

READ & RECOMMENDED

Jeffery Beam

THESE TWO RECENT anthologies of Classical Chinese poetry offer different but equal delights.

Poems of the Masters.

Red Pine, translator.

Copper Canyon Press, 2003.

496 pages, \$18 (paperback).

New Directions Anthology of Classical Chinese Poetry.

Eliot Weinberger.

New Directions, 2003.

256 pages, \$24.95 (hardcover).

Red Pine's translations from the T'ang and Sung Dynasties' most widely read and studied anthology has never before been translated in its entirety into English. Red Pine gives us his cloudlessly nimble translations alongside the original Chinese, along with commentaries on the poets' lives and work. For the background material alone, *Poems of the Masters* rests solidly among previous contributions to Chinese poetry in translation. With Red Pine's versions, however, these essential poems introduce us to a complete view while presenting poems of verity and impressive skill. *Poems of the Masters* is the twentieth century's first great collection of historical Chinese poetry, important for scholars and poets, lovers of poetry, and seekers after knowledge. I was saddened that last November I was in Sicily when Red Pine came to my hometown to read from this work.

For the past half century, and even longer, noted poets have translated selected poems from the *Poems of the Masters*. Weinberger's superb collection offers T'ang and Sung translations by four major New Direction authors, twentieth-century poets William Carlos Williams, Pound, Rexroth, and Snyder, and the important translator and scholar of Chinese poetry, David Hinton. In addition, it includes work from throughout the classical period—from early anonymous poetry through the Sung. Because these poets, and their comrades such as

Fellonosa, became some of the major conduits for the introduction of Chinese poetry into American poetry, the anthology also delivers a succinct, yet thoroughly engaging history of those influences, by including a number of essays on Chinese poets by the translators, a brilliant translation of one of the first critical pieces in Chinese written in the third century by Lu Chi, some never before published translations, some translations of the same poems by the different translators/poets, and biographical notes.

Chinese poetry distinguishes itself through a natural language of image without rhetoric—the purest of poetic dynamics: a radiant complex of natural elements and the human interior. These two volumes instruct and delight, resisting scholarly ponderousness for the full repast. As Lu Chi states: “Literature is the embodiment of our thoughts . . . Looking down, it bequeaths patterns to the future; gazing up, it contemplates the examples of the ancients . . . It is the equal of clouds and rain in yielding sweet moisture; it is like spirits and ghosts in effecting metamorphoses. It inscribes bronze and marble, to make virtue known; it breathes through flutes and strings, and is new always.”



The Art of War: The Denma Translation.

Sun Tzu.

Denma Translation Group, translator.

Shambhala, 2002.

292 pages, \$16.95 (hardcover).

The Art of War, a wisdom manual for military leaders in classical China, has also impressed itself on the western mind as a tool for liberated enlightenment and practical action. It serves as a handbook to maneuvering through conflict, and winning, without going to battle. Westerners have found it useful in business, social action, and personal development. This new collaborative transla-

tion retains the inscrutable style of the original together with numerous explanatory and helpful line-by-line commentaries written by the Group.

Self-knowledge is central to Sun Tzu's teachings. Without awareness of one's own skills, faults, talents, and a roadmap of the mind and its tendencies, no battle can be won. The editors compare the state one attains to "the zone" that athletes, artists, and performers know so well. And to the source which "lovers do not even name." Because aggression is common to contemporary life, then the zone can be a successful tool, and an uplifting endowment. It becomes a manual for dealing with exterior as well as interior conflict. A principle central to Sun Tzu, *taking whole* means preserving as much as oneself and one's enemy as possible—bringing the enemy to something larger than their original goal; but also transforming one's self and one's allies to a richer and deeper victory. Other principles include *Shih*, or the recognitive power inherent in a situation or condition that allows for an accomplishing leap—"the rush of water, to the point of tossing rocks about" or "like drawing the cross-bow," and the *Tao*—the very is-ness of something—the way things move or work—the effortless oneness with a thing's natural condition.

The translators stress the importance of their method. They have remained meticulously close to the spirit of the sound and mysterious openness of the original text—staying faithful to the poetic form and language of the Chinese.

