



Making Something Happen: American Political Poetry between the World Wars

Michael Thurston

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Poetry makes nothing happen," wrote W. H. Auden in 1939, expressing a belief that came to dominate American literary institutions in the late 1940s--the idea that good poetry cannot, and should not, be politically engaged. By contrast, Michael Thurston here looks back to the 1920s and 1930s to a generation of poets who wrote with the precise hope and the deep conviction that they would move their audiences to action. He offers an engaging new look at the political poetry of Edwin Rolfe, Langston Hughes, Ezra Pound, and Muriel Rukeyser.

Thurston combines close textual reading of the poems with research into their historical context to reveal how these four poets deployed the resources of tradition and experimentation to contest and redefine political common sense. In the process, he demonstrates that the aesthetic censure under which much partisan writing has labored needs dramatic revision. Although each of these poets worked with different forms and toward different ends, Thurston shows that their strategies succeed as poetry. He argues that partisan poetry demands reflection not only on how we evaluate poems but also on what we value in poems and, therefore, which poems we elevate.

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