Current Books

Reviews of new and noteworthy nonfiction

The Poet's Voice

POETRY SPEAKS:
Hear Great Poets Read Their Work from Tennyson to Plath.
Edited by Elise Paschen and Rebekah Presson Mosby;
Dominique Raccah, series editor.
Narrated by Charles Osgood. Sourcebooks.
336 pp. plus 3 CDs. $49.95

Reviewed by Honor Moore

Hearing a poem read aloud by its author is an utterly different experience from reading the poem. A poem encountered on the page enters the mind, and the mind must puzzle it out. "Getting" it may require repeated visits, as if its meaning were stubbornly withheld. By contrast, when the poet is a great performer, hearing a poem requires no such effort—the living voice transports us to the dimension where the poem is composed, where all its elements are unified, where the poet's intention is understood.

In the last 20 years or so, great poetry readings have come to form a kind of canon, one that includes such memorable readers as Stanley Kunitz, Carolyn Forché, Frank Bidart, Eileen Myles, and Lucille Clifton. But what do we know of the great readers of the past? *Poetry Speaks*, with narration by the newscaster Charles Osgood, gives us recordings of 42 British and American poets, beginning with Alfred, Lord Tennyson, and ending with Sylvia Plath. Three CDs are tucked into a robust, illustrated volume—edited by Elise Paschen, a poet and former director of the Poetry Society of America, and Rebekah Mosby of National Public Radio—which accords each poet a short biography, a generous selection of the poems (including those read aloud), and an introductory essay by a contemporary poet. Though the recordings have long been accessible to the specialist, this is the first collection to make them widely available, and the first to offer such abundant contextual material.

It's also the first to capitalize on the recent heightened American interest in poetry. When Dylan Thomas toured the United States in the early 1950s, he returned the sensuality of speech to the performance of poetry, unseating the prevailing overly literal style of reading just as the culture was awakening from its postwar torpor. Later in the decade, the Beat and New York School poets moved poetry off the shallow stages of university auditoriums and into the cafés and jazz clubs. Their performances invented a new American style of reading, recontextualizing traditional metrics and appropriating the rhythms of jazz, blues, and hip speech.

In the ensuing decades, the importance of live poetry grew as new voices seemed to articulate what the culture avoided or suppressed. When the black arts movement emerged from the civil rights struggle, poetry readings inspired new activists. African American poets, notably Gwendolyn Brooks, left mainstream publishers and began to write and read for their own communities. One can discern the change here; when Brooks reads the formal "Song in the

Front Yard" (1945), her irony is available only to those who seek it, but the deft street rhymes of "We Real Cool" (1960) cut with the surprise of a switchblade. Still later, the shock of Sylvia Plath, here reading "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus" with insolent power, inspired the great flowering of American women poets in the 1970s.

In the last decade, with the appointment of imaginative and energetic poets laureate (Rita Dove, Robert Hass, and Robert Pinsky), the presence of contemporary poets on public television (two series hosted by Bill Moyers, Pinsky's readings on *The NewsHour*), and the proliferation of graduate writing programs in American universities, there have probably been more people writing, publishing, and giving readings of their poems in the United States than ever before. Ironically, as poets in the literary tradition became more likely to give compelling readings, the written poem has come under siege. Performance art has inspired "peformance poetry," hip-hop has spawned a poetry to be spoken or "rapped," and in some circles the champions of poetry "slams"—poetry performance competitions—have come to be as distinguished as Pulitzer Prize winners.

It is this expansion of the audience for live poetry that has opened the way for a major anthology of poetry readings by the great poets of the past. The effect is momentous. It is as if one were at a reading where Tennyson listened to Anne Sexton with mystified astonishment, Allen Ginsberg performed for Walt Whitman, and Yeats eavesdropped on W. H. Auden's reading of "In Memory of W. B. Yeats." To hear, through the rumble of wax cylinder technology, Tennyson's voice rhythmically intoning "The Charge of the Light Brigade" raises the hair on one's neck.

Quickly the static recedes and the voices become clearer. H.D. (Hilda Doolittle), Ezra Pound's contemporary (and onetime fiancée), appears cool and distant in photos, but her reading from "Helen in Egypt" has a vulnerable delicacy that gives the lie to the forceful, truncated lines in which the poem is written. Pound's own Latin and Greek phrases seem disruptive on the page, but in his reading they feel integral, held to the flow of the poem by the force of the poet's voice. In some of the recordings, the editors include the poet's introduction. Yeats announces that because he spent such a long time putting the stanzas of "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" into verse, "I will not read them as if they were prose!" When he begins to chant those stanzas, the cranky public man recedes and we are lost at Innisfree.

The volume that houses the CDs functions as an extremely luxurious set of liner notes. Alongside the text are photographs of the poets and their artifacts, including Robert Frost on the cover of *Life* and a letter from Wallace Stevens to William Carlos Williams ("Dear Bill") on stationery headed "Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company" in wonderfully fat, scrolly letters.