Lastly, my previous explanation, and theirs, means nothing without an intense, private, and dedicated response to the text—a scholarly, spiritual, and soulful relationship to uncovering meanings hidden within. The translators' new commentaries intend to make the text more accessible to the contemporary mind. In addition, a website includes more commentaries, explications of translation practice, a study guide, and a public forum for shared discussion. I find this lovely pocket-sized book an important new guide to my world.



One Man's Moon: Poems by Bashō and Other Japanese Poets.

Cid Corman.

Gnomon Press, 2003.

111 pages, \$15 (paperback).

I cherish Gnomon's limited editions of three of Cid Corman's Japanese haiku versions collected herein—*One Man's Moon* (1984), *Born of a Dream* (1988), and *Little Enough* (1991), but am particularly delighted to now have

these three as well as *A Real Issa* (1999), *So Here You Are* (2001), selections from *Walking Into the Wind* (1990), and miscellaneous versions published by Bob Arnold's Longhouse brought together here as *One Man's Moon: Poems by Bashō and Other Japanese Poets*. Corman, a master of the small poem, whose work we publish in *Oyster Boy* as frequently as possible, renders precisely pithy versions that refrain from the usual sentimentalism one finds in many haiku translations. All the greats are here—Buson, Issa, Ryōkan, Saigyō, and of course, Bashō.

Corman has lived in Japan for 46 years and so understands oral Japanese perfectly, and according to scholar-translator J. P. Seaton has captured the original much more closely than any translator he knows. For the unlearned, Corman brings his usual uncomplicated, frank, exacting, almost clipped, voice to the wry, deeply moving, and sensual world of the Japanese poets. These versions strike right to the heart without extras, they move gently and yet piercingly into the core of their meaning, and delight by the verbal clarity Corman always obtains. I can think of none richer. It's as if each of these poets had reincarnated in Corman as one poet, one voice able to hit the tone and sense of each. In Corman's no less enlightening small introduction, he observes, "It is rare enough—in any form—that anyone today finds poetry a way of 'staying alive,' yet that is what it is, if it has any validity at all. // And so it is they also still live in us. You can feel—if you let each syllable grow into—every moment of life comes to be shared—at depth. // This is what it is—not about—but is." As I write this Corman is fighting for his life in a Japanese hospital. May his words, and our admiration of them, find him well.



Braided Creek: A Conversation in Poetry.

Jim Harrison & Ted Kooser.

Copper Canyon Press, 2003.

90 pages, \$15 (paperback).

Many people don't know that Jim Harrison writes poetry, and perhaps many don't know of one of the Midwest's finest poets, Ted Kooser. Longtime friends, they often share poems within letters, but during a period in which Kooser was battling cancer they began a series of dispatches entirely in poetry. *Braided Creek* reads like those wonderfully engaging response poems you sometimes find in Asian poetry between Zen or haiku masters. This book goes a step further as the anonymous poems avoid the cult of personality, while asserting poetry and friendship's one voice.

Harrison, the great gourmand of the wild (being a

woodsman, hunter, and gourmet game chef), and Kooser, the settled farm-rancher, know the land and its inhabitants as well as they know their internal maps. And these little poems, witty but never cute, pungent yet never insulting, remind one in the roundabout, quizzical way that Zen poems do, of the realities of this world, somehow leaping into the next:

Straining on the toilet
we learn how
the lightning bug feels.

followed by:

For sixty-three years I've ground myself
within the karmic mortar. Yesterday I washed
it out and put it high on the pantry shelf.

One hears Bashō, Buson, and Issa here, but even more present is the irreverent lust for life and tickled curiosity of Ikkyū:

My wife's lovely dog, Mary, kills
butterflies. They're easier than birds.
I wonder if Buddha had dog nature.

or

See how the rich and famous
sniff the tips of their fingers.
What have they been touching?

Everything's here from politics to crows, from Paris to straw hats with green brims, from dead raccoons to love. Every modest poem speaks loudly from a deep reservoir. Immensely wise, *Braided Creek* rings clear as a new bell, but with the dignity of an old one. It's hard to imagine such rightful simplicity from the famous. But then Harrison and Kooser (especially Harrison) have always lived the contradictory life of the Zen poet—often invited to court, but a lot happier roaming the hills.

