forms to the depiction of transatlantic trade, shares this transnational outlook with otherwise very different figure like contemporary Cuban-American poet Richard Blanco, who weaves his African, Caribbean, European, and North American heritage into a poetry for the global age. The concluding chapter of the volume, Stephen Burt's "American Poetry at the End of the Millennium," makes yet another surprising connection in that it positions Hart Crane as a precursor to and reference point for contemporary American poetry. It is only fitting that *The Cambridge History of American Poetry*, which will set the standard for many years to come, ends by opening a new conversation.

Augsburg

Timo Müller