

Poetry in America:

THE SUBURBS OF CAMELOT

Has poetry ceased to matter to most Americans? And if it has, should the blame be placed on the poets, the reading public, or the times? Here critic Frank McConnell considers the state of contemporary American poetry and describes the efforts of some of our better poets to make their art matter once again.



by Frank D. McConnell

"The suburbs of Camelot"—one may as well admit, at the outset, that the poet in America has really never gotten closer to the center of things than that. If it is not an especially honorable position, at least it is not a particularly disgraceful one. It is, rather, as countryfolk say, a middling spot. And that may explain the special despair of the American poet. For no country ever harbored greater expectations about the marriage of imagination and expedience, vision and policy, than America. No republic ever asked more of its poets, or, by doing so, made it harder for its poets to function.

As early as the mid-19th century, Ralph Waldo Emerson advanced the theory that the new world would have to have a new voice, its own, democratic Homer. Much of the subsequent turmoil of American writing—not to mention much of its occasional excess and absurdity—originated in this sense that there is, or ought to be, a "national voice." Such nations as England, France, or Germany do not trouble themselves about a national voice or a distinctive sensibility; they are both secure and settled enough to have outlived that adolescent identity crisis.

America, on the other hand, is not. We still think of ourselves as a young country, even though we are over 200 years old, older than most of the working democracies on the planet. We also think of ourselves, with more than a touch of hubris, as the last, best hope of man. Out of this national adolescence issues a crying need for self-definition, both political and literary.

Not surprisingly, much of American poetry, and particularly much of that written since World War II, has been intimately involved with this quest for identity. There are, of course, so many distinctive voices and styles in the poetry of the postwar years that it is impossible to give them all a single characterization. But if we think of the American poet

as a person trying to find a voice that could be at once public and private, political and lyrical, then I think we have begun to track something like a national poetic burden.

There is even an image—a sad yet pertinent image—for the special crisis of poetic identity I am trying to describe. In 1961, at the presidential inauguration of John F. Kennedy, Robert Frost read a poem he had composed for the event. An old man, eyesight failing and voice quavering, he was barely able to get through the reading. It was not, after all, one of that distinguished poet's more distinguished poems.

Nevertheless, that moment is a special one in the history of those difficult transactions between the American imagination and American political reality. As part of our memory of our popular culture's Camelot, it recalls a time when art and politics seemed ready to march hand in hand toward the New Frontier. Never mind that the Vietnam tragedy, Watergate, and the shipwreck of New Deal economics lay in the future. For one brief moment, America had found a leader wise, young, and adventurous enough to appoint a poet laureate. That was how the newscasters and the reporters described Frost on that occasion.

Clearly, the selection of Frost to read an inaugural poem said more about Kennedy and his sense of public image than it did about Frost or *his* sense of the poet's role in society. The performance was both tawdry, a bit of clever public relations, and profoundly significant, an expression of the American hope for a union of poetic and political vision. It is revealing and ironic that the most memorable utterance on that occasion was not Frost's poem but the rhetoric of Kennedy's inaugural address. That irony may stand, for the moment, as a metaphor of the troubled position of the American poet since World War II.



But, as I have said, the American poet's troubles extend further into the past, with the formulation of his special role. Walt Whitman, in *Song of Myself* (1855), expressed very forcefully what the American poet would like to believe about himself, about his poetry, and about its use. Earlier, Percy Bysshe Shelley, the defiant English romantic, had described poets, in "A Defence of Poetry" (1840), as the "unacknowledged legislators of the world." But Whitman went beyond Shelley by insisting that poets should be the *acknowledged* legislators of the world—at least of the new world whose bard he appoints himself. In a real democracy, it would be the visionaries, the lyric sensibilities, who would have the most immediate effect upon public policy:

The President holding a cabinet council is surrounded by the
great Secretaries,
On the piazza walk three matrons stately and friendly with twined
arms, . . .

And such as it is to be of these more or less I am,
And of these one and all I weave the song of myself.

All walks of life, all ranges of experience are united in what the poet sees, feels, and sings. And his song, with its quasi-Biblical parallelism of each element in the human catalogue, is the warrant, the sacred text, of that union. Thus did Whitman create the scripture his mentor, Emerson, had called for.

