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An Anthropologist at Work: Ruth Benedict's Poetry

Philipp Schweighauser

Ruth Benedict, an influential twentieth-century anthropologist best known for her *Patterns of Culture* (1934), has written a considerable range of poems, a good number of which have been published in distinguished poetry journals such as Monroe's *Poetry*. Considering her double interest in poetry and anthropology and her use of modernist poetic techniques, this writer's works are privileged sites for an interrogation of the complex relations between cultural alterity (ethnic otherness) and poetic alterity (poeticity, literariness). Benedict emerges as a modernist poet of a different sort. Her rhymes and religious subject matter testify to her rootedness in nineteenth-century aesthetics, but her complex interweaving of cultural and poetic forms of alterity place her at the heart of a modernist enterprise, whose frantic search for new forms of artistic expression has from its beginnings been bound up with a sustained interest in the language and practices of cultural others.

It is a well-known story: "in or about December, 1910, human character changed" (Woolf 320). Virginia Woolf's assertion of a radical break between nineteenth- and early twentieth-century aesthetics is echoed both by proponents of modernism and by those who mourn the displacement of an earlier literary tradition that included, in poetry, the work of the so-called Fireside poets as well as the once immensely popular verse of women writers such as Lydia Huntley Sigourney, Ella Wheeler Wilcox or Celia Thaxter, now largely denigrated as sentimental poetesses.[1] Yet when we take a closer look at some of the canonical

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[1] The publication in 1982 of Cheryl Walker's *The Nightingale's Burden: Women Poets and American Culture Before 1900* marks the beginning of a renewed interest in nineteenth-century poetry, particularly in women's poetry of the period. Other important anthologies covering a similar terrain include John Hollander's *American Poetry: The Nineteenth Century*, Paula Bernat Bennett's *Nineteenth Century American Women Poets: An Anthology* and

critical pronouncements asserting that both of these groups claimed a break and, by claiming it, constructed it, we find that their affirmation of a rupture in literary and cultural history is more qualified than we tend to remember it. George Santayana's indictment of what he has termed the "genteel tradition," for example, does not consign that tradition to the past, but emphasizes that it survives into the twentieth century to co-exist with a younger, more aggressive and energetic vision of America. Speaking before the Philosophical Union of the University of California in 1911, Santayana in fact held that "[i]n all the higher things of the mind – in religion, in literature, in the moral emotions – it is the hereditary spirit that still prevails" ("The Genteel Tradition" 188). And when we read in his 1930 essay "A Brief History of My Opinions" that "every impulse or indulgence, including the aesthetic, is evil in its effect, when it renders harmony impossible in the general tenor of life, or produces in the soul division and ruin," we hear a distinctly nineteenth-century voice (20).

Amy Lowell's narrative of rupture in her essay "Two Generations in American Poetry" (1923) is more pertinent to my own concerns. While Lowell does disparage Wilcox, Thaxter and other nineteenth-century women poets as "caged warblers" whose "chaste and saccharine music wander[ed] through the ambient air of current periodicals," the two generations Lowell's title refers to are not divided by the turn of the previous century (111-2). Lowell's main concern is, in fact, with two generations of twentieth-century poets. Lowell distinguishes between the early, iconoclastic and experimental modernism of H.D., Pound or Sandburg and a second generation of modernist poets emerging in the 1920s. That younger generation of American modernists, Lowell submits, can itself be divided into two groups: the "Secessionists" and the "Lyrists" (121). About the secessionists, Lowell writes that "to them art is akin to mathematics," and she wonders "whether a movement which

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Janet Gray's *She Wields a Pen: American Women Poets of the Nineteenth Century*. The resurgence of interest in nineteenth-century verse is also reflected in recent monographs such as Elizabeth Petrino's *Emily Dickinson and her Contemporaries*, Bennett's *Poets in the Public Sphere: The Emancipatory Project of American Women's Poetry, 1800-1900*, Betsy Erkkila's *The Wicked Sisters: Women Poets, Literary History, and Discord*, Eliza Richards's *Gender and the Poetics of Reception in Poe's Circle*, Mary Loeffelholz's *From School to Salon: Reading Nineteenth-Century American Women's Poetry* and Angela Sorby's forthcoming *Schoolroom Poets: Childhood and the Place of American Poetry, 1865-1917*. See also my bibliographical essay in the forthcoming MLA volume *Options for Teaching Nineteenth-Century American Poetry*, edited by Bennett and Karen Kilcup.

