

## New Mexico Quarterly

---

Volume 22 | Issue 1

Article 20

---

1952

# Some Inadequacies of Contemporary Poetry

Kenneth Lash

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq>

---

### Recommended Citation

Lash, Kenneth. "Some Inadequacies of Contemporary Poetry." *New Mexico Quarterly* 22, 1 (1952). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq/vol22/iss1/20>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by the University of New Mexico Press at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in *New Mexico Quarterly* by an authorized editor of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact [disc@unm.edu](mailto:disc@unm.edu).

# BOOKS and COMMENT

---

*Kenneth Lash*



## SOME INADEQUACIES OF CONTEMPORARY POETRY

**A**RT USUALLY reflects its time and place. Its strongest works will also act as a kind of barometer of a climate yet to come. Its minor works will register prevailing winds. At its weakest it will go on recording a storm long since spent. This is what American poetry, with the usual exceptions, seems to have been doing since the big blow of the 20's and 30's.

These were peculiarly American winds, with their emphasis on technique, their preoccupation with abstraction, and their sense of moral outrage. They were good strong things in their time. The trouble is that those who came after seemed to think that one's proper task was either to imitate the fabulous storm with his own faint thunder, or to crack his poetic cheek and blow away the little curblings that had somehow escaped. Thus what once was fresh grows stale and unprofitable. What once was true grows false.

Take the matter of technique, for example, about which Pound, Eliot, and others lectured us with telling effect. I wonder if ever in history there were in one place at one time as many technically competent poets as there are in America today. Technique can be learned, our communications are unexcelled, and we seem to be the most facile of all civilizations. But technique plus facility often add up to a kind of neon cleverness. Once it's decided that April is the cruelest month and poetry a game, art

is on its way to becoming artifice. The question of our poetic diction is illustrative.

Originally it was fresh and exciting, though the 1913 Imagists attached silly labels announcing it as "the language of common speech." Except for folk-ballads, poetry has little to do with common speech other than to render it uncommon. All that can be done is to substitute one kind of poetic diction for another. Whether one describes the world in terms of roseate dawn or boardinghouse beds is a matter of historical mood. But historical appropriateness is important, and so the experimenting and adjusting that these people involved themselves in made possible a "contemporary" poetic realization. What they did was to take the hard, unpoetic words of twentieth-century living, and by means of juxtaposition and structural relation make them "poetic," i.e., emotionally and intellectually evocative. It was more a matter of unusual phrases than of separate words, but it was still diction.

Once it represented a fresh vision and a new kind of accuracy, but if a diction keeps welling long enough, some new generation will eventually drown in it. Today's version is as inflated, as straitening, and as boring as any rosy-fingered Victorianism. The shock value of unusual word juxtaposition (often mistaken for brilliant metaphor in our free-association world) can cover a lack of dramatic insight; free verse can disguise a lack of inner form. The result is often a kind of unintegrated stylism that hides everything but its blinding self.

This tendency is abetted by the characteristic abstractness of much of our poetry. America has always glowed with abstractions, sometimes very ironically so. I suppose that the earlier twentieth-century poets specifically needed to be abstract in order to express the abstractness of science and machines, and to tell us that a rose is not a rose, that the inmost Chinese box of every truth contains its opposite. So their poetry was characterized by an indirection of emotion and ambivalence of conclusion. A great relief after a hundred years of God's in his heaven all's right with the world.

But what a potential Pandora's box! Breaking down accepted truths is a lot easier and flashier than putting them together, and ambiguity is the finest possible camouflage for pretentiousness. Once there's no pinning down to "conclusions," and no personal commitment except to an established vision, it's easy to look like a sage. But that matters less than the fact that by now the accepted truth is ambiguity, and so we are overdue to involve ourselves again with the concrete, to rediscover its identity in some way on some level.

I know that contemporary poetry *looks* concrete. Sometimes it is, magnificently so. But less and less does it find the directness of lines like "An aged man is but a paltry thing, / A tattered coat upon a stick, . . ." More and more it's a question of concrete detail invented (rather than "seen") to support some correlative, some foreordained vision. There's something too deductive about correlatives. Poetry, like all art, is more an *inductive* process. It's at its best when it surprises hugeness coiled like a spring inside some "small" fact. It's at its worst when it employs the kind of intellectual "pathetic fallacy" that is basic to deductive system and generalization. The meaning of a poem ought to seep up from underneath a tangible, somehow innocent, exterior; not club down from behind a duck-blind. Poetic traps are for propaganda.