The moon put her hand
over my mouth and told me
to shut up and watch.

or

Bucket in the rain,
rejoice!



The Lover of God.

Rabindranath Tagore.

Copper Canyon Press, 2003.

134 pages, \$15 (paperback).

Tagore, the first Asian to win the Nobel Prize, is considered modern India's greatest poet. Tony K. Stewart and Chase Twichell have translated this lovely book into English for the first time. Tagore, who wrote these poems at the precocious age of 14, passed them off for some years as the writings of a "newly discovered" seventeenth-century Bengali poet. During the years in which Tagore refused to acknowledge authorship, he even wrote a biography of Bhānu (included as an appendix to this volume). After the "hoax" was detected he continued to revise the poems over the next sixty-five years.

The Lover of God recounts the classic story of Lord Krishna's adolescent lover, cowherd maiden Rādhā, and her confidante Bhānu. Bhānu who represents the poet, rebukes Krishna, and attempts to calm Rādhā's anguish while reflecting on the pains and delight of love's suffering, Krishna's fickleness, and the meaning of mortality and divinity. Here's Bhānu: "May I dispense with modesty, friends? / Look at their beautiful bodies. In daylight or darkness, moving together / or at rest, they seem washed by some / honey-colored light. It's their own light, / rippling and shuddering over them. / ... quenching moon—this is my pain, too." And Rādhā: "Don't talk about love to me . . . / Don't play rough games with my heart. / . . . Your words spill / as from a boat full of holes, and my soul / spills with them, beyond saying."

It's impressive enough that Tagore could emulate so convincingly the classic style of Hindu religious love-poetry from centuries before, but it's even more delightful that his women are fully realized and self-determined before Divine presence.



A Mind of Winter: Poems for a Snowy Season.

Robert Atwan, editor.

Beacon Press, 2002.

84 pages, \$15 (hardcover).

This little anthology of American winter poems holds various delights. It's a pleasant size to hold beside the fire. The vintage Thomas Nason engravings evoke in black and white the stark beauty of wood and hearth. The poems are few but excellent and each tells winter from a different perspective and different style. In Sylvia Plath's darkly optimistic poem, "Wintering," the poet becomes the Queen Bee storing her honey and yet remains the

poet terrified of the dark cellar and the power of the hive. Instead of the usual Robert Frost “Stopping by Woods” we get three other lesser known, but no less lovely poems. The volume opens with one of my favorite snow poems, Wallace Stevens’s “The Snow Man,” reminding us to “have a mind of winter” in order to “regard the frost and the boughs / Of the pine-trees crusted with snow.” Richard Wilbur introduces us to a snowman that weeps a single tear for a fearful child at a window who is nevertheless protected by light, love, and warmth. The poems range from formal classics by Whittier, Dickinson, Amy Lowell, and Longfellow to contemporary poets Mary Oliver and Charles Simic. The book itself is, as Emerson declares, a “frolic architecture of the snow.”



The Spiritual Emerson: Essential Writings.

Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Beacon Press, 2003.

266 pages, \$25 (hardcover).

2003 marked the two-hundredth anniversary of Emerson’s birth, and as a result there has been a spate of books published to commemorate the event. *The Spiritual Emerson* is one of the best. It brings together all of Emerson’s essays and lectures that best articulate Emerson’s spiritual relevance, including such well-known works as *Nature*, *Self-Reliance*, and *The Over-Soul*. No less important are later works such as *The Fugitive Slave Law* and *Essential Principles of Religion*. Editor David M. Robinson’s fine introduction to the development of Emerson’s spiritual belief and how later he became more convinced of the importance of moral action as integral to spiritual growth provides useful insight into how Emerson speaks to us today.

If only our Republican leaders would learn from such humble and open ethics! Having received the gift of Emerson at the right time in our history, we seem to have mostly tossed him aside in the last hundred years. Just look at our new profile in the world—an empire-seeking greed-filled garden for the rich (with, at last, the “1984” “Brave New World” lingo to keep the spin on).

Emerson saw religious forms and institutions as only tentative truths contrasted to the perennial value of moral ethics. He rebelled against the positive authority of the saints and Jesus, while celebrating their holiness. He championed simple free minds unspoiled by idolatry. He demanded social and political structures that humanely followed rightness of action while preserving the separation of church and state. His language, always beautiful, always experimentally charged, also always makes its

point without effort: “That which I hate and fear is really in myself, and no knife is long enough to reach its heart” (“Character”).

