

1975

# Introduction

Thomas R. Whitaker

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“The simple bastard could have killed you.”  
“You’re ridiculous. I hope your feet freeze.”  
I began to yell and swear at her.  
“Quiet. Damn you,” she said. “You want Papa to hear us.” She slammed  
the kitchen door and left me standing out here in my slippers.

I continue to hold my ground. It’s getting colder now.

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## FIELDS OF ACTION

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### Introduction / Thomas R. Whitaker

The most challenging modern poems aren’t merely narratives or mimings of an action imagined as taking place elsewhere. Nor are they “spatial forms” which might be adequately described by the critic who gazes and catalogues from the middle distance. Fields of verbal action, they require us to participate in their present movements. Some of their modes of action are explored in the pieces here brought together. A second such gathering will appear in our issue of Summer, 1975 (6/3).

First: three essays on fields that are simultaneously “epic” and “personal”—obsessed by Western history and devoted to constructing something like “the history of one’s self.” Guy Davenport here leads us into the forest of symbols that is *Ulysses*; Marjorie Perloff unfolds some origins of the post-symbolist landscapes in *The Cantos*; and Sherman Paul invites us to share that projective openness to the “context of / now” which generates *The Maximus Poems*.

In addition: two new instances of less obviously expansive but no less “cosmic” fields. The example of Rimbaud, as Marjorie Perloff argues, could urge Pound toward an actively presentational style. But for others, of course, Rimbaud has been most centrally the *voyant*. And without the *Illuminations* somewhere in the background, would we now have Denise Levertov’s “Growth of a Poet”—which seems to invite *la poésie objective* to rediscover an older understanding of the world as potential song of correspondence? Or W. S. Merwin’s “Birds at Noon”—which seems, after more than a decade of commitment to distances and absences, now to open a new field of lyric presence? The other side of departure, perhaps. “*Départ dans l’affection et le bruit neufs.*”

And also: a gesture toward another kind of post-Poundian and post-Rimbaudian field. (The explicit mentors here include both Cid Corman and César Vallejo.) For Eshleman’s *Coils* the poem must work through the

dreck of one's own life—its pain, self-indulgence, incapacity, pretentiousness—toward the condition of *seeing*. But Diane Wakoski's admiring review is in fact a double gesture: it points also toward the urgency (Let these betrayals and angers become a present word of mythic affirmation!) which so often animates her own poetic sequences.

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CRITICISM / GUY DAVENPORT

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## Joyce's Forest of Symbols

In Book X of the *Republic* we learn that we can all be artists by turning a mirror round and round, like Buck Mulligan in the first chapter of *Ulysses*, and that a man named Er, the son of Armenius, came to life at his own funeral and explained the process of metempsychosis. This Er turns up in *Finnegans Wake* fused with Arminius and Comenius, quarrelers with Fate, wearing the mask of his namesake, the thunder god Er. "Airmienious" Joyce calls him, and we know him by the company he keeps, Hurdlebury Fenn and other attendants of their own obsequies.

This Finnegian Er, who when his heroic age is over will learn to sit by his wick in his wick, civilized enough to have a house and a lamp, and be known as Earwicker, says that in witnessing souls ready for reincarnation he saw Orpheus choose to return as a swan, Ajax choose to be a lion, and Ulysses choose to be a private citizen minding his own business.

Giambattista Vico could have advised Ulysses that he had made his choice in harmony with the course of history, for the age of heroes and kings gives way to the age of the common man just as the age of the gods had given way to that of heroes and kings.

We can locate Bloom by other roads. The hero of the Aegean epic becomes in Athens the center of his nobility rather than a man who places his nobility at the center of events. In the truest genius of Roman literature the hero becomes the privileged spectator, like the charming scapegraces of Apuleius and Petronius.

The gods give way to magic, virtues and vices become civic rather than tragic and individual, and literature shifts from its concern for the relationship between god and man to a concern for the relationship between man and society. Yet the hero remains a hero, whether venturing into the lands of faery or into hell and purgatory.

Not until Sancho Panza begins to be as interesting as his metempsychotic master is the age of heroes really over. And then, to speed up literary history to a blur, the children of Sancho emerge as Mr. Pickwick and Tartarin