concerns itself more with statements about poetry than with the making of poetry itself is ever going to produce works of art of a quality to justify the space taken up by the pronunciamentos" (121).[2] The lyrists, a term Lowell herself coins, are an entirely different group. Less experimental than either the secessionists of the 1920s or the modernists of the first decade of the twentieth century, the lyrists wrote highly personal poetry that combines emotion with intellect to produce work of a more conventional poetic diction. In Lowell's estimation, "the lyrists are unquestionably doing the better work" than the secessionists (119-20). Lowell names Edna St. Vincent Millay and Elinor Wylie as the chief representatives of the group, which she identifies as "a feminine movement" (119-121).

In organizing his selection of poems for his prestigious anthology *Modern American Poetry*, Louis Untermeyer in the 1920s and early 1930s adopted Lowell's term, including Millay, Louise Bogan and Léonie Adams among the lyrists. Another member of that group is Anne Singleton, who contributed two poems to the fourth edition of Untermeyer's anthology: "But the Son of Man . . ." and "Unshadowed Pool." Anne Singleton is the pseudonym under which Ruth Benedict published her poems.[3] Benedict was one of the preeminent cultural anthropologists of the twentieth century. A student of Franz Boas, she established the "culture and personality" school of anthropology together with Edward Sapir and Margaret Mead. Her book *Patterns of Culture* (1934) is one of the classics of the field, and, according to Sylvia Schomburg-Scherff "the best sold and most influential work in twentieth-century cultural anthropology" (41; my translation). Written in the mid-1930s, Benedict's

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[2] While Lowell does not provide us with any examples or names of secessionist poets, it is clear that she refers to poets like Hart Crane, e.e. cummings or William Carlos Williams, who published their poetry in the experimental *Secession* magazine. *Secession* was founded by Gorham Munson in 1922, the year before Lowell wrote her essay. It was a programmatic journal, committed to promoting the "new rebels [. . .] those writers who are preoccupied with researches for new forms" (Munson, qtd. in Hammer 1993). Hart Crane's biographer Philip Horton describes *Secession* and the writers associated with it in similar terms: "The contributors to *Secession* [. . .] – Josephson, Cowley, Cummings, Burke, Yvor Winters, W. C. Williams – were primarily interested in aesthetic problems, questions of form and craftsmanship, which grew immediately out of creative activity and could be answered by experimentation. And it was for the express purpose of printing their work as that of a group with common directions that Munson was publishing the magazine" (134).

[3] By 1930, Untermeyer added the following note to Anne Singleton's poems: "Anne Singleton – the pseudonym under which a well-known anthropologist writes her poems – " (qtd. in Benedict, *Anthropologist* 92).

book was instrumental in shifting the discussion from biology to culture, and in its multiple challenges to many a contemporary anthropologist's desire "to identify our local ways of behaving with Behaviour, or our own socialized habits with Human Nature," contributed significantly to the dissemination of ideas about cultural pluralism and relativism (7).

Benedict's poetry is not modernist in any straightforward sense. Her "Unshadowed Pool," for instance, uses comparatively conventional imagery, a regular rhyme scheme and lacks the fragmented linguistic surface we have come to associate with modernist poetry:

Unshadowed Pool

You are a pool unshadowed by cast lustre,
Crystal as air, having no skill to hold
Skies that are cloudy-petaled, and the rushes blowing,
Intricate patterns and sun-aureoled.

Pools should be spread with design caught at heaven,
Laced by near stems and taking the quick bird.
They should be garmented with far-sought garments
Lest any come there and find the pool unstirred;

Lest, at arm's length, pebble to pebble lying,
Life's farthest depths show clear as whitened bone,
Nothing be water-misted, nothing secret,
Past the rent altar-veil, the common stone.

