Fulbright Poems: Locating Europe and America in the Cold War

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Adrienne Rich (1929–2012), Richard Wilbur (1921), and John Ashbery (1927) are three American poets who traveled to Europe in the 1950s on a new kind of fellowship. Ashbery received a Fulbright and started work on a PhD in Montpellier, France; Rich won a Guggenheim Fellowship and embarked on a trip to Oxford, England; and Wilbur headed for the capital of Italy after he had received a Prix de Rome from the American Academy. They are representatives of a much larger group of American poets who traveled to Europe in the aftermath of the Second World War. More American poets than ever before in their nation’s history journeyed to Europe, leading to hundreds of poems that were inspired by the Old World. These poets were driving forces behind all the important postwar poetry movements, including Beat poets (Gregory Corso and Allen Ginsberg), Black Mountain writers (Paul Blackburn and Robert Creeley), Confessional poets (Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton), the Middle Generation (Randall Jarrell and Robert Lowell), and the New York School (Kenneth Koch and Frank O’Hara). They wrote about nearly all European countries, although they settled in and wrote mostly about Western Europe, especially France and Italy. Some poets vacationed in Europe, but others lived there for many years, sometimes for more than a decade, as Ashbery eventually did.

The poets who took advantage of new funding possibilities occasioned a new kind of poem, according to critics. “The pages of literary magazines were beginning to be dotted with what were known as ‘Fulbright poems’” (309), as Brad Gooch explains. These were
“poems about the cobblestones or pigeons of Rome or Provence written by an elite of subsidized young Americans abroad” (309). Robert von Hallberg is the only critic who has written extensively about this generation of poets’ sojourns in Europe, and he did so disparagingly. Equating the poets’ creative efforts to capture Europe with “Tourist Poems,” von Hallberg wrote in 1985 that the poets tended “to gather, like pigeons and hawkers, around the sights and monuments” (71) of Europe.

More recent scholarship suggests that it is time to revise von Hallberg’s negative appraisal of the Fulbright poems. First, Jeffrey Gray’s monograph *Mastery’s End* (2005)—the most extensive study on postwar American poetry and travel—suggests how vital travel was for this generation of American poets in terms of how they looked at themselves as poets and Americans. The “continuity of the self (particularly a national self) across linguistic, cultural, geographic, and temporal borders” (10) became a dominant theme for many postwar American poets. Second, Jahan Ramazani’s *A Transnational Poetics* (2009) is important as he suggests how significant it is to view the development of American poetry not only as part of a mononational tradition, but as something that is constantly infused by foreign influences. Third, in *Cultural Mobility: A Manifesto* (2010), Stephen Greenblatt suggests that certain forms of mobility are not taken seriously enough. He argues that “migration, labor-market border-crossing, [and] smuggling” are considered “serious,” while other forms, “such as tourism, theater festivals, and (until recently) study abroad, are rendered virtually invisible” (251).

This chapter departs from Gray, Ramazani, and Greenblatt by looking at how travel made possible by fellowships had an impact on three American poets (and by implication an entire generation) who traveled to Europe in the postwar era. These grants allowed many poets to travel to Europe for the first time during formative years of their careers. This chapter argues that the so-called Fulbright poems are more profound and conflicted than von Hallberg assumed. The poets were neither imperialist pawns nor completely independent agents as they took advantage of their country’s newly acquired wealth and power. They were, in fact, critical of and anxious about its imperialist tendencies. By focusing on the travel poems by Rich, Wilbur, and Ashbery, I will show not only how these poets reflected on America’s new standing in the world while writing poems about Europe, but also how Europe functioned as a catalyst for new themes and directions in their work.

Above all, these Fulbright poems are explorations about the poets’ self in relation to their nationality. Throughout my chapter, I will