



American Poetry : The Twentieth Century, Volume 1 : Henry Adams to Dorothy Parker

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Until nearly the end of the 19th century, American poetry remained in its infancy. To be sure, Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman had already produced their epochal (and diametrically opposed) masterpieces. But these were *sui generis* eccentrics, working on the fringes of a culture still in thrall to its Old World origins. Only with the dawning of the 20th century did American poets manage to cut the umbilical cord, and with astonishing results. Wallace Stevens, Robert Frost, Marianne Moore, William Carlos Williams, Claude McKay, and T.S. Eliot all seemed to appear out of thin air, imparting their accents--mandarin or bucolic or, in McKay's case, definitively uptown--to the modernist uproar. This artistic explosion has already been the subject of numerous studies (including such classics as Hugh Kenner's *The Pound Era* and Ann Douglas's *Terrible Honesty*), and even more numerous anthologies. But for sheer splendor and big-tent inclusiveness, *American Poetry: The Twentieth Century, Volume One: Henry Adams to Dorothy Parker* looks to be an essential starting point.

Weighing in at nearly 1,000 pages, *Volume One* is the work of Robert Hass, John Hollander, Carolyn Kizer, Nathaniel Mackey, and Marjorie Perloff. This poetic Gang of Five has made a number of decisions that will delight some readers and rankle others. For instance, they've elected to include song lyrics from the likes of W.C. Handy, Ma Rainey, Irving Berlin, and Cole Porter. (Doubtless these remain diminished without the music--but who could be so churlish as to exclude the tongue-twisting couplets from "Anything Goes"?) They've also thrown in a variety of very minor works by very major writers, such as "Terminus," Edith Wharton's breathless account of her one-night stand with boy toy Morton Fullerton.

But these are truly peccadilloes. There are hundreds of poems here, representing more than 80 authors, and thumbing through the selections by Marianne Moore or Robinson Jeffers or James Weldon Johnson or Robert Frost should be enough to send most readers into linguistic rapture. Lesser figures, from Sara Teasdale to H.P. Lovecraft, get their days in the sun. So too do complete obscurities like George Sterling or Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven (whose capsule biography suggests that she may have been the most unhappy of a notoriously unhappy lot). Poetry lovers are free to argue themselves hoarse over who got the short end of the stick--and indeed, the relatively small slice of the pie allotted to T.S. Eliot says a great deal about the transience of literary reputation. But anthologies are by their very nature imperfect, and it's hard to imagine a more welcome, less imperfect one than this. --*James Marcus*

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