It is a long way from *Leaves of Grass* to Frost's inaugural poem. And it is a longer way from the promise of the 1850s to the diffident, doubtful voices of recent American verse. But perhaps not so long as it at first appears. Much more explicitly than any other writers of the 19th century, Americans envisioned a wedding of romanticism and pragmatism, a political lyricism that would allow the full expression of both selves, public and private. Only Emily Dickinson, perhaps—who seems so much more "modern" than Whitman—wrote out of a healthy despair at never being more than a private voice.

Our century has, in general, enforced the split between public and private. W. B. Yeats, a great poet and a successful political figure, described the fissure when he observed that we make rhetoric out of our quarrel with others, and poetry out of our quarrel with ourselves. But that fissure is not one which poets—including Yeats himself—find comfortable. The exact inversion of Shelley's ideal of the unacknowledged legislator, and of Whitman's visionary republic, it is a formula against which much modern poetry struggles, and one which it occasionally overcomes.

Two crucial 20th-century figures, T. S. Eliot and W. H. Auden, dramatize the situation we are discussing and its particular relevance to the American tradition.

Eliot, though born in St. Louis and educated at Harvard, is nevertheless thought of as a British poet. All his major work appeared after his emigration, in 1914, to London. And he frequently avowed, in both his poetry and his critical writing, the predominantly British quality of his sensibility and cultural loyalties.

Furthermore, at least as far as Eliot himself was concerned, the "Britishness" of his personality was part and parcel of the subjectivity of his poetry. *The Waste Land* (1922) may well be the most influential poem of the 20th century: One hears echoes of its most famous lines, and of its general tone, throughout the poetry and fiction of the next decades. But this most public of poems—taken for years as an indictment of society, a dirge on the decline of the West—is, we can now see, an intensely private utterance, nearly a therapeutic exercise, designed to relieve Eliot of the psychosexual trauma of his first marriage.

To be sure, this new light on the poem does not diminish its power or its genius. Nor does it contravene its importance for the younger writers it affected so intimately. Indeed, we can apply to Eliot the same

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Declaring himself a
 "Kosmos," Walt
 Whitman proposed to
 sing "The Female
 equally with the Male"
 and to show that a
 "leaf of grass is no less
 than the journey-work
 of the stars."



formula for greatness that Jacques Maritain applied to Dante: "innocence and luck." He was innocent enough to accept and give expression to his soul's central hurt, and lucky enough to have his own personal pain coincide with the shape of his civilization's discontent. But his was the most private of poetic sensibilities. Eloise Hay, in *Eliot's Negative Way* (1982), suggests that the whole arc of his career is that of the medieval tradition of the "negative way": a progressive disengagement from things of this world until the soul is left alone with only its own emptiness and God. Whitman would have hated it.

Auden's history and career are almost too conveniently the inverse of Eliot's. He was, of course, an Englishman and, during his country's intellectual and political turmoil of the '30s, was probably the most distinctive voice of his era. Biographer Samuel Hynes quite rightly entitles his history of that decade *The Auden Generation* (1976). And what Auden's contemporaries—Stephen Spender, C. Day Lewis, Graham Greene, Christopher Isherwood—and, above all, Auden himself insisted upon was nothing less than a refoliation of the Waste Land. That is, while retaining and expanding the techniques of their precursor, Eliot, these writers were passionately committed to a poetry of political relevance, a poetry that could express both the private, idiosyncratic per-

sonality of the poet, and at the same time the poet's sense of himself as a man among men, involved in the major and dangerous public issues of his world and his time. "All I have is a voice," writes Auden in his great, suppressed poem "September 1, 1939":

All I have is a voice
 To undo the folded lie,
 The romantic lie in the brain
 Of the sensual man-in-the-street
 And the lie of Authority
 Whose buildings grope the sky:
 There is no such thing as the State
 And no one exists alone;
 Hunger allows no choice
 To the citizen or the police;
 We must love one another or die.