It’s not too late to allow this founding father of Transcendentalism to arouse our natures to the true meaning of democracy and spiritual love, and to the core of his belief—that Nature and humanity belong to a single divine energy. The science of ecology, born of this belief, needs to infuse society’s political and social structures too.

Emerson’s works are philosophic textbooks for such a needed change: “In the worst of times, men of organic virtue are born,—men and women of native integrity, and indifferently in high and low conditions. There will always be a class of imaginative youths, whom poetry, whom the love of beauty, lead to the adoration of the moral sentiment, and these will provide it with new historic forms and songs” (“Character”). Are you out there?



Black Mountain College: Experiment in Art.

Vincent Katz.

MIT Press, 2003.

352 pages, \$75 (hardcover).

One of the supreme experiments in American education, Black Mountain College (1933-1956), has become legendary for the creative minds in science and literature that taught and studied there; but there has never been, until now, a major exhibition celebrating the artistic contributions of the school. Katz’s book documents that exhibition as well as significantly furthers the assessment of what took place at BMC. This book, published in conjunction with an exhibition at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia in Madrid, includes essays on the arts at Black Mountain and contains 470 color and black and white illustrations.

The historic importation of Josef and Anni Albers and other Bauhaus figures who came to Black Mountain to escape Nazi Germany, absolutely transformed American art, and for a time American education. Towards the end of the school’s history, Charles Olson replaced Albers as the creative force at BMC resulting in one of the most influential literary currents in twentieth-century literature. Mr. Katz’s essay recounts the school’s philosophical origins and general history; discusses the Bauhaus principles imported by Josef Albers and others that drove the development of BMC arts, particularly visual, at the school; and the artistic collaborations that took place later in the school’s history. Martin Brody gives the most complete history yet of the school’s very interesting and

influential musical history. Kevin Power's discerning essay discusses Robert Creeley and the contributions of the short-lived but momentous *Black Mountain Review*; while Creeley, himself, writes about the important role of poet Charles Olson in the literary events at the school. Mary Emma Harris's earlier work, *The Arts at Black Mountain*, still very important in its own right, was not as sumptuously illustrated. Combined they make lasting assessments of the burst of originality and creativity that Black Mountain nourished.

BMC began under the direction of educator John Rice, and others, who had become disenchanted with the traditional education methods they had experienced at Rollins College (Rice was fired for his unconventional methods). It's really too bad that the philosophy they brought to Black Mountain didn't last. Two central premises were the importance of learning by doing immersed with the Imagination, and the communal exchange between faculty and students. The environment created advanced the work of its teachers including the Albers, Olson, Willem de Kooning, Buckminster Fuller, Stefan Wolpe, M. C. Richards, Jacob Lawrence, Hilda Morley, Franz Kline, Joseph Fiore, Lou Harrison, Aaron Siskind, Harry Callahan, Walter Gropius, Paul Goodman, and Merce Cunningham. Its illustrious students include writers and artists such as Ruth Asawa, Kenneth Noland, Robert Rauschenberg, Cy Twombly, Jonathan Williams, Francine du Plessix Gray, Michael Rumaker, Fielding Dawson, Ed Dorn, and Ray Johnson.

The insights offered here are superior. Beautifully edited and gorgeously published the book lives up to Josef Albers's stated intent when he arrived at the school in 1933: "to make open the eyes."



The Selected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers.
Stanford University Press, 2001.
758 pages, \$24.95 (paperback).

Robinson Jeffers has long been considered, a bit begrudgingly, as one of America's greatest twentieth-century poets, and thus somewhat ignored. Jeffers's work, antithetical in most ways to high modernism's imagistic and confessional streams, puts off many readers because of its pessimistic view of social and political life, and its intricate rendering of the natural world. The poems celebrate nature in its complete range—but most of all in its subtle yet beautiful violence. Contrasted with man's greed and abuse of nature, nature's force becomes vividly tragic in Jeffers's work, and threateningly superior. Jeffers depictions of the California shoreline are masterpieces

of beauty and admiring realism. His long lyrical narratives, compellingly rich in detail, were some of the first works embraced by the environmental movement, and forcefully point out the human danger to the earth. Ultimately Jeffers poems are regenerative, inspired, dynamic, and transcendent, creating an evocative and richly rewarding, even visionary, immersion in the natural world that for all its verbosity makes the world tangible and restorative. As editor Tim Hunt observes, Jeffers's work demands more than just simple contemplation of nature, but rather "identifying with it and recognizing one's final and inevitable participation in it."