A poet doesn't usually propagandize anything but his own emotional attitudes, which can be a good or bad thing depending upon the vitality and individuality of these attitudes. In 1917 Prufrock scored well on both points, but what is he doing around here now being rewritten fifty times a day? His lines are said, and he belongs offstage with streetcars and dead salesmen. A growing sense of this fact must lie behind the current preparations for crucifying Eliot, whose un-Christlike crime consists in having been too much imitated. Imitated in a very unfortunate way, since the followers were swallowing his propaganda whole at the very moment that history was getting ready to cough it up. Fifteen years have been like fifty in rearranging the central facts of

our time, and yet the old indignations are still being screeched. I don't know anything more discouraging than second-hand moral outrage which assumes a condition that no longer exists, or does not exist in the assumed form. This situation is forever turning up when moral discoveries have been around long enough to freeze into attitude.

The general poetic climate has moved from the moral tension of Hopkins, to the occasional synthesis of Yeats and sometimes Pound, to the *j'accuse* of Eliot and Pound at other times, to the air of contemporary condemnation. It's already stale air. I don't think the poets need any longer count the ways in which they do not love this world. Even Hollywood has caught up with the shameful truth. By now America the ugly is just as puerile as America the beautiful. But the intellectuals, wearing sadness on their sleeves, keep the old routine going. And the sad songs of the poet turn to hurlings of self-pity.

What began as a realistic exposure of sickness in times that were thought to be healthy, has lingered on to become emotional attitudinizing in times that are known to be sick. It's a kind of perverse romanticism: Camille among the lepers. The rotting hull replaces the daffodils, and becomes in time just as much a cliché of attitude.

I suppose that psychology, through little fault of its own, is partly responsible. It was with a sense of shock that we came to discover how many things were wrong with us; and it was with a sense of delight that we found out how much others were to blame for our plight. But contemporary man's awareness of his delicacy, though it may make him sicker does not make him uniquely delicate; nor does the medical identification of aggressive components make the world intrinsically more hostile. What happened to the *top* of the iceberg? Obviously suffering is not automatically a bad thing. Quite the reverse: with allowances for extent, suffering is the only way by which we learn the only things that are really worth knowing. Without it there is no art. This is

antique philosophizing, but I think it clarifies what I'm trying to say, or rather to ask: where is the visage of the *strength* of sadness, which is that of wisdom? how can significant poetry derive from an attitude basically anachronistic and superficial?

Even at the right time, only the finest poet who knows the most *personal* despair can produce beauty out of a portrait of temporal sterility and local doom. The others just produce the portrait. It may have contemporary accuracy and hence a real value, though more social than artistic. Social phenomena gain significance in ratio to the number of people sharing a like attitude; for the creating artist the reverse is true. That step ahead, which he takes or does not take, means everything. Much of his strength lies in his perversity, which is really the perversity of truth by which the idea too long established stands in need of destruction, and the idea being destroyed needs preservation.

Perhaps the latter is wanted now to save from the scrap-heap a rationalism too long misapplied and misunderstood. Or perhaps we have already entered an age of superstition (mystic political and religious conversions, "secret" weapons, the fat, omniscient "eye"). Or perhaps all such theorizing is relatively unimportant, since the central facts of our time are pain and terror. This last is the opinion of the published majority of our poets.

All right, but terror is a positive force, not at all the same as wasteland sterility. What's on the loose now is not the national salesman but the universal confidence man. Among American writers, Melville had by far the greatest poetic understanding of moral terror that is beyond mores. The idea frightened Hawthorne. It's probably frightening us too, so that we deal with terror on its surface. The surface of terror is where we select our masks and choose our culpables; writing about it results in a parade of small, degrading fears—degrading because they show that we have not gone near the door of our real terror. If we did, the fear would be equally real, since good reason for it would be apparent. Such fear is natural and valid. Obviously fear has al-

ways been an integral part of man's deepest experience, as well as motive of much of his works and days. What is wanted is assimilation, not self-pity. What's the point of the poet's yelping that fright is loose in a nasty age when in fact for the first time since the discovery of the wheel all mankind is involved in a struggle for simple survival. Bleats of wounded sensitivity just don't matter enough now. They are insufficient unto the day.

So is much of contemporary American poetry, though my description of it here does not pretend to be a full portrait. Nor even an impartial one, since I have principally concerned myself with exploring what I believe to be certain basic inadequacies. But let me be most clear about this: my quarrel is with this poetry ("modern" poetry) on its own level. I am not waving a banner for the poetry of the pen clubs, nor for that matter the poetry of *New Yorker* magazine. My interest and what must seem peculiar allegiance are with the poets up front. My complaint is that the front isn't far enough up. And I think this has to do with laws of diminishing returns, or with some corollary truth which makes the heir rich and unlucky.

I know that there are other reasons for the failure, though I have no faith in such bogeymen as bankers, conveyor-belts, and bombs. They may mess up an age, but they don't make it prosaic. Imitative critics and "intellectuals" are more apt to do this, once they start talking the guts out of art and building up the shibboleths of the group,<sup>1</sup> a process which has become both easier and more effective because of our inescapable system of communications. To the detriment of both, there is less and less difference between a garret and a university: the same prefabricated opinions come seeping through the walls. It's obvious that vitality and individuality are needed in many places. But a poet *must* have them.