That he later suppressed this poem is really of less importance than that he wrote it. Its resonance has become part of the resonance of our century. In fact, the powerful last line became a catch-phrase of Lyndon Johnson's speeches in his 1964 campaign for the Presidency—appropriately, for it is a line that incarnates the kind of prophetic populism Americans have always, at their best, desired.

Just as Eliot became an Englishman, Auden became an American, partly out of historical accident, but more out of imaginative necessity.

None of Auden's poetry after he emigrated to America in 1939 carries quite the urgency of his work of the '30s. But it is appropriate to think of him, if not as an American poet, then as a poet with strong affinities—elected affinities—to the dilemma of the American poet.

He may be the last truly public poet of his century, that is, the last poet who could truly regard himself as a private sensibility and a public activist at the same time, and in the same voice. This, and not Eliot's, is the voice that later American writers can take as the standard of their own success or failure. The morality of art and the morality of politics in Auden at his best achieve that unity envisioned by the English Romantics and longed for by their American cousins.



But that unified vision is an endangered species of poetry in the 20th century. And it was to be challenged in a particularly violent way in the decades after World War II. So the date of Auden's emigration to America, 1939, takes on a special retrospective significance. The war, whatever moral complexities and ethical horrors it involved, appears increasingly to have been the Last War: the last justifiable "Crusade." That, anyway, was the propaganda phrase applied to it—and, for once, propaganda appears to have coincided with truth.

I do not mean to indulge in undue nostalgia for that troubled and

perilous time. But, particularly in the light of what came *after*, it is difficult not to see it as an annealing, purifying process for the poets who lived through it. The war was a cataclysm with a *point*: a dark passage that, for all its darkness, nevertheless seemed to be leading to the light. Karl Shapiro was the first and perhaps the best of the "G.I. poets" to be published while the fighting was still going on. And the last lines of his "Elegy for a Dead Soldier" (*V-Letter*, 1944) have lost none of their eloquence:

Underneath this wooden cross there lies
 A Christian killed in battle. You who read,
 Remember that this stranger died in pain;
 And passing here, if you can lift your eyes
 Upon a peace kept by a human creed,
 Know that one soldier has not died in vain.

But a "peace kept by a human creed" was to be exactly what the years following the end of the war did not bring. The escalation of the Cold War, the red scare of the early '50s, and the debacle of Vietnam seemed only the most visible signals of a general decline in the national self-image and of a parallel decline in the American poet's sense of his involvement with the general and official life of the Republic.

The same year Shapiro published *V-Letter*, another, younger poet was imprisoned for five months as a conscientious objector, after having twice previously tried to enlist. It was Robert Lowell, who would become one of the most indispensable poets writing during the '50s.

Lowell's refusal to serve does not invalidate the stately humanism of Shapiro's epitaph. But it does foreshadow what would be the displaced position of the poet in the years after the war. Inhabiting an America that seemed increasingly adrift from the clear purpose of the war years, and more and more suspicious of its nontechnological intellectuals, the poet found himself—or herself—retreating into silence, into exile from the public life, or, worst, into madness, the most sinister trap for the romantic writer.

To be sure, in the modern period, poetry has been permanently threatened by a sense of its own irrelevance. But the postwar years in America bring that threat to a pitch of urgency. Saul Bellow's novel *Humboldt's Gift* (1975) is, among other things, an elegy for the death of a truly political identity for the American poet. Why, Bellow asks, does the culture allow its poets to be charlatans, clowns, and (often) suicides, but not ordinary, functioning citizens of the state? Why do we give our visionaries carte blanche for self-destruction but demand, as the cost of that irresponsibility, their admission of political impotence?

Bellow's grim answer is that this is a way of defusing the potentially explosive power of the imagination, of short-circuiting the current that ought to run from poets to Presidents, from lyricists to legislators. And this evasion, he feels, severely threatens the future of the Republic itself.