With Lowell and Benedict's biographer Margaret M. Caffrey, we could argue that, in its focus on the personal and emotional and in its reliance on more traditional poetic forms, "Unshadowed Pool" belongs to the lyrist school of poetry which subsequent literary criticism has – unfairly or not – relegated to the margins and, indeed, beyond the pale of the modernist enterprise (162-82). In this reading, "Unshadowed Pool" is, in Judith Modell's words, a poem about "the dangers of exposure to truth" in the most personal terms, the repeated "lest" indicating the poetic speaker's apprehension that, without a veil of secrecy, the world may peer into the very depths of one's soul – a pool being, of course, a conventional symbol of the soul (231). This apprehension is formulated as a warning to the poem's addressee, but it is an apprehension that Benedict, for whom the choice of a pseudonym was an important pro-

tective measure, shared.[4] In this reading, then, "Unshadowed Pool" belongs to the lyrist variety of modernist poetry at its farthest remove from T.S. Eliot's impersonal theory of poetic production.

This assessment is, I think, correct to a certain extent. Yet I would argue that Benedict's poetry also belongs to modernism for a different reason. As a poet *and* an anthropologist, Benedict was crucially interested in two types of alterity that modernist artists have been bringing into a dialogue since the earliest stages of the movement in the United States and elsewhere: cultural and poetic alterity, i.e. the otherness of other cultures, on the one hand, and the otherness of poetic language on the other. Think, for instance, of the well-known primitivism of some of Tristan Tzara's Dadaist poems, Langston Hughes's "Danse Africaine" or T.S. Eliot's 1919 essay on "War-Paint and Feathers," in which he proclaimed that one could no longer understand the cultural present without knowing "something about the medicine-man and his works" and added that "it is certain that primitive man and poetry help our understanding of civilized art and poetry. Primitive art can even, through the studies and experiments of the artist or poet, revivify the contemporary activities"(122). Alternatively, consider the fact that Harriet Monroe's *Poetry* magazine – the preferred publishing venue for the likes of H.D., Pound and Eliot – in 1917 devoted a special issue to so-called "aboriginal poetry," i.e. reinterpretations and imitations of Native American verse by European and Anglo-American poets like Constance Lindsay Skinner, Mary Hunter Austin, Alice Corbin Henderson, Frank S. Gordon and Edward Eastaway (Castro 16-19).

Poetry was also the magazine in which Benedict published no less than twelve of her own poems, most of them under her pen name Anne Singleton. Other poems of hers were published in *The Measure*, in *Voices*, *Palms* and *The Nation*. Today, a good selection of her verse is most readily accessible via *An Anthropologist at Work: Writings of Ruth Benedict*, Mar-

[4] Reflecting on her poetry, her use of a pseudonym, and her relationship with her long-estranged husband Stanley Benedict, Ruth Benedict in her autobiographical sketch "The Story of My Life . . ." writes that "until I was thirty-five I believed that the things that mattered must always hurt other people to know or make them interfere, and the point was to avoid this. My feeling about my verse and my nom de plume, my relations to Stanley, all are unintelligible without the rule of life I discovered in the haymow" (Benedict, *Anthropologist* 102). The "rule of life" Benedict discovered in an epiphanic moment while hiding in the hay at the age of six, and which she cherished for twenty-nine more years of her life, was "that if I didn't talk to anybody about the things that mattered to me no one could ever take them away" (102).

garet Mead's tribute to her colleague and intimate friend. The Ruth Benedict Papers collection at Vassar College Library holds most of her published as well as her unpublished poetry.

