Modern Poetry and Anticommunism

Alan Filreis, University of Pennsylvania

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Modern Poetry and Anticommunism

Alan Filreis

In one way or another, poets have always been involved in political life. Even the most resolutely inward-turning or formalist of writers have written what might be called a poetry of social encounter: even apolitical poets are wont to commend the poem as a social text. Major events or catastrophes tend to bring the social text to the fore, of course, and the American twentieth century is a period full of such moments. We would be right to suspect that most readers and critics of modern American poetry do not quite agree with Theodor Adorno’s famous dictum, “To write poetry after Auschwitz is an act of barbarism” (Adorno 1983: 34), because they sense, as for example the poet Lyn Hejinian does, that poetry after genocide has a more, rather than less, compelling role to play in intellectual life – as an alternative to official language. “Poetry after Auschwitz must indeed be barbarian,” Hejinian has said, because “it must be foreign to the cultures that produce atrocities. As a result, the poet must assume a barbarian position, taking a creative, analytic, and often oppositional stance, occupying (and being occupied by) foreignness — by the barbarism of strangeness.” The generation of American poets with whom Hejinian has been associated – members of the so-called “Language writing” school and others — were “shocked into awareness of atrocity” by the American military involvement in Vietnam (1954–75) and turned to poetry in the mid- and late 1970s as a means of challenging the dominant idea that language is natural — “that we speak this way because there is no other way to speak.” In redressing the “social
fraud” of official American language these poets sought writing as a difficult sincerity, a new realism. Even when writing about her family life, Hejinian is always at least implicitly a political poet because the honesty of her language refuses to reproduce that fraud, and “fraud produces atrocity” (Hejinian 2000: 325–7).

In the long run of American poetry across the twentieth century, before Auschwitz and after, there were eras in which poets’ politics tended to be overt, when radicalized poets castigated others for whom the social text remained implicit, hidden, or unconscious. Conversely there were eras in which it was the political poet who suffered rejection by those who felt that poems should not take political positions or that beautiful poems inherently did not — that there was something ugly about political statements made in verse. The American 1930s (which can be bounded as 1929–41 or 1927–44, depending on how scrupulously one follows decades) was the first sort of era; the initial period of Cold War (1949–60 or 1945–63) was of the latter sort. It is difficult to separate study of the poetry of the 1930s from the skeptical way in which it was viewed in the 1950s by critics and the poets themselves. As political crises heated up in the earlier period — the onset of economic depression, the rise of antifascism in response to the National Socialist state in Germany and Fascist states in Italy and then Spain, a new wave of challenges to civil rights in the US South — poets were confronted with the seemingly reasonable option of joining or closely affiliating with the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA). (The strategy of the international communist parties beginning in 1935 — the “Popular Front” policy of including liberals — made affiliation even more convenient.)

But by the late 1940s and 1950s American communists and former communists were routinely attacked for their beliefs, and the sort of poems communists had written in the 1930s went out of style. Communists were said to have written hamhanded, overtly explicit, unlyrical verse. Ideological confidence, dubbed dogmatism, was said to be anathema to lyricism. No person who had signed on to a definitive political program could write a good lyric poem and in that poem be consistent with his or her politics. Actually the relationship between modern poetry and communism in the United States in the twentieth century was dynamic and complex — no less complex than the relation between art and ideology generally. Yet anticommunism, in the world of poetry, especially in the peak Cold War years, served as a simplifying and reductive force. To the extent that anticommunists conceded that their approach to the writing of the communist movement was reductive, they were at least willing to justify it on the grounds that the art produced during the heyday of communism was itself so simple that a counterreductiveness was not just warranted but had an ethical basis. Of all literary genres, poetry in particular was at stake, because, of course, poetry is deemed inherently resistant to simplification.

