



American Experimental Poetry and Democratic Thought

Alan Marshall

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Alan Marshall examines the nature of democratic thought and expression in American experimental poetry, from Walt Whitman in the mid-nineteenth century to George Oppen and Frank O'Hara in the mid-late twentieth. The book's origins lie in Alexis de Tocqueville's ambivalent discussion of 'Some Sources of Poetic Inspiration in Democracies' in the second volume of his *Democracy in America*. It begins with a chapter on Tocqueville and Whitman, followed by a re-evaluation of the flawed republican humanism of Ezra Pound in the light of the thought of Hannah Arendt. The other main poets considered are Robert Creeley, Emily Dickinson, Mina Loy, Lorine Niedecker, Muriel Rukeyser, Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams.

American Poetry and Democratic Thought argues against the narrowly ideological interpretation of politics that dominates contemporary literary studies, an attitude that can be traced back to the legacies of Marx and Freud, and conceives of ideology in deterministic terms as unconscious political alignment. To that extent it echoes Tocqueville's concern, in his great work, to underline the differences between his own methods and perspectives and the historical determinism of his contemporaries. The book draws upon a wide range of thinkers, including Madison, Tocqueville, Kant, Marx, Freud, Heidegger, Adorno, Riesman, Arendt, Benhabib, and Cavell, as it seeks to expand and develop Tocqueville's circumspect humanist critical trajectory. The chapters are conceived as a series of innovative dialogical constellations, to which the close reading of poetry is central. The aim throughout is to measure the thought of the poets or their poems against the thoughts of those who are more often called thinkers.

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