That, of course, is the story from the poets' point of view. What it

does not explain is why the poets themselves have accepted this exile, or even whether there *has* been such a concerted attempt to banish them to a landscape of ineffectuality. Any consideration of the treatment of dissident writers in the Soviet Union, for example, should effectively still claim about the "exile" of the American poet from his society. And yet, in a strange way, the sense of exile among American poets *does* persist. To examine the important American voices of the postwar years is to examine the ways in which poets have felt both their exclusion from and their presence in political life; the ways our best poets have, while feeling themselves to be outsiders, devised strategies and subterfuges to make their insights indispensable—or at least dangerously pertinent—to the insiders.



Among the various strategies of recent American poetry, three broad trends stand out: the formalist, the confessional, and what we have to call the epic. They are not, of course, "schools" in any sense. And many of their constituents would feel uncomfortable being grouped in this way. Nevertheless, they do define an array of tactics by which major writers have sought over the last 30 years to overcome the deafness of America to poetic utterance, and to burrow their way from the suburbs of Camelot into the heart of the kingdom.

The formalist tradition is the natural one to examine first, because it is both the most conservative and the earliest strategy to emerge. The phrase, as generally employed, refers to a concern for the formal elements of poetry—intricacies of meter, stanza form, and rhyme—and implies, with more or less prejudice, a certain degree of academic coolness and detachment on the part of the poet. But I would like to extend its meaning to include those poets who, academic or not, display a concern for the idea of the poem as a self-sufficient form, a *made* object. This sounds like a fairly simple, even a self-evident idea of poetry. But with those writers who take the idea with full seriousness, it is actually a powerful way of reconciling the elements of privacy and publicity, self and citizen, in the act of the poem.

Among the important formalists, in this sense, of the postwar years are William Jay Smith, W. D. Snodgrass, Vassar Miller, Richard Wilbur, Howard Nemerov, and A. R. Ammons. Behind all of them lies the work of two early modern masters, Robert Frost and Wallace Stevens. Frost and Stevens were very different men with very different visions; but one thing they did share was the sense of poetry as a "heterocosm," an imaginative universe unto itself that somehow partakes of both "real" universes—the one inside the poet's head and the one outside it—and reconciles them through the alchemy of art. In the formalist vision, in other words, the poem is a kind of holy no man's land: a demilitarized zone where private and public self meet in truce and chat, on friendly terms, about their conflict.

The formalist poem *is* detached. But its detachment is the detachment of irony, of that special cast of mind that can hold opposites in a

healthy balance against one another, and stay sane.

Indeed, we can say that terms such as health and sanity are among the most important ones for this sort of writing. It is the poet's *duty* to remain sane, just because it is the poet's burden to see his world so clearly that madness (of either ecstasy or despair) becomes such a temptation. No poet of the last 30 years has been more faithful to that counsel than Richard Wilbur, whose "Advice to a Prophet" (from the volume of the same name, 1956) is virtually a model of the power such irony can achieve. The prophet to whom Wilbur addresses his advice is a hypothetical speaker warning us against the horror and madness of nuclear war. And Wilbur's advice is that the prophet not simply rant at us about statistics and kill-ratios, but talk to us calmly about the cost of a war that would destroy the earth, its people, and poetry:

Ask us, prophet, how we shall call
Our natures forth when that live tongue is all
Dispelled, that glass obscured or broken

In which we have said the rose of our love and the clean
Horse of our courage, in which beheld
The singing locust of the soul unshelled,
And all we mean or wish to mean.

Ask us, ask us whether the worldless rose
Our hearts shall fail us; come demanding
Whether there shall be lofty or long standing
When the bronze annals of the oak-tree close.

Wilbur has continued on his brilliant, witty, and grim way in his two volumes of poetry, *Walking to Sleep* (1969) and *The Mind Reader* (1976). And his production alone would guarantee the persistent vitality of the formalist ideal. But there is also Howard Nemerov, whose poems frequently attain a bitterness—and a bawdy humor—Wilbur never attempts. And there is A. R. Ammons, whose Frost-like "nature poetry" is a deceptively simple exploration of the nature of consciousness itself ("I hope I'm/ not right/ where frost/ strikes the/ butterfly:/ in the back/ between/ the wings," reads his haiku-like lyric, "The Mark"). In fact, Ammons may well be the most challenging formalist poet to emerge since Wallace Stevens himself. Once glimpsed beneath the smooth surface, his poems take on the complexity of metaphysics, and the excitement of forays into the unnamable.



