



Poems Containing History: Twentieth-Century American Poetry's Engagement with the Past

Gary Grieve-Carlson

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Ezra Pound's definition of an epic as "a poem containing history" raises questions: *how* can a poem "contain" history? And if it can, does it help us to think about history in ways that conventional historiography cannot? *Poems Containing History: Twentieth-Century American Poetry's Engagement with the Past*, by Gary Grieve-Carlson, argues that twentieth-century American poetry has "contained" and helped its readers to think about history in a variety of provocative and powerful ways. Tracing the discussion of the relationship between poetry and history from Aristotle's *Poetics* to Norman Mailer's *The Armies of the Night* and Hayden White's *Metahistory*, the book shows that even as history evolves into a professional, academic discipline in the late nineteenth century, and as its practitioners emphasize the scientific aspects of their work and minimize its literary aspects, twentieth-century American poets continue to take history as the subject of their major poems. Sometimes they endorse the views of mainstream historians, as Stephen Vincent Benét does in *John Brown's Body*, but more often they challenge them, as do Robert Penn Warren in *Brother to Dragons*, Ezra Pound in *The Cantos*, or Charles Olson in *The Maximus Poems*. In *Conquistador*, Archibald MacLeish illustrates Aristotle's claim that poetry tells more philosophical truths about the past than history does, while in *Paterson*, William Carlos Williams develops a Nietzschean suspicion of history's value. Three major American poets—T. S. Eliot in *Four Quartets*, Hart Crane in *The Bridge*, and Carolyn Forché in *The Angel of History*—present different challenges to professional historiography's assumption that the past is best understood in strictly material terms. *Poems Containing History* devotes chapters to each of these poets and offers a clear sense of the seriousness with which American poetry has engaged the past, as well as the great variety of those engagements.

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