Our concern here is to begin comprehending American political poetry in the context of modernism, a project that requires denying the dictum that communists could not be communists and engage the modernist style. To achieve this understanding, we must first know how political poetry could be understood by anticommunists as — to adapt a phrase that critic Alfred Kazin once used (1951: 398) against the communist novel — against the poem itself. The realignment of modernism and communism had to entail some kind of forgetting or smoothing over of the political crises of the 1930s that had so compelled writers as scattered across the modernism–communism spectrum as William Carlos Williams, Walter Lowenfels, George Oppen, Norman Rosten, Alfred Kreyberg, Dorothy Van Ghent, Genevieve Taggard, the imagist-communist Whittaker Chambers, Naomi Replansky, the lumberman Joe Kalar, Eda Lou Walton, Claude McKay, Kenneth Patchen, Louis Zukofsky, Norman Macleod, Lola Ridge, Isidor Schneider, Frank Marshall Davis, the surrealist Bob Brown, Stanley Burnshaw, Martha Millet, Maxwell Bodenheim, Carl Rakosi, the great sonneteer Edna St Vincent Millay, Muriel Rukeyser, and so on.

Consider, for example, the judgment the anticommunist poet Louise Bogan made against the poems of Muriel Rukeyser: in a radical’s poems one senses a distaste for the individualized feeling; radicals write poems with a “seriousness . . . unrelieved by . . . moments of lightness” (Bogan 1951: 92). Poetry had to be about human passion, the emotional sourcwork of a deep coherent self. Any refusal to explore or disclose that subjective depth was a subversive sign, and such a heretical view was another quality shared by the remnant of the 1930s left and by advocates of the “New American Poetry” as it emerged out of modernism in the late 1950s (and was gathered in Donald Allen’s influential book The New American Poetry in 1960). Most suspicious to anticommunists was the “progressive depredation of the value of personality” in the writing of radicals, as conservative political theorist Frank Meyer put it in The Moulding of Communists. The communist was incapable of forming an “attachment to another person — filial devotion, love, or friendship — deep enough to create values independent” of abstract political belief (Meyer 1961: 130, 46).
Instances of this critique abound. The poet-editor Henry Rago, later the editor of the influential Poetry magazine, reviewed Genevieve Taggard’s book Slow Music (1947) and saw only “her humorless faith” in the writing, but no humanity. He “wear[ed] of following Miss Taggard around” as she wrote poems mindlessly historical and mechanically incurious about form. Taggard’s poetry actually did not count, for Rago, as poetry. Poetry was not “poetic comment on the news.” And “poetry is not about crisis, it is the resistance to and escape from crisis, but of course only those people sensitive enough to know what crisis is will take the trouble to resist it!” The logic of Rago’s critique is circular: he does not even credit the poet herself has a heartbeat (Rago 1947: 289–91). Taggard, who had served as treasurer of the League of American Writers, a communist writers’ “front” organization, was not, to Rago, among those poets “sensitive enough” to present human depth. Her linguistic surfaces were like those of the newspaper headline, of the clipped subjectless language used by reporters and political commentators.

But what if that kind of language was itself the poem’s concern? In agonizing over the declined role of the poet, it might have plenty of heart. Taggard’s poem called “Poet” – published in the communist literary weekly, New Masses – begins straightforwardly enough, with a speaker, a poet indeed, who has worked in the fancy high-minded mode:

Tragic meaning was my altitude.
Took it for mine, felt it lift
Very high, learned to live holding it behind diamond eyes ...

But that is the last we see of the subject in a poem of five six-line stanzas. Increasingly the poem is about the poet’s linguistic choices – about lines that are end-stopped or not, about poetic units of measure that can be slowed or sped up. Yes, the poem’s “line” is the “party line” of the time: poets have a responsibility to widen the scope and role of poetry to include “the crisis hurrying.” But because the metrical heart of this poem-about-poetry beats with that urgency, the party line must be in the poetic line. Prosody and grammar have ethical aspects. The commentator’s stitting language (lacking subject, missing articles, etc.) of which Rago complains is the basis of the communist poet’s claim to aesthetic relevance. Here are the final lines of Taggard’s “Poet”:

Toiled in unit of slow going: in the line as it stops;
With stop after stop, the signal awaited. One
In the lock with all, chained but never slave.
Here sweat out struggle nothing-sweeter than history.
Web of feet, working over dark bloody ground.
Heart plunging neatly, spasm on spasm. (Taggard 1944)

The poet of rhetorical and stylistic “altitude” comes finally to be associated with a disturbance of the lyric line. The poet willing to write “Here sweat out struggle nothing-sweeter than history” brings the disengaged conventional tragic mode, with its obvious subjects and objects (poets and historical matters), down to the level of the line. The poem has heart, all right; its humanity, though, is in the meter of “spasm.” Here party line and disruption of lyric convention converge.

