

*Carl Rakosi*  
*and the Library of America*

The Library of America “is dedicated to preserving America’s best and most significant writing in handsome, enduring volumes, featuring authoritative texts”, according to the statement printed on the dust-jackets of those volumes. To be authoritative a text needs more than editorial intention and execution; the reciprocal assent of the scholarly community also has a role to play. In this essay I want to consider what “authoritative” means in the case of the selection of Carl Rakosi’s poems in the Library’s anthology *American Poetry: The Twentieth Century, Volume Two: E.E. Cummings to May Swenson*. (The poets are presented in the order of their dates of birth, this volume covering the years 1894-1913). In the case of an anthology so broad, inclusive, and representative in scope (it runs to over a thousand pages, includes token examples of Blues and popular song lyrics, and many African-American and women writers) it can be asked as well if the accolade “authoritative” is confined to the proper choice and use of copy texts, or if it might also extend to the selection of texts—especially if preservation involves more than durability. The question is not meant to license carping about exclusions and omissions: I hope it will be clear that any reservations about the selection of Rakosi’s poems have been influenced by questions about the editorial treatment of his texts.

In the “Foreword” to his 1986 *Collected Poems* Rakosi explains his decision not to organise the book chronologically, either by assembling poems in their order of composition, or by gathering together previous collections. He eschews such standard editorial formats because “the presumption underlying chronological sequence is that a literary development and some kind of psychological progression or evolving take place”. He does not deny that such may be the case, but having already said that “tracing my

development as a poet" does not interest him, he argues that any development or progression "can only be partial because a poet in the course of his life makes repeated leaps ahead and unwanted reversions", although "he does not make them on purpose or for a purpose (that he is aware of)". Unconventionally, therefore, but with Wordsworth and Whitman as available precedents, Rakosi prefers to gather his poems into arrangements although, in his case, the categories chosen (the separate sections of *Collected Poems*) are of the moment, even (in the light of other arrangements he has made of his work) provisional. "It seemed to me more creative and interesting to organise the poems as if I were making up a book for the first time, with the parts before me, the individual poems". Those parts, he says, constitute neither a large-scale "composition" nor a simple "aggregation"; rather, "the larger and perhaps different meanings they have when viewed in this way, is to be found, when it is there, in the arrangement".

What Rakosi values are the individual poem and the increment of meaning that may ensue when it is grouped with others as part of an arrangement. These arrangements are not series (the "Americana" section, for example, includes poems such as "The Founding of New Hampshire" not previously published as part of what might once have been taken as a developing "Americana" series: indeed, this poem predates the earliest "Americana" poems by a matter of decades); nor, for that matter, are they a kind of microchronology. When Rakosi speaks of his poems as "the parts before me" we should take him at his word, thinking of them as spread out not like the parts of a jigsaw puzzle, or a clock, but as the parts of an as yet speculative whole. For Rakosi, as he posits himself in the "Foreword", his poems are free of any entailments of textual history, as is his body of work as a whole. His *Collected Poems* is offered as neither monument nor record, but as its own creative act. One point needs to be added. In explaining what he has and has not done in the making of his book Rakosi had no need to mention his dealings with individual poems—of course, because in it they have no history—nor does he except, in passing, when he mentions the possibility of a chronological variorum. Such an edition could only exist in the realm of hypertext, and would show that many of Rakosi's poems have had very chequered pasts indeed.

Whatever its rationale, and despite its covert operations on Rakosi's past as a writer, *Collected Poems* must be viewed as author-

itative as representing the author's latest considered view of his text as a whole, and it will remain so until the second and third volumes of his *Collected Works* have been published. The Library of America editors, however, do not slavishly adhere to the convention of following an author's last revisions and corrections, although in the case of their choice of work by Rakosi they might very well have done so for all the difference it makes. This may be just as well, for the bases for their choice of text are firmly historical, while leaving ample scope for editorial discretion. In the rationale heading their "Note on the Texts" everything finally turns on an unexamined notion of what constitutes the "authoritative" as the ultimate basis of choice, so that their editorial decisions, in other words, are to be taken on trust:

The choice of text for each of the poems selected... has been made on the basis of a study of its textual history and a comparison of editions printed during the author's lifetime. In general, each text is from the earliest book edition prepared with the author's participation; revised editions are sometimes followed, in light of the degree of authorial supervision and the stage of the writer's career at which the revisions were made, but the preference has been for the authorially approved book version closest to the date of composition. Texts from periodicals, anthologies, and posthumous sources have been used only when a poem was not printed in one of the author's books during his or her lifetime, or when such a book version is not authoritative.