If poetry is to be widely read again, it must, as has often been said, move on toward artistic simplicity of diction. But it must

<sup>1</sup> See Harold Rosenberg's excellent article in *Commentary*, September, 1948: "The Herd of Independent Minds."

also move toward some point of saying to more people more things that they don't already know, of giving to more people feelings that they don't already have. Vitality and individuality are not simply assets of an artist: they are basic ingredients of his genuineness.

## POETRY RECEIVED

- ABNEY, LOUISE. *No Time for Doubt*. New York: Exposition Press, 1951. 64 pp. \$2.
- ALEXANDER, SIDNEY. *Tightrope in the Dark*. Prairie City, Ill.: The Decker Press, 1950. 102 pp. \$2.
- BARKER, ADDISON. *The Magpie's Nest*. Mill Valley, Calif.: The Wings Press, 1950. 56 pp. \$2.
- BEACH, JOSEPH WARREN. *Involuntary Witness*. New York: Macmillan, 1950. 97 pp. \$1.50.
- BENTON, ALICE. *Milestones*. Eureka Springs, Ark.: The New Dimensions Press, 1950. 38 pp. n.p.
- BLACK, JOHN. *Collected Poems, 1910-1950*. New York: The Fine Editions Press, 1950. 79 pp. \$3.
- BROUGHTON, JAMES. *Musical Chairs*. Drawings by Lee Mullican. San Francisco: The Centaur Press, 1950. 83 pp. \$3.50.
- BRUCE, IRENE. *Night Cry*. Reno: Poetry West, 1950. 61 pp. \$2.
- BRUNDAGE, BURR C. *The Juniper Palace*. New York: Bookman Associates, 1951. 96 pp. \$2.50.
- CHISHOLM, HUGH. *Atlantic City Cantata*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Young, 1951. 126 pp. \$3.
- CLARK, LAVINIA R. *Pine Needles*. New York: Exposition Press, 1951. 64 pp. \$2.
- CREWS, JUDSON. *Come Curse to the Moon*. Ranchos of Taos, N. M.: Motive Press, n.d. 46 pp. \$1.
- DE LA CRUZ, SOR JUANA INÉS. *The Pathless Grove*. Translated by Pauline Cook. Prairie City, Ill.: The Decker Press, 1950. 80 pp. \$1.50.
- EATON, CHARLES EDWARD. *The Shadow of the Swimmer*. New York: The Fine Editions Press, 1951. 88 pp. \$3.
- EBERHART, RICHARD. *Selected Poems*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1951. 86 pp. \$2.50.



- ELUARD, PAUL. *Selected Writings* (including the originals and translations by Lloyd Alexander). Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1951. 218 pp. \$3.50.
- EVANS, OLIVER. *Young Man With a Screwdriver*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1950. 56 pp. \$2.25.
- FEIN, HARRY H. *Light Through the Mist*. Boston: Bruce Humphries, Inc., 1950. 66 pp. \$2.50.
- FOX, ALBERTINE. *The Structure of a Scream*. Privately printed, 1951. 62 pp. \$1.
- HARPER, CAROL ELY. *Distichs for a Dancer*. The Swallow Pamphlets, No. 8. Denver: Alan Swallow, 1950. 14 pp. 50¢.
- HAY, SARA HENDERSON. *The Delicate Balance*. New York: Scribner's, 1951. 52 pp. \$2.50.
- HÉRIN, FERNAND. *Promenade With the Divinity*. Anvers: Imprimerie Artis, n.d. 23 pp. n.p.
- HOLMES, JOHN, EDITOR. *A Little Treasury of Love Poems*. New York: Scribner's, 1950. 523 pp. \$2.50; de luxe edition, \$5.
- KENYON, BERNICE. *Night Sky*. New York: Scribner's, 1951. 75 pp. \$2.50.
- KEY POETS. Edith Sitwell, *Poor Men's Music*; George Barker, *The True Confession of George Barker*; Randall Swingler, *The God in the Cave*; Jonathan Denwood, *Twinter's Wedding*; Stanley Snaith, *The Common Festival*; Dorian Cooke, *Fugue for Our Time*; Jack Lindsay, *Three Letters to Nikolai Tikhonov*; Maurice Carpenter, *Gentle Exercise*; Jack Beeching, *Aspects of Love*; Norman Cameron, *Forgive Me, Sire*. Denver: Alan Swallow, 1950. 30¢ each, \$2.50 the set.
- KRAMER, AARON. *Thru Every Window*. New York: The William-Frederick Press, 1950. 31 pp. 50¢.
- LEACH, HENRY GODDARD. *The Fire's Center*. New York: The Fine Editions Press, 1950. 55 pp. \$2.75.
- LEMBO, FRANK R. *Raindust*. Illustrated by Merry Kone Fitzpatrick. New York: Exposition Press, 1951. 92 pp. \$2.50.
- LEWIS, JANET. *Poems, 1924-1944*. Denver: Alan Sallow, 1950. 62 pp. \$2.50.
- MOORE, MERRILL. *Illegitimate Sonnets*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1951. 125 pp. \$2.75.
- MOORE, NICHOLAS. *Recollections of the Gala*. London: Editions Poetry London, Ltd., 1950. 79 pp. 7s6d.

