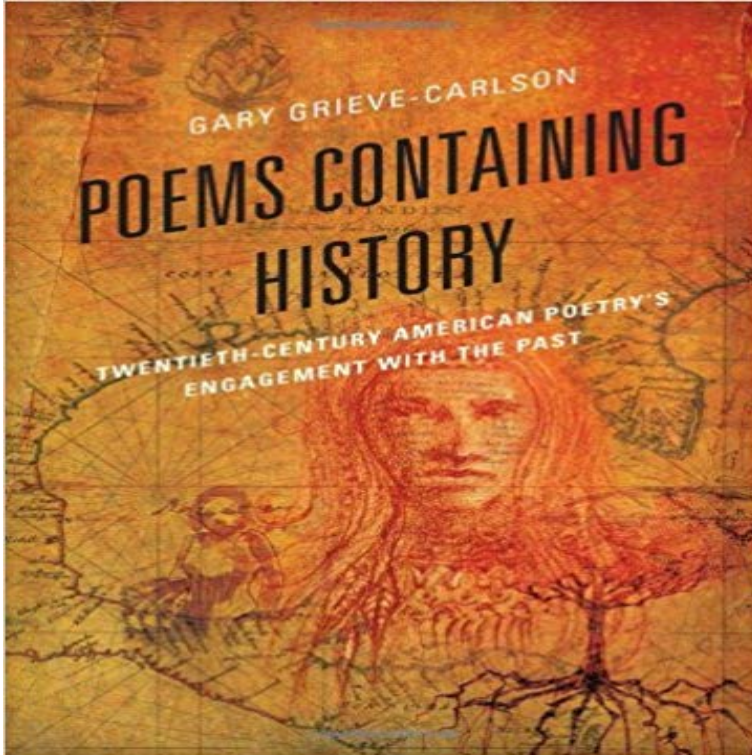


Poems Containing History: Twentieth-Century American Poetry's Engagement with the Past



Ezra Pounds definition of an epic as a poem containing history raises questions: how can a poem contain history? And if it can, does it help us to think about history in ways that conventional historiography cannot? Poems Containing History: Twentieth-Century American Poetry's Engagement with the Past, by Gary Grieve-Carlson, argues that twentieth-century American poetry has contained and helped its readers to think about history in a variety of provocative and powerful ways. Tracing the discussion of the relationship between poetry and history from Aristotles Poetics to Norman Mailers The Armies of the Night and Hayden Whites Metahistory, the book shows that even as history evolves into a professional, academic discipline in the late nineteenth century, and as its practitioners emphasize the scientific aspects of their work and minimize its literary aspects, twentieth-century American poets continue to take history as the subject of their major poems. Sometimes they endorse the views of mainstream historians, as Stephen Vincent Benet does in John Browns Body, but more often they challenge them, as do Robert Penn Warren in Brother to Dragons, Ezra Pound in The Cantos, or Charles Olson in The Maximus Poems. In Conquistador, Archibald MacLeish illustrates Aristotles claim that poetry tells more philosophical truths about the past than history does, while in Paterson, William Carlos Williams develops a Nietzschean suspicion of historys value. Three major American poets T. S. Eliot in Four Quartets, Hart Crane in The Bridge, and Carolyn Forché in The Angel of History present different challenges to professional historiographys assumption that the past is best understood in strictly material terms. Poems Containing History devotes chapters to each of these poets and offers a clear sense of the seriousness with which American poetry has engaged the

past, as well as the great variety of those engagements.

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