By the late 1940s and 1950s it was simply assumed, as Rago assumed of Taggard, that poets who were or had been affiliated with the communist movement wrote verse that was plain, descriptive, didactic, tonally grim, and had learned little or nothing from the language of the modern poetic revolution, with its emphasis on the “word as such.” It made no difference that communist poets like Taggard did wrestle with their poetry as aesthetic problems. For conservative poet E. Merrill Root, it simply made no difference that in the late 1930s the magazine called The Harvard Communist had “combine[d] avant garde experiments with Communist ideology”: notwithstanding such experiments, which imply an awareness of poetry’s formal problems among the students who edited and wrote for the magazine, the “style of the magazine,” Root claimed, “is pure party jargon” (Root 1955: 28–30). The poems Root quoted when he made this judgment – and the rest of the verse published in the Communist – can hardly be said to have succeeded in their linguistic experiments, and while thematically many follow the CPUSA line, as language they cannot rightly be called jargon. For conservatives like Root, communist writers’ stiff certainty mooted a priori any connection to the poetic avant garde. Yet by complaining about young collegiate poets, Root was going after small game.

Had he aimed for bigger game, he might have sought after William Carlos Williams – already by the mid-1930s an eminent modernist who then entered a brief period in which his populism and enthusiasm for American working people converged with the ideas of the Popular Front. There can be no doubt that Williams’s 1935 poem “The Yachts” evinces the very sort of certainty that drove the excommunist
E. Merrill Root further and further rightward. Williams wanted to write a poem describing his recollection of the impressive America's Cup yacht races he had seen off Newport, Rhode Island. Notwithstanding the grandness and beauty of the scene, he was angry that the magnificent skills of a small privileged class were supported by the work of a nation of impoverished people. His personal response seems almost too obvious to us now and could easily have made for a poem of the sort that anticommmunists later deemed the inevitable result of communist infiltration into modern writing. But if anything was inevitable about Williams' desire to craft his economic views into verse, it was that he would seek for radicalism a correlative poetics. He decided to begin with, and then abandon, Dante's terza rima, the rhyme scheme of interlocking rhymes written in iambic tercets (three-line stanzas): aba beb cde ded (and so forth). Why would a poet, presumably striving for a reputation of competence, eschew a stanza form just a few lines after taking it up? Would that not draw too much attention to the poem's failure, or at least indecision? This choice helped convey the poem's theme of social desperation amidst luxury and apparent surety, which Williams borrowed from literary history and then radicalized: the scene from Dante's Inferno where Dante and Virgil must cut through the arms and hands of the damned who float beneath them and attempt to sink their craft. Williams's poem begins thus:

**The Yachts**

contend in a sea which the land partly encloses
shielding them from the too-heavy blows
of an ungoverned ocean which when it chooses
tortures the biggest hulls, the best man knows
to pit against its beatings, and sinks them pitilessly.
Mothlike in mists, scintillant in the minute
brilliance of cloudless days, with broad bellying sails
they glide to the wind tossing green water
from their sharp prows while over them the crew crawls . . .
(Williams 1986: 388)

Later, in its final three stanzas, the poem shifts from its depiction of the boats contending with a restless ocean (the "moody" sea "lapping their glossy sides, as if feeling/ for some slightest flaw but fails completely") to the nightmarish scene of a sea of human bodies, Depression-era people in agony, the "ungoverned" watery world the society that permits them to live impoverished lives, the waves their hands pulling at the yachts. The shift seems abrupt although it is thematically prepared at the beginning:

Arms with hands grasping seek to clutch at the prows.
Bodies thrown recklessly in the way are cut aside.
It is a sea of faces about them in agony, in despair

until the horror of the race dawns staggering the mind.
the whole sea become an entanglement of watery bodies
lost to the world bearing what they cannot hold. Broken,

beaten, desolate, reaching from the dead to be taken up
they cry out, failing, failing! their cries rising
in waves still as the skilled yachts pass over. (Williams 1986: 389)