But the formalist position could not long be held unchallenged. At least it could not long be unchallenged by people who took their poetry seriously. Sooner or later, it was bound to be asked, What does your irony, your wit, your detachment matter in a world that takes none of these gifts seriously? What does your perilously achieved sanity *mean*

to a nation that will not admit that it *needs* to be sane? Or, to ask the question no poet wants to be asked, and the question the best poets all, finally, ask themselves: How can you spend your time *saying* this stuff? And once that question becomes askable, the confessional mode in poetry becomes thinkable:

After a hearty New England breakfast,
 I weigh two hundred pounds
 this morning. Cock of the walk,
 I strut in my turtleneck French sailor's jersey
 before the metal shaving mirrors,
 and see the shaky future grow familiar
 in the pinched, indigenous faces
 of these thoroughbred mental cases,
 twice my age and half my weight.
 We are all old-timers,
 each of us holds a locked razor.

That is Robert Lowell, at the conclusion of "Waking in the Blue" (from *Life Studies*, 1959)—a straightforward, and frightening, account of his experience in a mental hospital. Lowell began his poetic career as what might be called a formalist (*Lord Weary's Castle*, 1946), but very soon became the leader, the model, and in a way the patron saint of the confessional mode in American poetry.

"We asked to be obsessed with writing,/and we were." That is how Lowell puts it in his poem, "For John Berryman," included in his volume *Day by Day* (1977). Obsessed is the relevant word here. If the formalist tradition insists upon the aesthetic unity of the poem as a work of art, and upon the sanity and clarity of the artwork as a model of consciousness, then the confessional tradition—if it can be called a tradition—insists upon exactly the opposite. The confessional poets—Lowell, John Berryman, Sylvia Plath, and Anne Sexton, among others—are writers for whom the act of writing has none of the calm, lucid, purifying quality we associate with the idea of art as aesthetic form. For them, art is a way of staying alive: a deliberate and desperate gamble, with their private pain as the stakes and the transfiguration of that pain into something like grace as the hoped-for jackpot. "My mind's not right," says Lowell in "Skunk Hour" (again, from the crucial *Life Studies* volume). And it is part of the power of this poetry that we take that statement not as a self-pitying whine but as a human cry of immense appeal, as an attempt to orient the wounded self within the world and to make it function there.

To be sure, to talk in these terms is to romanticize the idea of confessional poetry, to give at least a nod in the direction of that myth of the suffering poet that has been such a terrible burden for so many poetic careers over the last two centuries. Why should we care, asks the sensible reader, about the versified self-revelations of misfits and paranoids? And the sensible reader is at least half right. The confessional impulse in poetry has surely spawned more bad verse, more embarrass-

ing self-psychoanalysis masquerading as poetry, than any other trend in recent writing. But no artistic movement can be fairly judged in terms of the disasters it legitimizes. And the confessional poets, at their best, represent one of the most exciting and humanizing directions of recent American writing.

It is not enough to say that these are *troubled* poets. All poets—all fully conscious human beings, probably—are troubled, and deeply so. But these writers seek to turn their troubledness, sometimes even their neurosis, into the stuff of human, public discourse. They *confess*; they do not merely wallow in self-pity at their own and the century's mental disorientation; rather, they seek to voice that disorientation so as to externalize it, to make it part of the public discourse. In this attempt, they are profoundly political. If the work of the formalists is like a demilitarized zone of irony, where the ancient political strife of self and society is held for a while in abeyance, the work of the confessional poets reads like a series of front-line dispatches from the the heat of that permanently pitched battle.

John Berryman, Lowell's good friend and one of the most fascinating, self-destructive characters in recent American literature, carried the confessional mode to the point of excess and greatness in his long series entitled *The Dream Songs* (first part, 1964; completed series, 1968). A cycle of 18-line poems, written in an absolutely original, simultaneously slangy and sublime diction, it is the story of Henry, a drunken, successful, and self-tormenting poet in middle age, and Berryman's alter ego.