Here I should declare my interest. These principles might be admirable from my point of view, as editor of Rakosi's *Poems 1923-1941* (1995), were they not so hedged round with qualifications ("in general", "sometimes", "preference"), which serve to obscure their underlying purpose.

Date of birth produces some strange bedfellows: it is difficult to think of Charles Olson, whose career began in the 1940s, as the poetic contemporary of Hart Crane, whose career ended in suicide in 1932. Yet both are here. From one point of view literary and historical coherence are sacrificed to eclectic inclusivity: it would be interesting to have Robert Lowell and John Berryman in the same volume as Crane, but they are too young, just as it

would be interesting to have had Cummings in Volume One with Ezra Pound and Marianne Moore—again, too young. But so what? It wouldn't matter—this is a multi-volume anthology after all, encyclopædic in its treatment of twentieth-century American poetry—if you could have your cake and eat it. The text on the front and back flaps of the dust-jacket claims that the anthology “restores” an era which ended with World War II. “New schools and definitions of poetry seemed often to divide the literary scene. This was the era of the Harlem Renaissance, the Objectivists, the Fugitives, the proletarian poets. It was also an era of vigorously individuated voices—knotty, defiant, sometimes eccentric”. Study of textual history, preference for the text closest to the date of composition, both serve the purpose of restoring a literary era, but here could only achieve this (of course) if the era's poets were all conveniently born in the same two decades. Furthermore I wonder if the copywriter has looked at the product. After some cross-checking I can find just one proletarian poem, by Joseph Kalar. Two other “proletarian poets”, Edwin Rolfe and Isidor Schneider, are scarcely represented as such, with poems selected from works either too late, in the former case, or too early, in the latter, to qualify. If proletarian poets did divide the literary scene, and such a case might well be made, the evidence for it won't be found here.

There's precious little evidence, for that matter, of what Rakosi was up to before 1945, and what there is resists identification as such. My edition of Rakosi's early poems may not have been available to the editors when they were at work, but even so in the case of his early poems they have chosen to set aside “preference... for the authorially approved book version closest to the date of composition”. Their practice thereafter seems inconsistent with this, and it is a moot point what distinguishes the “stage of the writer's career” Rakosi had reached when he published revised versions of these poems in 1967, which the editors accept, and the stage he had reached in 1986 when he published revised texts of other poems which they reject. At what point in the intervening years did the author's views cease to be authoritative?

We can only address the editors' reasoning, and its possible significance for their choice of poems (as opposed to texts), by considering each of their textual decisions and their cumulative effect. The textual source for most of the poems chosen is *Amulet* (1967), the book which announced Rakosi's return to writing and

portraits it is not one of his best.

My argument so far is that the editors have gained nothing by departing from the policy of giving preference to the “book version closest to the date of composition”, but forfeited much. At the same time, where they have adhered to that policy, in the case of early poems given their belated first book version in *Amulet*, they have again gained nothing and (this is my opinion) lost some quality. Moreover, by ruling out periodicals and anthologies as sources, and relying on *Amulet* as the unique source for Rakosi’s early work, they have restricted the field unduly. There may be a logic in this, derived from the notion of the authoritative text, but it hasn’t been consistently applied, and when it comes to the test I think its application has been found wanting. If in 1986 Rakosi was at a stage in his career when revisions of work from the 1960s weren’t authoritative, what does that say about the status of his revision in the 1960s of work from the 1920s and 1930s? If distance in time does not count, what does?