Although not definitive (Jeffers's complete works, also recently republished, consist of five very solid volumes), this edition hopes to offer a text accessible to the general reader and academic alike. The book is massive—many of Jeffers's works are long narratives, and the editor explains the difficulty in making a representative selection from such a large body of work:

"Before the first man / Here were the stones, the ocean, the cypresses, / And the pallid region in the stone-rough dome of fog where the moon / Falls on the west. Here is reality. / The other is a spectral episode; after the inquisitive animal's / Amusements are quiet: the dark glory."



Juniper Fuse: Upper Paleolithic Imagination & the Construction of the Underworld.

Clayton Eshleman.
Wesleyan University Press, 2003.
330 pages, \$29.95 (paperback).

Noted poet Clayton Eshleman has long been fascinated by the Upper Paleolithic cave drawings and what they mean. In *Juniper Fuse: Upper Paleolithic Imagination & the Construction of the Underworld*, Eshleman uses poetry and prose to explicate his new and startling idea—that rather than simple hunting magic or mystical mother-earth relationship, the paintings were physical manifestations of early humanity's struggle to differentiate itself as hominid from the animal world. Our early complex responses to the animal/human dichotomy led to the impulse to make animal art, and the caves presented a sense of safe haven in the womb of undifferentiated self as well as physical ground in which to work. The cave's rock structures aided in communicating with the spirit and mind. Technological weapon advancement was the catalyst for the separation anxiety, and Shamanism provided a reactive means to preserving some sense of the original peaceful oneness. That cave art represents a dream world as active and present as the everyday world—and is thus the fruitful

ground of myth and mythology—grants the importance of sympathetic magic in the making of the pictures. Thus sexual imagery, the primary reason for these paintings created over thousands of years, was more than “merely a reflection or diminution of an empirical sense world”; it became the foundry for humanity’s ability to dream and imagine.

Focusing on the origins and development of Southwestern France’s cave wall imagery during the last Ice Age (40-10,000 years ago), Eshleman considers other theories and proposes his new idea. It’s a poetic and intuitive response ripe with careful research. I found the poetry more or less boring—personal myth-making that did little to move his theories forward. I could appreciate them as a creative groundwork towards consolidating his theories (a virtual reenactment of the primitive’s retreat to the underworld), but I didn’t find them moving as poems. I can see how others might. In any event Eshleman’s theory is fascinating and affectionately described. *Juniper Fuse* is an essential read for anyone interested in prehistory, cave art, the development of consciousness, myth, and religion. Unusual in its approach, remarkably creative in its intellectual breadth, and convincing in its arguments, it adds significantly to our understanding of early humanity.



Another South: Experimental Writing in the South.

Bill Lavender, editor.

Alabama University Press, 2002.

304 pages, \$26.95 (paperback).

When most people think of Southern poetry they think at worst of poems creaky with rocking chairs under steamy magnolias, and at best good ‘ole boy formalities or tough-minded narratives recounting dysfunctional family life. This anthology proves that an undercurrent exists, introducing the work of thirty-four pioneering, experimental, and radical poets. This is a strong beginning. The authors tender credos and short, creative, bios that help provide some ground in which to approach their work. Editor Bill Lavender provides this definition of “experimental”: “poetry that pushes at a boundary, that attempts to cover new ground, that transgresses stylistically, semantically, socially, or politically.” He quotes the contemporary mainstream poet Andrew Hudgins to obtain a definition of what these poems aren’t: “I raced through the characteristics I’d memorized ten years before in a Southern lit class: a sense of the living presence of the past; love of landscape and the natural world; cruel humor; and a preoccupation with religion, family, violence,

race, and the grotesque. I was bemused to discover that I and my writing possessed every item on my memorized list. Not most of them. All of them. I was astonished and perplexed.”