In the introduction to her *Letters from the Field, 1925-1975*, Margaret Mead hints at the nexus between poetic and cultural alterity that is, I believe, at the heart of Benedict's poetry:

> In fact, generation after generation, philosophers and educators, historians and naturalists, polemicists and revolutionaries, as well as poets and artists and storytellers, have drawn on the accounts of peoples who seemed more idyllic or more savage or more complexly civilized than themselves. (1-2)

Many years before Mead wrote those words – the *Letters* were first published in 1977, the year before Mead died – she herself had published poems in *The Measure* and *Poetry*, and so had Edward Sapir, the anthropological linguist best known for his book *Language* (1921). Sapir, Mead and Benedict were all students of Boas, and they all wrote poetry and dedicated poems to one another (Benedict, *Anthropologist* 87-90). Sapir and Benedict, moreover, between 1923 and 1938 exchanged a voluminous correspondence about their poems, submitting their work for comment and criticism and discussing plans for publishing their own volumes of collected verse – projects which were, however, never realized. Unfortunately, Ruth Benedict's side of that correspondence has not survived, but a selection of Sapir's letters to Benedict is collected in *An Anthropologist at Work* (158-97).[5] That volume also contains

[5] Sapir's ambivalent attitude in these letters toward *Poetry* and its editor Harriet Monroe is instructive. In many of his letters to Benedict, Sapir dismisses Monroe's taste as well as her selections of poems as timid and sentimental. A case in point is a letter dated 14 May 1925, in which Sapir responds to Monroe's rejection of a number of Benedict's poems. Sapir attributes "Harriet's reaction chiefly to her inveterate softness or sentimentality. Difficult or in any way intellectual verse gets past her only with difficulty. She prefers stuff about sweet love and my baby" (Benedict, *Anthropologist* 179). Even if Monroe's own poetry was decidedly less daring and experimental than the poems she published, this seems a peculiar assessment of the poetic tastes of an editor who was publishing T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Carl Sandburg and Edgar Lee Masters in the year Sapir wrote his letter. Moreover, similar criticisms of *Poetry* magazine occur too frequently in Sapir's correspondence with Benedict and in too many different contexts to be put down solely to one poet's desire to comfort another poet about negative editorial decisions. In any case, Sapir's charges of sentimentalism in this and a host of similar assessments of Monroe's tastes are in striking contrast to his exasperation at *Poetry*'s penchant for experimental modernist poetry, expressed in a letter dated 29 September 1927:

Benedict's 1941 selection of her poetry, a fact that further attests to the high esteem in which Benedict's friends and fellow anthropologists held her literary endeavors.

Why this interest in and dedication to poetry among a number of the leading anthropologists of the twentieth century? As students of other cultures, Mead, Benedict and Sapir were keenly aware of not only the variety of language uses and the ways in which different language uses shape each linguistic group's understanding of the world, an insight most famously codified in the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. As anthropologists, these scholars were also keenly aware of the ways in which Euro-American strategies of representing other cultures – including the scholarly monograph – threaten to distort their objects of representation and, indeed, destroy the very otherness of the other as they reduce the other to the cognitive and linguistic structures of the self and thereby efface it. In entering into a relation with the cultural other, anthropological discourse runs the risk of what Emmanuel Levinas calls totalization: the violent negation of alterity by way of "a reduction of the other to the same" (43). As anthropologists schooled by their teacher Franz Boas in the self-critical reflection of their own methods of inquiry and the cultural situatedness of their own language uses, Mead, Benedict and Sapir knew the importance of exploring alternative forms of representation.

> The age and I don't seem to be on very intimate speaking terms. In the last number of "Poetry," for instance, I find almost nothing that even remotely interests me. I think the ideology of a Hupa medicine formula is closer to my heart than all this nervous excitement of Hart Crane's. Can you tell me what he wants? You spoke of Mark Van Doren's excellence. I've not read his recently published book but the citations in the review in "Poetry" were not very alluring. They sounded more like keen celebration in verse form than poetry. And I'm utterly sick of intelligence and its vanity. It's the arch disease of the time and the reason for its choking vulgarity and its flimsiness. So I don't feel I have anything to say that anybody would want to hear, even if I had a sufficiently great gift of words to say it with, and I doubt greatly if I have that gift. The experimental excitements of this great modern time do not rouse me, they chill me to loathing. The freedoms we hear about are pinchbeck whims of the body and it is as much as one's accredited sanity is worth to even whisper the word "noble" (Benedict, *Anthropologist* 185-6).