One interpreter of this poem, Thomas Whitaker, deems it to be "limited... by the lack of preparation (and hence justification) for that sudden shift." He argues that we accept the abrupt move from precise natural depiction to surrealistic radicalism because of what we know about history and economics beyond Williams's words. We "assent to it as a paradigm of something known outside the poem rather than find it inherently revelatory" (Whitaker 1968: 121). Whitaker's complaint can be understood as political code. One doesn't need to be a deep reader to conclude that his point is antipolitical: he's complaining that the leftist position animating Williams in this poem is an extraneous or extrapoetic matter, that the poem must be taken on its own terms, that "knowing" of the Depression and economic crisis as the poem's historical background is one thing and interpreting the poem as revolutionary quite another. Yet if the point of "The Yachts" is to depict the discovery - I take it to be the speaker's discovery of the radical nature of his economic views - of the "relentless tyranny exercised by its own beautiful instruments" (Whitaker 1968: 120), we must also consider that a poem is always at every point in danger of becoming just such a beautiful instrument. "The Yachts" is written to enable Williams to think in this critical way about the form his writing takes. So it is a matter for Williams of an ethical poetics that he abandon the terza rima that assured or certified
his engagement with art and that he abruptly cast off “objective description” (Schneider 1945: 5) for didactic political symbolism.

The radicalism of The Yachts depends on that abruptness or discontinuity, and these qualities are inherent in the poem’s form. Yet even as the typical virtue of a great poem is its flow or continuity, the party line against the Party line was roughly this: what is inherent in poetry is good; what is “outside” it threatens its integrity as art. Note, for example, the way in which the Soviet Union’s criticism of the superficiality of American poetry of the day (it was 1947) was refuted by T. O’Conor Sloane, director of the Catholic Poetry Society of America: “If a few . . . poets are moved to lyricize for political purposes,” Sloane announced, it “has [no] bearing on the quality or value inherent in their work” (New York Times 1947). The false connection of aesthetic value and “political purposes” was itself seen as a form of communist charlatanism. Ray B. West, editor of Western Review, argued that revolutionary writers of the 1930s were “less interested in literature than they were in other matters . . . primarily social.” He claimed that on the whole “such communities dislike, if they do not hate, genuine literary achievement.” West added that the by-then defunct communist writers’ clubs of the 1930s, such as the John Reed Clubs – though they were crucial as oases of support for unemployed writers developing their craft in a barren time – were, to his mind, “well-remembered, but little lamented” (West 1958: 4).

For critic William Van O’Connor the “upheavals of the thirties” did draw experimental poets out of their usual isolated state, but “the pendulum swung too far the other way,” verse got too involved with politics and “became the poetry of a party,” thus “forcing out aesthetic” concerns (O’Connor 1947: 36). Leo Gurko’s history of poetry in a book called The Angry Decade was similarly quick and dirty: “Why there should have been an outpouring of notable verse during the second decade of the century and not during the fourth, may be due at bottom to . . .” – whereupon Gurko’s readers are treated to his musings on the “accident” of history (Gurko 1947: 258–9). But he meant that it was no accident that the Red Decade was a barren time for poetry. He agreed with John Chamberlain, who wrote: “By taking control of writing the intellectuals managed to poison the intellectual life of a whole nation – and the poison has lingered on” (Chamberlain 1952). Now the “big job” was “to extract the poison.”

No “notable verse” The communist-modernist problem inspired two great books of poems by Williams, An Early Martyr (1935) and Adam & Eve & the City (1936) as well as his series of short “proletarian portraits”; fueled the emergence of the “objectivist” poets, three of whom took the communist movement seriously (two, George Oppen and Carl Rakosi, joined the Party); and, in the person of poet and New Masses editor Stanley Burnshaw, who criticized Wallace Stevens for his disengagement, enabled the left-right dialectic in Stevens’s The Man with the Blue Guitar (1936–7). “Blue Guitar” is the poem in which Stevens confronts the literary left most perceptively; it is also the poem in which he makes his most explicit allusions to modernism. In the opening cantos of this long work, people referred to only as “they” are modernism’s alleged communist detractors (Filreis 1994: 248–90). Here is the first canto:

The man bent over his guitar,
A shearsman of sorts. The day was green.

They said, “You have a blue guitar,
You do not play things as they are.”

The man replied, “Things as they are
Are changed upon the blue guitar.”