Henry's troubles range from the most intimately personal (his health, his fear of death, his sanity) to the most public (he is a Stevensonian Democrat, he opposes the war in Vietnam, he is revolted by racism in America). And in transforming his private anguish into this massive, versified novel, Berryman creates what amounts to a bitter, funny epic of the self. The very first song says much about the tone of the whole volume:

All the world like a woolen lover
 once did seem on Henry's side.
 Then came a departure.
 Thereafter nothing fell out as it might or ought.
 I don't see how Henry, pried
 open for all the world to see, survived.

Being "prided open for all the world to see" and, at the same time, surviving, is what this sort of poetry is about. And the high incidence of mental disorder among these poets—a common taunt of the very vulgar—is really of less importance than the radiant, *earned* sanity with which they record the burden of consciousness.

Anne Sexton, who died in 1974, may well have been the bravest of the confessional poets. With a subtler, wittier version of Berryman's comedy, she wrote a series of poems that narrate her attempt to become a person. They are, at the same time, a kindly, even comfortable

*A self-portrait done
by Anne Sexton in
the 1950s. Afflicted
by mental illness,
she took her own
life in 1974.*



journal of a voyage of self-discovery. In “You, Doctor Martin” (from her first book, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, 1960), she writes these unforgettable lines about madness from the perspective of the madhouse:

And we are magic talking to itself,
noisy and alone. I am queen of all my sins
forgotten. Am I still lost?
Once I was beautiful. Now I am myself,
counting this row and that row of moccasins
waiting on the silent shelf.

But for the confessional poet—and particularly for Anne Sexton—the perspective of the madhouse is only the necessary prelude to the perspective of the fully clarified individual. And in her last volume, *The Awful Rowing Toward God* (1975), Sexton writes poems of that earned sanity, that mature joy, which is the aimed-for end of confessional writing. In “Welcome Morning,” she writes:

So while I think of it,
let me paint a thank-you on my palm
for this God, this laughter of the morning,
lest it go unspoken.

The Joy that isn't shared, I've heard,
dies young.

Of course, that could be taken as the most sentimental and most undistinguished greeting-card verse, or as the lyric for a belated flower child's wobbly song for acoustic guitar and off-pitch voice. That is the great danger of confessional poetry: It depends greatly, perhaps too greatly, upon the reader's faith in the seriousness and honesty of the poet/speaker. And that faith is often based on extraliterary matters—on an awareness of the poet's life, perhaps, or on a sense of shared ideology. For better or worse, confessional poetry calls more for a personal judgment than for a strictly formal one.

Not that the confessional tradition in modern American poetry is an unrelieved or formless affair of soul-baring. John Ashbery may be the most original and most fascinating poet to emerge over the last decade. And though it is a gross insult to his intricacy to describe him as a confessional poet, there is really no other category to which he belongs. Ashbery's obsession is a simple one: It is with what the critic Harold Bloom has called "the anxiety of influence," the poet's nagging sense that anything he says—anything he *can* say—has been said before, and better. His confession, in other words, is a confession of impotence and emptiness; of exactly that sense of belatedness that a writer like Whitman so hated, feared, and spent his career declaiming against.

But miraculously, out of even this conviction of aridity, Ashbery makes new, humanizing, and often splendid poems. In "The One Thing That Can Save America" (from *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, 1975), Ashbery describes the seemingly hopeless situation of the poet:

I know that I braid too much my own
Snapped-off perceptions of things as they come to me.
They are private and always will be.
Where then are the private turns of event
Destined to boom later like golden chimes
Released over a city from a highest tower?

This most intensely private of voices is, finally, a public speaker, announcing not just the hardships of being a poet, but the hardships of staying conscious at all at a time when so much of our public, popular culture wants to lull us to comfortable sleep.



The formalist and the confessional poets between them account for much of the history of American poetry since World War II. Indeed, it would be possible to write a history of recent American verse using no other descriptive terms than those two. But there is another impulse—probably the oldest and probably the most urgent impulse of poetry—at work in recent American writing.