Many of these poets work in what I would call L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E poetry, or at least in a Post-Modernist mode that seems deliberately obfuscant. These are styles with which, at their most extreme, I don’t feel much companionship. The poets I find interesting in *Another South* remain accessible enough that I can enjoy spending a little time with them. Most of the work seems to me to reverse William Carlos Williams’s dictum “No idea but in things” for “No things but in ideas” making for a poetry deeply intellectual without expressing more than the idea of emotion.

I understand the attempt to get at the hidden meanings in language and self for which the L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E poets and others strive. I just don’t think it works and I don’t think most of the time it beneficially gets at the dissonance or fracture of contemporary experience other than to point it out. I know this is a completely subjective on my part, yet I believe poetry should be both accessible and hermetic, and I find these styles ultimately off-putting and self-referential. And, too wordy. In my opinion many of these poems would be improved greatly by a tremendous amount of excision. A good Zen poem accomplishes so much more than any of these do. Granted, mainstream poetry is rife with failures, even worse self-reference, in addition to being plump with trite confession, lazy, and gratuitously over-wrought (or its opposite—flat and boring) subject, language, and image. I dislike it even more!

I do know that there are many who will find much wonder here. I’m not entirely antagonistic to these poems. I admired parts or all of the work by poets Ralph Adamo, Jake Berry, Dave Brinks, Skip Fox, Honoree Fanonne Jeffers, Thomas Meyer, Alex Rawls, Kalamu ya Salaam, Lorenzo Thomas, and Stephanie Williams. I found it balanced, interesting, and generally “tight.” I did find Ms. Jeffers’s work good, but seemingly out of place—more mainstream.

I do hope *Another South* will open the doors to more innovative, yet lucid poetry. I try to place as much of it in *Oyster Boy Review* as I can.



Good Poems.

Garrison Keillor.

Viking Press, 2002.

476 pages, \$25.95 (hardcover).

I have mixed feelings about this anthology, but I suppose no more mixed than any anthology of poems might bring. Sourced from Garrison Keillor's radio program, "The Writer's Almanac," it offers a varied selection of inspirational poems for general consumption, heard "while . . . frying eggs . . . and reading the paper." Nothing wrong with that. My only quibble (other than, pardon the plug here, that the audio version of this book beat out my own spoken word CD collection—along with Yeats, Nikki Giovanni, and *The Spoon River Anthology*—for the 2003 Audie Award in Poetry)—some of the poems are so simply accessible they taste sweet. But there are stunningly good poems too, including many by poets unknown or relatively so. That in itself makes it work combing through the dreck.

Keillor, rightly says, at least in the case of radio-heard poems, that "What makes a poem memorable is its narrative line. A story is easier to remember than a puzzle." Outside of radio, I don't agree that that's the only quality necessary. I know, remember, and love many poems that have no narrative. But then I'm not the general public that fears poetry's mystery, searching out poems that comfort rather than confront their intelligence. Nevertheless, Keillor's "conspiracy of friendliness," as he calls it, might indeed contribute to the slow retreat from America's uneasiness and that's to be applauded. What ear-opening fun to find Stevie Smith next to Langston Hughes, Wallace Stevens elbowing Oscar Wilde, Charles Bukowski holding court with the Blues composer Jimmie Cox, and Thomas A. Clark, David Budbill and Bob Arnold included therein.

*What Poetry is All About.*

Greg Kuzma.

Blue Scarab Press, 2003.

245 pages, \$15 (paperback).

This eccentric, comic, and instructive collection exposing the poetry "business" is unlike anything else you will have ever read. I suppose you might call this "creative non-fiction" for the pieces can't reasonably be called essays, as they aren't direct narrative or arguments but rather the author's oblique, oftentimes surreal, tumble of words and images. Kuzma kamikazes around each subject categorizing, listing, assessing, berating, admiring,

bemoaning, and wondering. Amazingly it works, and the reader is left with a deeply perceptive assessment of the pitfalls of writing today. Kuzma scrutinizes his own reasons for writing from the ridiculous to the sublime. He inventories the whole range of emotions one experiences upon creating a poem, or not creating a poem, publishing or not publishing, editing or not editing, receiving awards and accolades or not receiving them. He achieves a droll brutality while divulging every writer's contradictions.