This question brings me to “Figures in an Ancient Ink”, in which the older poet contemplates his former writing. If I read it as a radical disavowal of the significance of the image, as something superficial, mere “patina”, in favour of direct speech, here represented as such by the use of interrogatives—to the extent that I view it as Rakosi’s renunciation of his earlier modernism—I would surely go too far. At the very least, Rakosi retains an attachment to what he formerly wrote, appointing himself in some sense as its curator but with responsibilities, unlike those of the scholar, not only to the text but also to his current identity as a poet. This is perhaps the best pattern for an understanding of Rakosi’s treatment of his early work in *Amulet* but, if so, it entails no constraint for scholarship, and leaves the logic of the single authoritative text in tatters.

In “The Islands”, published in 1932 in the *Lion and Crown*, a Columbia University journal, Rakosi associates Greeks, Danes, and Saracens in an imagination of a European past to which he is linked. (He spent his young years on the banks of the southern Danube, so this is less far-fetched than it might seem). Their “image is an ancient/ ink”, in need of artificial light if it is to be seen, and what they have in common is that they are not Christian: “Athens the Greek hawk/ was no parakeet” implies “Paraclete” as a quasi-homophone. These predecessors are “fellow-agents”, like Rakosi they live and act in the world, and the

implication is that he lives and acts in a world no less strange than that imagined in the poem. It ends with the lines "the strangeness/ is my insulator/ but my heart is sound". The "insulator" links back to "filaments" ("Light the filaments"), and I find myself wondering just when the Rakosi household in Kenosha first enjoyed the amenity of electric power, but in any case Rakosi's early poems evince a fascination with sources of artificial light. The important question, however, is what the speaker needed to be insulated from.

In "Figures in an Ancient Ink" the older poet asks "What, am I in love then/ with my own images, an Onan/ wrapped in their protective strangeness?/ shrinking from what failure?" At this stage in the new poem extended citation of the old one, abbreviated and locally reconfigured, has receded, and what remains of it is "strangeness", the merest trace, but no longer the strangeness of the European past so much as the strangeness ("unconnected images") of the older poem's images. (The difference is inscribed in the new poem's recycled title). On its heels enters anxiety about failure, as though a sound heart had proved insufficient. But for what: success as a poet? as a man? as an American? All that can be said with any confidence, I think, is that anxiety is here projected on to the persistence of Rakosi's early text. This makes for a complex poem, with different textual and temporal layers, just about self-sufficient for the purposes of meaning but, because of partial incorporation of its prior text, unable to stand free of it or to elude having its representation of it called into question. As far as "The Islands" goes, "Figures in an Ancient Ink" cannot be thought of as authoritative.

One doubt remains. Can Rakosi's textual history be so exceptional as to exacerbate uniquely the logic of textual authority? I suspect not. If not, then surely textual authority needs to be established on a case by case basis rather than by rote? Indeed, it might be asked why the editors of this anthology should concern themselves at all with the choice of authoritative texts (after all, on their principles anthologies are the place of last resort for that commodity) when what we require of an anthology are reliable texts of an authoritative choice of poems. Their emphasis on authoritative choice of texts seems to imply that choice of poems is the lesser issue. In the case of Rakosi and the Library of America it seems to me to be a very big issue indeed, for two very simple reasons: its anthology includes none of the early poems dealing

with the immigrant and urban experience, and it passes over entirely the great, late poem "The Old Poet's Tale". Put another way, we have neither Rakosi the "Objectivist" nor Rakosi the poet of old age. Instead we have (again I quote the dust-jacket) what is described as "the aphoristic wit of Carl Rakosi". Really? I'd have thought Rakosi's wit was too metaphysical to be confined thus. Take the 1986 version of "Lying in Bed on a Summer Morning".

A contrary air.

It is gone.

And by the blue sky,

clear as in Genesis,

holds.

What is there between us?

an abstract air....

a state sans question

or inquietude....

something light

as a country air

yet serious as gold

or man sui generis.

Diction, contrast, and the controlled pace of repetition and variation together perform the turns of language that allow the problem of being to be addressed with the composure of wit. (Mere serenity is witless.) Whatever the grounds for choice of text in this case, there can be no appeal to textual authority.