And they said then, “But play, you must,
A tune beyond us, yet ourselves,

A tune upon the blue guitar
Of things exactly as they are.” (Stevens 1997: 135)

The speaker introduces the guitarist, a figure of the artist or of the poet. But before the guitarist himself can speak from his position (he is literally making his art by bending his body over his instrument and he has an aesthetic point of view as well), his unnamed detractors criticize him. “They” are the detractors. The poem begins by creating the impression that readers should already know who would insist that the guitarist play “things exactly as they are.” The speaker of later cantos eventually emerges from a dialectic of opposing (and then overlapping) aesthetic positions. The reality that is changed on the blue guitar is not only the sort of change the blue guitarist already knows how to make, as a cubist or surrealist. Finally, he also changes the way he makes his changes. The detractors, whose complaints are absorbed by the speaker, enable this higher order of change.

No “notable verse” that engages the communist-modernist problem? If it weren’t for Kenneth Fearing’s association with communism as
one of the original “Dynamo” poets, who would know (or rightly care) that his poem “Literary” didn’t simply give expression to modernists’ antibourgeois impulse, their repudiation of the means of mainstream literary publishing? Fearing’s demotic, chatty, comic, digressive style made Allen Ginsberg’s to some degree possible and arguably supported the venturing of New York School poets (such as Frank O’Hara) into their antic, free, antiliterary style. Here is the first stanza of Fearing’s “Literary”:

I sing of simple people and the hardier virtues,
by Associated Stuff Shirts & Company, Incorporated,
358 West 42d Street, New York, brochure enclosed;
Of Christ on the Cross, by a visitor to Calvary, first class;
Art deals with eternal, not current verities, revised from last week’s
Sunday supplement;
Guess what we mean, in The Literary System; and a thousand noble
answers to a thousand empty questions, by a patriot who
needs the dough. (Fearing 1940: 79)

In “What If Mr. Jesse James Should Some Day Die?” Fearing heaps scorn upon capitalism’s big shots:

Where will we ever again find food to eat, clothes to wear, a roof
and a bed, now that the Wall Street plunger has gone to his
hushed, exclusive, paid-up tomb?
How can we get downtown today, with the traction king
stretched flat on his back in the sun at Miami Beach?
(Fearing 1940: 47)

The critic M. L. Rosenthal called this “the true poem of the early thirties,” the kind of poem “that aroused the . . . ire of pure esthetes
[and] Southern Agrarians.” Its immediacy, clarity, and oratorical style
“was declared to be not poetry but propaganda” (Rosenthal 1944:
215). And yet in poems like “Resurrection” Fearing’s writing is “re-
markable in its lyrical telescoping of personal emotion with sensuous
imagery and critical thought” (p. 217), and like many poets involved
with communism between the wars Fearing “could hardly avoid
the thousand experimental and symbolistic influences of the times”
(p. 208).

Rosenthal was the first to treat seriously the poetics of Fearing, and
indeed was one of the earliest fans of 1930s poetry generally among
American critics. As he came of critical age in the late 1940s, Rosenthal
knew many poets. Fearing and Rukeyser among them, who refused
to succumb to the new fashionable separation of modernism and
radicalism. In fact, as Rosenthal wrote, poets “played with” the “esthetic
war between conservatives and radicals” (emphasis added). He meant
that communists and modernists (including some modernists who
were communists) wrote poems, poem by poem, that were sometimes
generalizable as “modernist” but that no pattern imposed on “thirties
poets” by mid-century critics revealed the actual cut and style of the
poetic line, let alone the content, political or otherwise (Rosenthal
1957). For instance, the communist editors of The Left, a magazine
produced in Iowa in the early 1930s, deemed apolitical those who made
the distinction between modernist and left-wing poetry; their
magazine was subtitled “A Quarterly Review of Radical and Exper-
imental Art.” “I suspect that ‘esthetic’ and ‘Marxist,’” wrote the critic
Kenneth Burke (1932) in a letter to Isidor Schneider, “should not seem
so different in emphasis as do ‘esthetic’ and ‘sociological.’” Richard
Wright, whose ideas about poetry we have been taught to think of
as premodern and unnuanced, published an article in the communist
New Challenge in 1937 declaring that T. S. Eliot and Gertrude Stein
represented a “gain in human thought” and needed to be materia
poetica for the radical writer (p. 55). The “proletarian” writer Edward
Dahlberg told a friend in 1933 that his current writing project was a
marriage of Karl Marx and Marcel Proust. Dahlberg introduced a new
book of Kenneth Fearing’s poems in 1935 — the book that included
“Literary” — with the judgment that Fearing’s “fantastic patterns of
slang and speech,” his rhetorical derangements, made him something
of a symboliste “with Marxian insights” (Dahlberg 1935: 11).