However, this book is not about what poetry is all about, at least not most of the time. It's about our culture's love affair with success and our confusion of poetry with the writing life. Kuzma brilliantly tells it all. The irony is so heavy the book would break your toes if you dropped it. But, again, it works, and one is left dismayed, warned, and humbled by its effect. There's a lot of common sense about careerism and a lot of tenderness towards real poetry displayed. Kuzma's original approach occasionally overwhelms with its flood of particulars, its biting satire, but to see pretense and mediocrity routed with such charm, compassion, and hilarity is great fun.

If you are prone to take offense this book is not for you, for I guarantee you will find yourself soundly hand-slapped at least once in its pages. If your impulse to write is less than pure (even if you don't know it), then prepare to walk the gauntlet. However, if you are ready to be analyzed and made honest this is the book to do it. Your relationship to writing poetry (and your ego) will never be the same. Robert Peter's *Hunting the Snark* is the only work that has ever come close to this. Is it possible if enough poets and readers read this that poetry might regain its stature in the world? Greg Kuzma has done us a service with wanton authority. Talking about this book is like talking about the wind. Go stand in a hurricane, then you'll know what the wind knows.

*Correspondence of William Carlos Williams and Louis Zukofsky.*

Barry Ahearn, editor.

Wesleyan University Press, 2003.

600 pages, \$65 (hardcover).

Letters of Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov.

Robert Bertholf, Albert Gelpi, editors.

Stanford University Press, 2003.

857 pages, \$39.95 (paperback).

I can never get enough of reading letters and these two recent compilations generously add to the understand-

ing and appreciation of four great literary minds of the twentieth century.

In many ways Zukofsky and Williams couldn't have been more different—one writing plainly in order to find the music in the everyday, the other taking the music of the everyday and making a baroque simplicity. In their long correspondence, Zukofsky's almost scientific discernment and Williams's impressionistic intelligence combine thoughtfully and revealingly, while expressing the wit and friendly joy they shared. This correspondence, largely unpublished until now, shows the two masters not only criticizing each other's work, offering advice on the problems and victories of publishing, but describing their personal lives in rich detail. From Williams to Zukofsky: "Eyes have always stood in the poet's equipment. If you are mostly ear—a newer rhythm must come in more strongly than has been the case so far. / Yet I am willing to listen." And from Zukofsky: "Of course, it's not the ideas a man holds, but the depth of strength of the emotions, which retains them."

Visionary poets Duncan and Levertov also shared a long friendship as attested to by nearly 500 letters from 1953 to 1985. This collection represents the most important and complete interchange between two poets in the latter half of the century, and offer essential insight into the aesthetics of Black Mountain, open-field, Projectivist, and Objectivist poetry—but also elucidates the blend of mystical and personal which makes their work so entrancing.

Both poets, fascinated by the sources of poetry and the power and revelatory capacity of the imagination, focus frequently on their attempts to define for the other, and for themselves, the central issues of poetic thought and practice that they shared. Ultimately, however, their commonalities exposed basic differences that led to a serious rupture in their friendship. The schism was catalyzed by their poetic responses to the Vietnam War and deeply embedded in their differing mysticisms—hers a personal exploration into the natural world rooted in Christianity, his a highly complex hermeticism based on the occult. Duncan's hermeticism required a silent retreat into his poetic world, whereas Levertov's religious convictions moved her to action. Years passed and the wound between them continued to fester. These letters painfully, almost annoyingly, reveal the conflict that ended their friendship and decades of poetic mentoring. The bickering becomes almost unbearable at times, and one wonders how two people who loved each other so much could let such disagreements injure so deeply. But then, life is like that, isn't it?

In the end absorbing in their forthrightness, sure in their monumental intent to define and rescue poetry

from its deadening materialism, I found this book one of the most exciting interchange of ideas in letters that I have ever read. Albert Gelpi's introduction thoroughly extends appreciation for Levertov and Duncan's relationship, and provides illuminating insight into the causes of the rift between them. Such a massive collection demands good appendices and the editors successfully provide contextual notes, a glossary, a chronology, and biographical information about the people mentioned in the letters.