The editors were shrewd in pairing some contemporary poets with their forebears. C. D. Wright comments on Gertrude Stein; Jorie Graham on Elizabeth Bishop, her Harvard predecessor; and Agha Shahid Ali, the Kashmiri poet who has made the United States his home, on T. S. Eliot, the American poet who made Britain his home. The essays work best when they reframe our sense of a poet by entering the poetry and managing, while never speaking down to us, to put complex, critical ideas in direct and simple language. Pinsky reveals the complexity in Williams's "Queen Anne's Lace" by explicating the relationship of its patterning of images of sensuality and abstraction to the rhythms of jazz. Charles Bernstein presents an elegant and cogent primer on Pound's poetic techniques that brings clarity to the difficult "With Usura" from Canto XLV. Rafael Campo makes an eloquent and convincing case for H.D.'s stature as a Modernist on a par with Eliot and Pound while noting her radical use of classical myth.

Poetry Speaks founders only on the issue of audience. The volume will be used in the classroom, but it will also be purchased by those who want to listen on their own. Given the publisher's stated intention of bringing poetry to a larger audience, the selection of a newscaster to introduce the recordings was understandable, but I found the narration intrusive. Osgood clearly has great sympathy for poetry, but his cliché-riddled presentation (Edna St. Vincent Millay was "a free

spirit") isn't up to the intellectual rigor of the rest of *Poetry Speaks*. Osgood's cozy tone, meant to reassure the novice listener, instead disrupts the enthralling fabric the recordings weave.

"Not words, not music or rhyme I want," wrote Whitman, "not customs or lecture, not even the best, / Only the lull I like, the hum of your valvéd voice."

>HONOR MOORE *is the author of two collections of poems,* Memoir *(1988) and* Darling *(2001), as well as a biography,* The White Blackbird: A Life of the Painter Margarett Sargent by Her Granddaughter *(1996). She lives in New York City.*

Bomb Thrower

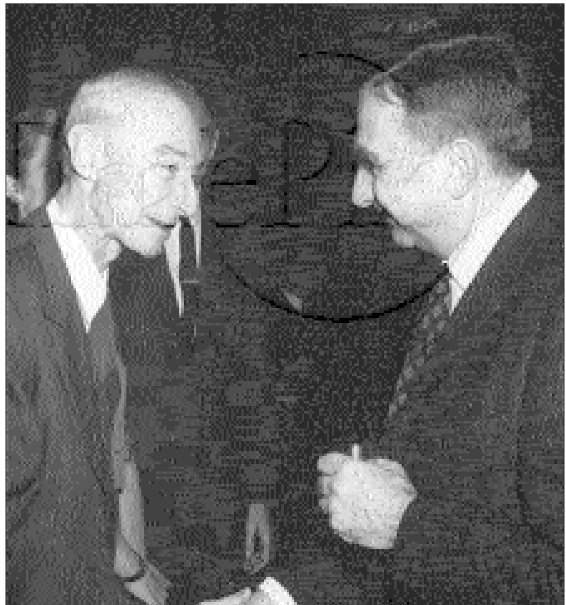
MEMOIRS:
A Twentieth-Century Journey in Science and Politics.
By Edward Teller with Judith L. Shoolery.
Perseus. 628 pp. $35

Reviewed by Kai Bird

"God protect us from the enemy without and the Hungarians within," quipped J. Robert Oppenheimer to a friend at Los Alamos during World War II. A disproportionate number of the physicists working to produce the atomic bomb were Hungarian refugees, and every one of them possessed a difficult, demanding personality. But of these men, none was more difficult, more relentless, or more loquacious than Edward Teller.

Born in 1908, Teller is still with us and, to judge from his long-awaited memoirs, as feisty and opinionated today as he was during the Manhattan Project. In those pre-Hiroshima years, Teller annoyed Oppenheimer and other colleagues with his obsession with building a fusion "super" bomb at a time when the Los Alamos physicists were struggling to ready a simpler fission weapon. Temperamentally fixated on his obsessions, Teller persisted after the war and lobbied vigorously for bigger and more destructive bombs. No one worked harder than this physicist and self-appointed lobbyist to supplement America's already quite destructive atomic arsenal with the apocalyptic thermonuclear weapons we all live with today.

To his friends in the nexus of Republican Party politics and right-wing think tanks centered around California's Hoover Institution, Teller is a genius and political hero: the man who persuaded President Ronald Reagan to spend billions on "Star Wars" missile-defense technologies. In the early 1960s and again in 2000, Teller played a key role in defeating a comprehensive test ban treaty. In short, he is a man who has embraced every nuclear weapons system and rejected every substantive arms control agreement ever proposed.


Edward Teller (right) congratulates Fermi Award winner J. Robert Oppenheimer in 1963.