Burke, even in those politically charged days more modernist than
communist (it was already 1936), was in any case a close advisor and
theoretical mentor to a number of communist poets; among them was
the communist poet Isidor Schneider, who always agreed with his
friend Burke that the idea of radical writing composed “as though
nothing but a shoddy sentence were really ‘virtuous,’” was not
just crude but politically ineffective. Communists in the 1930s had
often written “of strikes,” of course, but the fact is that they also
had written love poems (Filleis 1994: 198, 346 n.94) and lacy imagist
ditties (Schneider 1929), had conducted “elfin experiments” in verse
(Untermeyer 1945: 336); had sometimes quoted “passages from revolu-
tionary poems which are plainly precious” (Burnshaw 1936: 20–1):
had loved and imitated “the ornate, rolling prose of Sir Thomas
and had praised “the little lyricists ... who are finding a place in the memories of people who can and do, upon occasion, quote the great poets of the past” (Schneider 1932).

Nor later, during the Cold War, was it possible to predict what communist poets who associated themselves with the 1930s milieu felt should be the poetic response to the anticomunist purge of poetry in the 1950s. Experimentalism was part of the heretical mix, as was honor due modernist experimenters. In a striking lyric published in Mainstream, Richard Davison, the best of the communist confessional poets of the late 1950s, presented a portrait of the poet as a “young rebel”; this poem mourns the radical martyr Joe Hill, adores the pro-Soviet singer-actor Paul Robeson, supports progressive presidential candidate Henry Wallace, and ... reads Proust (Davison 1960). Isidor Schneider deeply admired the evasive, circumlocutory novelist Henry James and was willing to say so in the communist papers (Schneider 1945). Radical Joe Freeman revered the work of the modernist painter Piet Mondrian. Muriel Rukeyser, along with her communist “sense of righteous indignation,” worked hard to make her poems “an amalgam of modern styles” (Bogan 1951: 92). Given the actual details of individuals' poetic practice, there was (and is) simply no prediction or accurate generalization accounting for what version of the modernist aesthetic one would find in the work - in the actual writing - of any given left-wing poet at mid-century.

Again and again, the very presence of communism among American poets threw off some of the most nuanced poetry critics of the second half of the century. Even the subtlest among them fell into the anti-ideological pattern. This is surely the case with Richard P. Blackmur's rebuke in 1945 of Muriel Rukeyser. Blackmur read Rukeyser's book of poems, Beast in View (1944), and decided that her “amorphous” meters failed. Actually Blackmur's judgment was harsher than that: her meter was not even “representative of the tradition of craft in English poetry”! This prosody, claimed Blackmur, had “nothing to do with the speed and little to do with the shape of the poetry.” Without overtly conceding that his bias against Rukeyser's use of “direct perception, reportage, and the forces to which she gives in” - a transparent euphemism for communism (for communist culture was generally associated with documentary) - was a repudiation of political poetry and its modes, Blackmur was able to speak of the poet's poor metrical control as a drag on otherwise strong generic and even topical aspects of the blank verse (Blackmur 1945: 346-7).

What book was Blackmur reading? Meter was hardly the thing that could truly have irked him when coming to these metrically regular lines:

The girl whose father raped her first  
Should have used a little knife

That passage of Rukeyser's beautiful "Gift-Poem," emphatically (and appropriately) iambic, was almost but not quite in a ballad stanza - a ballad wrenched just slightly, aided by the thematic violence:

The girl whose father raped her first  
Should have used a little knife  
Failing that, her touch is cursed  
By the omission sin for life... (Rukeyser 1944: 34)

Perhaps disappointing as a piece of rhyming, but not because of its meter. In the end Blackmur's many readers learned summarily that Muriel Rukeyser was "confused about sex" (this noted in an essay otherwise oblivious of thematic considerations) and were instructed to imagine "what she ought to have done and could do" in her poetry "at some future stage of itself": instead of the "rough blank verse," "rough rhyme," "half rhyme," reportage, the immediacy of direct perception which "usually takes over the verse," there would be more formal lyrics like these (of John Fletcher):

Lay a garland on my hearse  
Of the dismal yew;  
Maidens, willow branches bear;  
Say, I died true.