Taken together, Sapir's diverging assessments of *Poetry* magazine testify to an awareness on his part – at whatever level of consciousness – that his own poetic tastes, and maybe his own poetry, occupy a middle ground between a more conventional aesthetic poetic tradition rooted in the nineteenth century and an experimental, perhaps more audacious modernist aesthetics of the twentieth century. This is also very much my own assessment of the place of Benedict's poetry and that of her fellow lyrists in U.S. literary history.

The idea that the language of literature *is* such an alternative form of representation has been a critical commonplace at least since Shelley's "A Defence of Poetry" and became a crucial tenet of the modernist programme that centrally informs Adorno's reflections on the negativity of art in his *Aesthetic Theory* and whose main thrust is summed up in Georg Simmel's assertion that "[a]rt [. . .] possesses that quality of distinctness from life itself, a release through contrast, in which the representation of things in their pure form makes any contact with our reality impossible" (66). Around the time Benedict began writing poetry, the otherness of poetic discourse was also stressed by formalist critics like Victor Shklovsky, whose "Art as Technique," one of the classic statements on poetic alterity, was published in the same year as the "aboriginal issue" of Monroe's *Poetry* magazine.

This nexus of poetic and cultural alterity is also at the heart of a number of Benedict's poems, including "Myth," "This Breath," and "Unshadowed Pool." Ostensibly lines about the dangers of personal revelation deeply felt by the reticent Benedict herself, "Unshadowed Pool" is also a poem about the dangers of exposing the cultural other to the world's gaze. With the altar, the "common stone" and the "whitened bones" in the final stanza, Benedict incorporates materials of her anthropological research. While the cultural references are not specific enough to attribute them to any particular culture Benedict studied, we know that, in her fieldwork in the Zuni Pueblo of New Mexico, she encountered the altar in the center of Zuni on which rests a stone in which, according to Zuni mythology, "beats the heart of the world" (Tedlock 501). Moreover, whitened bones spotting the Southwestern landscape regularly met Benedict's eyes when she conducted fieldwork among the Pima, the Cochiti Pueblo and the Zuni Pueblo in the mid-1920s (Modell 231; Darnell 46-7). In her poem, Benedict transposes all of those cultural markers from the surface of the land to the depths of a pool, as if to hide them from view. The poetic speaker's apprehension that the bones, the altar and the stone may be discovered by "any" who "come[s] there and find[s] the pool unstirred" bespeaks an awareness on the poetic speaker's as well as Benedict's part that the revelation of the cultural other may result in its annihilation.

This is an insight Benedict herself had to be reminded of at times, for instance by the linguist, anthropologist and poet Jaime de Angulo, who wrote the following words to her in a letter dated 19 May 1925:

> As for helping you get an informant, and the way you describe it "if I took him with me to a safely American place" . . . "an informant who would

> be willing to give tales and ceremonials" . . . oh God! Ruth, you have no idea how much that has hurt me. I don't know how I am going to be able to talk to you about it because I have a sincere affection for you. But do you realize that it is just that sort of thing that kills the Indians? I mean it seriously. It kills them spiritually first, and as in their life the spiritual and the physical element are much more interdependent than in our own stage of culture, they soon die of it physically. They just lie down and die. That's what you anthropologists with your infernal curiosity and your thirst for scientific data bring about.
>
> Don't you understand the psychological value of secrecy at a certain level of culture? Surely you must, but you have probably never connected it with this. You know enough of analytical psychology to know that there are things that must not be brought to the light of day, otherwise they wither and die like uprooted plants. (Benedict, *Anthropologist* 296-7)

De Angulo's letter invites us to take another look at Benedict's poem and suggests that the position it adopts toward revelation is more ambivalent than my reading so far has suggested. The "rent altar-veil" in the final line also belongs to Christian mythology, referring to the rending of the veil in the temple at the moment when Christ died on the cross (Matt. 27.51; Mark 15.38; Luke 23:45). According to scripture, the rending of the veil opened access to the holy of holies to all men and women (Heb. 10.19-20). Henceforth, direct communion with God would no longer be the prerogative of the high priests but an experience potentially available to every believer.[6] The rending of the veil, then, offers the promise of a mythical experience of the highest order, an experience desired by every true believer. And as the "common stone" in the final line suggests, that kind of experience as well as the search for it are shared across cultures.

