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The San Francisco Poetry Renaissance, 1955–1960 by Warren French (review)

James Ruland

Western American Literature, Volume 26, Number 4, Winter 1992, pp. 390–391 (Review)

Published by University of Nebraska Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/wal.1992.0049>

Western
American
Literature

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Volume 26, Number 4
The Western Literature Association and The State University of New York Press

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noted Laurence critics, and is a welcome addition to the growing number of works on Margaret Laurence.

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The San Francisco Poetry Renaissance, 1955-1960. By Warren French. (Boston: Twayne's United States Authors Series, Twayne Publishers, 1991. 143 pages, \$24.95.)

Warren French, the author of *The San Francisco Poetry Renaissance, 1955-1960*, has composed what he himself calls a "preliminary history" of the Beat era in the Bay Area. We are told that Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg are not to be discussed at any length in this history; rather, his historical outline focuses principally on the efforts located and centralized in San Francisco.

The problem is the aforementioned Beat forerunners do a poor job of remaining in the background. French's camera eye continually shifts and pans, often forgetting his own protestations that the *mise en scène* of his "San Francisco story" remain in San Francisco. However, this does not prevent *The San Francisco Poetry Renaissance, 1955-1960* from achieving the status of an extremely necessary book among Beat scholarship. Warren French's thorough knowledge of little known publications, publication histories and the socio-political climate makes the work a historically invaluable reference towards the investigation of an era. French demonstrates familiarity with both poet and publisher, critic and cynic, reviewer and reviewed, no matter how remote, including the neglected members of the eclectic Beat underground whose accomplishments were frequently ill-noticed and who strived to avoid the notoriety strained and stained by the label of "beatnik."

Although San Francisco and its environs sets the scope of his work, French's history claims to limit itself to highlighting the "beat frequency" when that broadcast issues forth from the Bay Area. Although Ginsberg's reading of the first section of *Howl* at the Six Gallery on October 7, 1955, undisputedly marks the beginning of the San Francisco Poetry Renaissance, just as the final publication of the collective Beat effort, *Beatitude*, ended it in the Spring of 1960, it would be a misnomer to say that the content of French's work neatly falls within these parameters.

Perhaps these loosely-adhered-to parameters justify the work such that it warrants inclusion in Twayne's United States Authors Series. The title, and its seemingly restrictive window of time and place, should not discourage the student or scholar from this informative work. French's observations are the result of fifteen years of meticulous research and *The San Francisco Poetry Renaissance, 1955-1960* is refreshingly objective in its avoidance of the extremes of

worshipful over-effusiveness and scathing disgust that mark much of what has previously been noted of this most remarkable era and its colorful inhabitants. For the moment, enough has been recorded of their lives; this history of their times is long overdue.

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Critical Essays On Gary Snyder. Edited by Patrick D. Murphy. (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1990. 267 pages, \$38.00.)

Gary Snyder has generally been treated by critics as a public figure first, as a poet second. In part it is because his life has been so well publicized, first as a member of the San Francisco Beat scene, later as a long-term resident of a Zen monastery in Kyoto, member of a communal ashram on an island in southern Japan, most visible figure in an environmentally centered community in the Sierra foothills, and frequent spokesman against nuclear power, uncontrolled and unplanned rural development, and the destruction of the environment.

The superficial treatment of Snyder's poetry is also attributable, though, to its built-in difficulties. In subject, it is consistently reflective of Snyder's own experiences, moving with time from back-country work in the Pacific Northwest to life in Japan to the raising of children and a home in California to contemporary environmental politics. Yet the poetry is not lyric in the usual sense, for it maintains a kind of flat-surfaced objectivity that avoids self-reflection and moral dilemmas. In structure, Snyder's poetry—highly irregular on the page, rhythmically reliant on breath groups, seemingly intended for reading aloud—owes much to *haiku*, *renga*, and other Chinese and Japanese forms. It is not surprising, then, that most Snyder criticism has focused on the man, his influences, his public role, and his subject matter rather than on the poetry itself, in spite of—or perhaps because of—its remarkable appeal to a wide audience.

This collection of eighteen essays—most reprinted from critical journals, five newly written for this collection—is part of the G. K. Hall series, "Critical Essays on American Literature." The articles range in date from 1968 to 1990 and concentrate primarily on Snyder's "ecological vision," in Tom Lyon's phrase, on his background in logging, trail maintenance, and Buddhist studies, and on his development as a poet. Taken as a whole, the volume provides useful perspectives on Snyder's use of Buddhism and East Asian literatures (in essays by Bert Almon, Jody Norton, and Katsunori Yamazato) and an interesting scanning of American cultural attitudes toward the environment and to the public role of the poet during the last twenty years.

The best of the essays, Robert Kern's "Silence in Prosody: The Poem as