Blackmur meant that Rukeyser should follow "the form" (Blackmur's emphasis) although not the sentiment of such traditional lines. It is difficult to imagine that the connection between Rukeyser's "rough" language and her "confus[ion] about sex" was not connected thematically to this judgment. Rukeyser, who was already being red-baited, was beginning to be aware that the criticisms of poetic form by otherwise sensitive critics sometimes now covered homophobic and antimadical reactions. She overheard publishers talk about the gay poet Robert Duncan's writing - that it "lacked... moral fibre" - the same "strength of [Fletcher's] sort of form" Blackmur called for. In 1944, Duncan had come out as a homosexual in the magazine Politics.
and, Rukeyser observed, “the echoes have not faded.” She heard a poet say of Duncan: “Intellectual torment. Sexual confusion.” “Now the two touchstones of American sentimental reactions,” she wrote, “are . . . the names of communism and homosexuality[,] signals to the unsure for fear-trigger response that will be identical” (Rukeyser 1948: 49).

R. P. Blackmur (1945: 346–7) had gone looking in *Beast in View* for lines of verse that might come “to the strength of th[e] sort of form” he had found in the English lyric tradition – and then, turning back to Rukeyser, discovered these lines:

The world is full of loss; bring, wind, my love,
My home is where we make our meeting-place,
And love whatever I shall touch and read
Within that face. (Rukeyser 1944: 16)

Yet this poem – Rukeyser’s sweet-sad poem “Song” – beautiful as it is, is not at all typical of the political and sexual radicalism of *Beast in View*, which Blackmur eviscerated without feeling the need to refer to politics at all – only to the failures of form, and to a (vague, unnamed) “force” to which Rukeyser the poet submitted herself (Blackmur 1945: 346–7).

This sort of averting to form was much more effective than if Blackmur or many another anticommunist critic had felt any obligation to spell out the emerging antipolitical counteraesthetic that would mostly bury the work of Rukeyser and would obliterate other left-wing poets from the poetic landscape. The praise of Rukeyser’s “Song,” a completely integrated lyric effort, implicitly cast doubts on the disruptions of poems like Rukeyser’s marvelous “Who in One Lifetime,” where the difficulty of the first line becomes the medium for the convergence of domestic/sexual and wartime/international radicalisms. The poem begins by identifying itself, by date, as a wartime poem:

*June 1941*

Who in one lifetime sees all causes lost,
Herself dismayed and helpless, cities down,
Love made monotonous fear and the sad-faced
Inexorable armies and the falling plane,
Has sickness, sickness. Introspective and whole,
She knows how several madresses are born,
Seeing the integrated never fighting well,
The flesh too vulnerable, the eyes near-torn.

She finds a pre-surrender on all sides:
Treaty before the war, ritual impatience turn
The camps of ambush to chambers of imagery.
She holds belief in the world, she stays and hides
Life in her own defeat, stands, though her whole world burn.
A childless goddess of fertility. (Rukeyser 1944: 37)

One begins this poem trying to decipher the grammar of the first line. Is it an interrogatory without a question mark, asking who sees lost causes? Rather, “who in one lifetime” is the grammatical subject of a fragment – it is *she who* has witnessed the war-torn world and “has,” or feels, or, more properly, comprehends, sickness. So much has happened by June 1941. Vocabularies collide somewhat ungrammatically. “Love” could also be the subject and “made” thus a transitive verb, making a noun have a quality (love has been made monotonous). But the noun follows the modifier (monotonous fear), so that it might refer to the *kind* of fear love makes. Or monotony may be made into fear by love. Domestic and geopolitical qualities are confused, as then, after love, there are armies: an “and” (“and the sad-faced . . .”) seems colloquial, a parataxis (creating a connection between unconnectable parts). This is not the way history is usually told (and then this happened, and then this, and so on). Or perhaps the connection makes sense and love is meant to be making other objects into other qualities, “sickness, sickness” being the quality love bestows on the armies no one can stop as on the ground falling out under their feet. The cause that is lost is that level, sure ground: connection between sentences and phrases; the normal, logical way in which history, in language, proceeds. And yet, of course, the poem is grounded and assured by the blessings of literary history: it’s a Petrarchan sonnet, with an octet and sestet, a lyric diction, and a rhyme scheme sufficient to remind us of its formal pedigree.