I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness,
 starving hysterical naked,
 dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking
 for
 an angry fix,
 angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly
 connection
 to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night,
 who poverty and tatters and hollow-eyed and high sat up
 smoking
 in the supernatural darkness of cold-water flats floating
 across the tops of cities contemplating jazz. . . .

That may be one of the most shocking openings in poetry of this century: the first lines of Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*, published in 1956. We have, by now, survived the historical moment when terms such as beatnik or the Beat Generation could get in the way of seeing the strength of this poetry. We have even survived the historical moment when Ginsberg's own irrepressible clowning could get in the way of the profound seriousness of his writing. For *Howl* is nothing more or less than an attempt to write the epic of a generation: to create the voice that, transcending both formal irony and confessional anguish, could articulate the political stance of the poet in the way Whitman believed it could be articulated.

It is a foolhardy and a suicidal enterprise, of course. Ridicule and condescension are bound to greet any attempt to write poetry of this sort—and, during the '50s, they did. What Ginsberg had the courage to do—along with poets like Kenneth Rexroth, Gregory Corso, and Michael McClure—was to remind us that the poet *is* a public voice, and that—at least in an Emersonian democracy—his visions *ought* to be taken seriously, since he is the amanuensis of those passions and pains that keep us human. Ginsberg has continued this lonely battle on behalf of the fully enfranchised American imagination up through the publication of *Plutonian Odes* in 1982.

Ginsberg was born in 1926, in Paterson, New Jersey. And his *Howl* volume appeared with an introduction by William Carlos Williams, the poet and physician whose long, maddening, and stunning poem, *Paterson*, may, coincidentally, be the closest thing we shall have to a 20th-century American epic.

Williams was the oldest of our contemporary poets. In fact, he was one of the acknowledged masters of early modern poetry. But *Paterson*, which appeared during the '40s and early '50s, was both the culmination and the transformation of his early career. Proposing to reclaim the promise Whitman announced for American poetry, it is, indeed, quite the "youngest" poem discussed here.

Williams's *Paterson* is both the city and a man: both a single human being, and a collection of human beings who represent, in their collectivity, the fate of any society, anywhere. In the simplest language, Williams creates the man/landscape of *Paterson*, and in doing so resur-

rects the ideal of a democratic speech:

The province of the poem is the world.
 When the sun rises, it rises in the poem
 and when it sets darkness comes down
 and the poem is dark. . . .

No amount of quotation or explanation can catch the special power of *Paterson*. Its egalitarianism, its generosity, and its anti-academic (never anti-intellectual) exuberance make it perhaps the central American poem of the last few decades. Williams believed in the power of poetry—not, as had Whitman, to make the world habitable, but at least to make it bearable.

"The language is worn out," he keeps saying of the unhappy and confused citizens of Paterson. Yet no man tried more heroically to reinvigorate that language, to return the words of the tribe to their original freshness—a freshness which would also be the freshness of our shared life (and it is significant that Williams was as proud of the babies he had delivered as of the poems he had written).

So here, with the youngest poem by the oldest poet, the survey ought to end. But it cannot. Because there is one detail of modern American poetry that we have not yet addressed fully: the fact that almost no one reads it. The warfare of the private and the public voices of the poet is a very nice thing to talk about; it is even an interesting academic subject for a dissertation or a book. But it does not cover the fact that poetry is not a going concern in America, and has not been for a long time. Major presses publish volumes of poems—even by distinguished poets—as loss leaders. The Muse—if she is still around at all—is probably by now a bag lady, looking for a place to sleep and keep warm for the night.

Not that this is an unusual situation. Poets are rarely best sellers. And most of them would probably be deeply chagrined if they *were*. But we still ought to be able to ask why it is that we find it impossible to cherish our poets until long after they are dead.

I have no doubt that most educated Americans do not read poetry for one of two reasons. Either they have been trained, by teachers and critics of the most academic sort, that they *cannot*; or they have been told, by critics and teachers of the most pandering sort, that they *need not*. The difficulties of contemporary poetry (and of all good poetry, for that matter) are undeniably real. But by worshipping or irrationally fearing the subtleties of modern writing, we do it a disservice. And in doing poetry a disservice, we do ourselves an even greater one.