- New Directions 12*. Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1950. 556 pp. \$5.
- NIMS, JOHN FREDERICK. *A Fountain in Kentucky*. New York: Wm. Sloane Associates, 1950. 72 pp. \$2.75.
- Poems From the Iowa Poetry Workshop*. Iowa City, Ia.: The Prairie Press, 1951. 33 pp. \$1.
- Poetry Awards, 1950*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1950. 89 pp. \$2.
- DU PONT, MARCELLA MILLER. *Sonnets and Lyrics*. New York: The Spiral Press, 1950. 56 pp. \$3.
- POWELL, CLARENCE ALVA. *Industrial Sonnets*. Drawings by Henry Gorski. Buffalo: Glass Hill, 1950. 20 pp. 60¢.
- The Rent That's Due to Love*. An anthology of Welsh poetry, including the originals and translations by Gwyn Williams. London: Editions Poetry London, 1950. 125 pp. 7s6d.
- REXROTH, KENNETH. *The Signature of All Things*. Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1950. 90 pp. \$2.50.
- ROSENBAUM, NATHAN. *A Man From Parnassus and Other Poems*. New York: Bookman Associates, 1951. 127 pp. \$2.50.
- SALINAS, PEDRO. *Sea of San Juan*. Translated by Eleanor L. Turnbull. Boston: Bruce Humphries, 1950. 89 pp. \$2.75.
- SAMPLEY, ARTHUR M. *Furrow With Blackbirds*. Dallas: The Kaleidograph Press, 1951. 80 pp. \$2.
- SCHEVILL, JAMES. *The American Fantasies*. Sausalito, Calif.: Bern Porter, 1951. 34 pp. \$2.
- SLOANE, MICHAEL. *First and Last Poems*. New York: The Fine Editions Press, 1951. 72 pp. \$2.50.
- SQUIRES, RADCLIFFE. *Where the Compass Spins*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1951. 52 pp. \$2.25.
- TAGORE, RABINDRANATH. *Sheaves*. Translated by Nagendranath Gupta. New York: Philosophical Library, 1951. 152 pp. \$3.50.
- THOMAS, ROSEMARY. *Immediate Sun*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1951. 64 pp. \$2.50.
- VIERECK, PETER. *Strike Through the Mask!* New York: Scribner's, 1950. 70 pp. \$2.50.
- WALKER, JOHN. *Arma Virumque Cano*. Pasadena: The Untide Press, 1950. 30 pp. n.p.

WEISS, T. *The Catch*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1951. 77 pp. \$2.25.

WILLIAMS, OSCAR, EDITOR. *A Little Treasury of British Poetry*. New York: Scribner's, 1951. £74 pp. \$5.

WILLIAMS, WILLIAM CARLOS. *The Collected Later Poems*. Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1950. 240 pp. \$3.

WILLIAMS, WILLIAM CARLOS. *Paterson* (Book Four). Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1951. 56 pp. \$3.

Katherine Simons

## ITEM: SHAKESPEARE

**A**MONG the current additions to the vast store of Shakespearean and Elizabethan commentary, three recent books follow already well-defined approaches to Shakespeare and the plays of his day. Alice Venezky's *Pageantry on the Shakespearean Stage*<sup>1</sup> is an examination, from the standpoint of the Shakespearean theatre, of the uses of pageantry; J. V. Cunningham's *Woe or Wonder*<sup>2</sup> views Shakespearean tragedy in terms of the idea of tragedy inherited from classical and medieval tradition and developed by the Elizabethans; Harold C. Goddard<sup>3</sup> takes his place with the subjective critics, since he is concerned not so much with Shakespeare the dramatist of his age as with Shakespeare the poet for all time and particularly for us of this troubled and violent twentieth century.

All three move in distinguished company. Men like Sir E. K. Chambers, Harley Granville-Barker, W. J. Lawrence, and John

<sup>1</sup> Twayne Publishers, 1951.

<sup>2</sup> *Woe or Wonder: the Emotional Effect of Shakespearean Tragedy*. The University of Denver Press, 1951.

<sup>3</sup> *The Meaning of Shakespeare*. The University of Chicago Press, 1951.