“Who in One Lifetime,” dated “June 1941” in the text – the great turning point in World War II, when the Soviet Union joined the Alliance and a second front opened – is about a woman, not herself a warrior, who upon finding “pre-surrender on all sides” discovers the abandonment of prewar treaties, the language of peace betrayed – “turn/ The camps of ambush to chambers of imagery.” She presents a poem as a form of infuriated feminized helplessness, which, she implies, serves us as a model not for just *one* lost cause, but for *all*. Is “Who in One Lifetime” a “communist” poem? Does it follow the platform of a radical political party? These are not simple questions.
Nonetheless, the skeptical or antipolitical critic, assuming the answers to these questions are *ipso facto* yes, might well attack the poem on *aesthetic* grounds. The poem itself allows for this. What enables the poet to "turn/The camps of ambush to chambers of imagery"? Is it the sonnet itself, a classic "chamber of imagery," a result of "ritual impatience"? The speaker maintains "belief in the world" by epitomizing the ultimate paradoxical form for a political woman poet. "A childless goddess of fertility." The c-rhyme in the sestet, which is supposed to rhyme *abcabc* (one of several conventional options for a Petrarchan sonnet), should be *imagery/fertility*. But after *sides/hides* and *turn/burn*, that final rhyme is odd and disappointing, and metrically the line falls a beat short. Poets have long derived a sense of clarity and unity from the sonnet. This is a sonnet made in and about June 1941—a time of extraordinary unity among allies, when antifascism finally seemed ubiquitous and the war seemed possible to win—that undermines its expression of "belief in the world" by enacting, through its form, the "very "ritual impatience" that normally renders the agony into the solaces of poetry, especially in time of war. The antifascist poet, rather than feeling clarification at the re-entry into the war of the world’s one communist government, is confused by what it means. The work of reconstructing the political context—a context of which the poem is evidence and to which it contributed—is difficult. But attentive readers of American political poetry of the twentieth century need to engage in such effort.

Then there is the work, also difficult, of reading the poem as *poetry* while maintaining an awareness of a history of ideological readings that have already distorted the poem’s career among the readerly public. In historical terms, such distortion is the "social fraud" perpetrated by official American language about radicalism—the language against which political poets at the end of the century, such as Lyn Hejinian, sought redress in organizing or constructing the process (in other words, *the writing*) of their own writing. Hejinian’s *My Life*, written in the 1980s, is a political portrait of the young artist as a languaged self passing through periods—especially the late 1940s and 1950s—in which language seemed to her a social fraud. “[D]eceptive metaphors,” such as the trope that nations were dominos falling in predicted order to Soviet communism, "establish[ed] the pretense that language is ‘natural’—that we speak this way because there is no other way to speak" (Hejinian 2000: 324). And so the American political poet, after the demise of communism and the fading even of anticommunism, still seeks in poetry an alternative to that naturalness.

**References and Further Reading**


Dahlberg, Edward (1933). Letter to Joseph Warren Beach, January 3, Beach Papers, University Archives, University of Minnesota.


Chapter 10

Mysticism: Neo-paganism, Buddhism, and Christianity

Stephen Fredman

Introduction

"Mysticism" is an inexact term that covers a broad range of religious and quasi-religious phenomena. Loosely conceived, mysticism refers to the knowledge or experience gained by an individual that purports to effect a direct relationship to absolute reality or the divine. In practice, mystical knowledge or experience is said to erase the boundaries that maintain a limited conception of the self, and, by so doing, to give rise to a pervading sense of unity, ecstasy, or love. Mysticism as so defined can be found within monotheistic and polytheistic religions and in nontheistic Buddhism; it also appears in less well-defined religious movements, such as the tantric sects of Hinduism and Buddhism, the gnostic sects of early Judaism and Christianity, and the occult sects in European culture beginning in the Renaissance. To highlight the importance of mysticism for twentieth-century American poetry, this chapter will explore the relations of the poetry to three forms of mystical practice: neo-paganism, Buddhism, and Christian mysticism. In terms of its impact upon the poetry, the most prevalent of the three forms is neo-paganism, which comprises a number of non-Christian occult movements, such as Hermeticism, alchemy, Theosophy, and primitivism. Buddhism gained a surprisingly strong foothold in American poetry of the second half of the century—particularly the schools of Zen and Tibetan Buddhism. The most prominent strains of Christian mysticism have been the incarnational,