

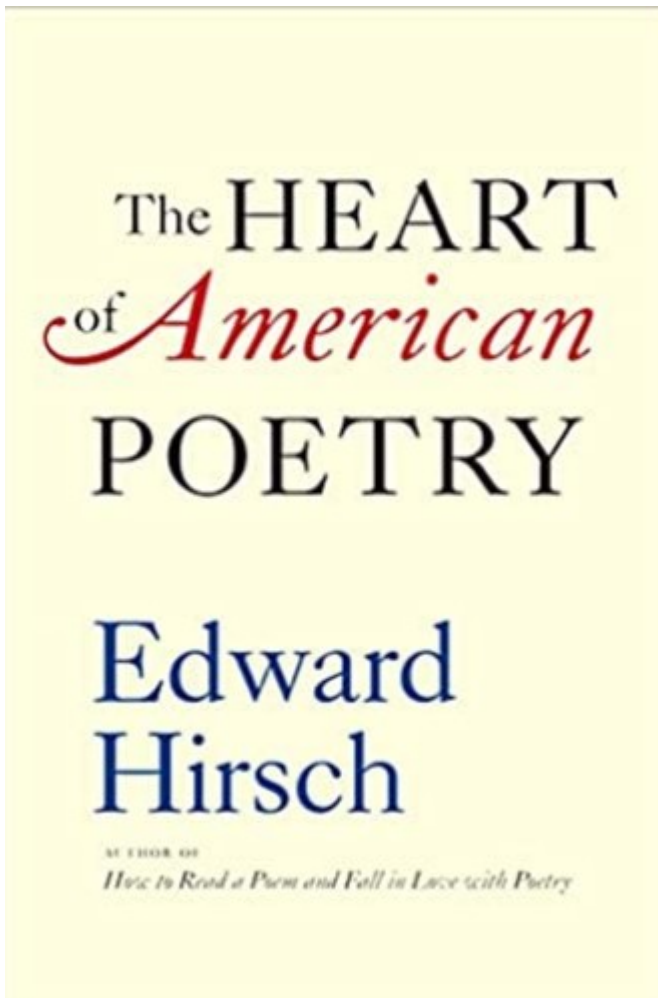
The voices of American poets

Edward Hirsch's labor of love celebrates centuries of American verse, from Anne Bradstreet to Joy Harjo.

by [Jeffrey Johnson](#) in the [March 2023](#) issue

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In Review



The Heart of American Poetry

By Edward Hirsch

Library of America

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Opening with the proto-feminist Puritan poems of Anne Bradstreet (1612–1672) and closing with the reorienting poems of Joy Harjo of the Muskogee Nation (1951–), Chicago-born poet and literary critic Edward Hirsch serves us with new readings of 40 American poets. Drawing on his life of teaching and writing, Hirsch places the work of the poets in chronological order. A representative poem precedes informal and authoritative comments on each chosen poet.

Committed to his discipline over a lifetime, unassuming and patient as a teacher, Hirsch guides readers through a selection of American poets, making a personal case for the vitality and lasting value of poetry by weaving his life story through the essays. Written in the isolation of the pandemic, without the benefit of his poetry library, this labor of love from one of America's greatest champions of poetry stands out from critically distant collections as a personal and heartfelt retrospective.

In the first months of his first year of teaching at a college in Detroit, Hirsch drove north to Saginaw to visit the grave of Theodore Roethke (1908–1963). That fall pilgrimage grounded Hirsch on the soil that inspired one of his literary forbears and provided a moment of reflection on the requirements of his vocation.

Grieving at the death of a close friend, Hirsch woke from a restless sleep to a voice in his head reciting a line from "The Wild Iris," a poem by Louise Glück (1943–): "At the end of my suffering / there was a door." He imagined that his absent friend was using the words of the poem to reach out to him from beyond the grave.

The book spans centuries and reveals the breadth of American experience. Each discussion of a poet's life and work ends with an appreciation, such as these lines on Denise Levertov (1923–1997): she "was a poet of thoughtful feeling, who worked her way toward a poetics of immediacy and incarnation. . . . She was a passionate Jewish-Christian who brought a dancing joy and fervor to an openly sacramental postmodern American poetry." Or this sentence, in praise of Lucille Clifton (1936–2010): "For all the rage and despair in her work, she ultimately viewed poetry as a way of reaching out to others, of not being alone in the world."

Hirsch suggests that the poets' individual approaches to their American poems could be graphed on a Cartesian coordinate system, with introspections on the nature of

the self, the soul, and God on the vertical axis and concerns about democracy and society on the horizontal axis. Wallace Stevens (1879–1955) worked along the vertical axis. His well-known poem “Sunday Morning” relocated American religion away from the church and into nature. “Harlem,” by Langston Hughes (1901–1967), is an example of a poem on the horizontal axis, a cry for amendment of the injustices of American society.

Puritan writers, who came to their new land bearing an English literary heritage, turned out a poetics that Hirsch calls “a newfangled combination of theology and farming, a struggle not to get lost in the wilderness, hymns in small churches and meetinghouses.” Two hundred years later, Emily Dickinson (1830–1886) worked the Protestant hymn tradition into memorable personal contemplations. Walt Whitman (1819–1892) sang with a free and unconstrained voice like that of the Hebrew prophets to a wild young country of immigrants, already divided and bruised as a nation.

As the American nation developed governmental and economic systems, social structures, and cultural features, many voices were left out of the decision-making processes and the successes that followed. Poets were there to speak up—and sing—for those who had been silenced and forgotten.

Sterling Brown (1901–1989) turned folk music to poems that lifted southern Black experience into view of literary types. James Wright (1927–1980) was the voice of the workers in his Ohio home. “The nameless poor, the common lot, had been washed out of Anglo-American modernism,” writes Hirsch, but Wright “brought them back with dignity and determination.”

Garrett Hongo (1951–), a fourth-generation Japanese American with family roots in Hawaii, found a vehicle for his poetic voice in the itinerary poem, a composition of pilgrimage and spiritual observation which Hirsch describes as very American. “Like our culture, the poem is set in the present tense. At the beginning, we are slightly separated from the landscape, which we are speeding through, and its beauty works a counterpoint to the speaker’s unspoken longing and grief, which he holds at bay.”

In the late 1940s, Muriel Rukeyser (1913–1980) called poetry “the outcast art.” Hirsch agrees. In example after dissimilar example, collected from a lifetime of reading and writing, he presents a case that America’s poets are an underused cultural resource. Their voices sing America in all its wideness, diversity, violence, and troubled hopefulness. This humane view, heard throughout the book in Hirsch’s

ardent tone, corrects the academically oriented opinion that important poets write only for other poets.