In many a traditional account of the function of poetic discourse, moreover, poetry gives expression to a secularized version of this search. Shelley's reflections in "A Defence of Poetry," for instance, are shrouded in the metaphor of the veil and anticipate Shklovsky's observations by a century: "Poetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar. [. . .] It creates anew the universe, after it has been annihilated in our minds by the recurrence of impressions blunted by reiteration" (33, 56).

Benedict's poetry finds itself in a tension between this desire to rend the veil in search of experiences of a different, higher order – a desire

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[6] See Spurgeon's 1888 sermon "The Rent Veil" for an extended reading of the relevant Biblical passages along those lines.

that informs both the poet's and the anthropologist's work – and an apprehension that the object on the other side of the veil may shrivel and die beneath the observer's gaze. The stance "Unshadowed Pool" adopts toward revelation, then, is an ambivalent one: it is both to be feared and to be yearned for. Benedict's poem, in other words, gives expression to the modernist search for special moments of being, a search that finds its object in the epiphany, and at the same time registers the dangers of dragging into visibility things that may best be left hidden at the bottom of a shadowed pool.

In their yearning for the immediacy of mythical experience, the modernists were perennially in danger of locating the potential of that experience in other cultures they constructed as more primitive than their own. This was a temptation Benedict herself was not immune to. Mead's account of Benedict's decision to enter anthropology under Franz Boas's tutelage testifies not only to a desire on Benedict's part to locate aesthetic value in the differentness of the objects of her research, but also to a primitivist tendency: "She had tried busy work that did not make sense to her; now she had found busy work with high standards set by someone for whom she had great respect, among materials that delighted her to the extent that they were bizarrely different and esthetically satisfying" (Benedict, *Anthropologist* 17). Yet in her poetry, Benedict demonstrates a keen awareness of the possible ethical pitfalls of representing other cultures and channels that awareness into poetic forms that simultaneously disclose and hide the cultural other.

As the contributors to a *Festschrift* for Martin Stern edited by Wolfram Malte Fues and Wolfram Mauser demonstrate, literature of all ages and in all genres is a practice of *verbergendes Enthüllen*, of concealing disclosure. Poetic alterity, then, is at least partly describable as an interplay or oscillation between masking and revelation. But an awareness of the ethical implications of that doubleness is thrust upon modernists fascinated by forms of cultural alterity to an unprecedented degree. Modernists are, in other words, faced with the question of what Wolfgang Iser calls "translatability," the question of how one may embark on a "translation of otherness without subsuming it under preconceived notions" given the fact that "the specificity of the [other] culture encountered can be grasped only when projected onto what is familiar" (5). It is in this respect that Benedict belongs to modernism. Hers is a self-reflexive modernism which draws much of its energy from the otherness of other cultures but which at the same time registers the dangers of normalizing

and effacing the cultural other by assimilating it to the languages of the self.

To conclude, the two readings of the poem I have outlined, the psychological and autobiographical one that places Benedict firmly within the lyrist tradition on the one hand, and the anthropological reading on the other, do not exclude one another.[7] "Unshadowed Pool" is precisely a poem about the self and the other, and the possible relations between the two. In her poem, Benedict stages an encounter of the self with the other that raises important questions concerning our responsibility toward other ways of speaking and being in the world. These questions continue to haunt literary and cultural studies as much as they do the social sciences. They are, finally, questions that our discipline, concerned as it is with that *other* language use we call literature, should be well prepared to engage with.

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[7] See also Mead, who argues that Benedict's study of Native American cultures enabled her to bring anthropology and poetry together: "Later, the stuff of Indian myth and ritual, drawing as it did on the same landscape, became one of the doorways through which the separated parts of her life began to be united" (Benedict, *Anthropologist* 87).

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