

Paul Metcalf (1917-1999)

A Brief Study of His Life and Works

by Jacob Siefring

Paul Cuthbert Metcalf was a documentary poet and novelist, travel writer, playwright, and essayist. Born in eastern Massachusetts and raised in Cambridge, he was a great-grandson of Herman Melville, a figure he placed at the center of his first major work, the documentary novel *Genoa: A Telling of Wonders* (1965). Almost all of Metcalf's works cull and intermix material from dozens or sometimes even hundreds of historical and scholarly source texts arranged in sophisticated montage sequences. At times, his work is truly polyphonic. Metcalf constructed his first two books, *Will West* and *Genoa*, around fictional protagonists and situations, but the bulk of his work opts instead for a poetic and narrative treatment of geographical themes. Notable books in this vein include *Patagoni* (1971), *The Middle Passage: A Triptych of Commodities* (1976), *Apalache* (1976), *U.S. Dept. of Interior* (1980), *Waters of Potowmack* (1982), and *I-57* (1988).

Metcalf's signature mode was quotation and juxtaposition, and his typical subject matter was historical America. Writing of *Genoa*, a work that sees Christopher Columbus and Herman Melville as having twinned destinies, Guy Davenport credited him with advancing a new kind of "architectonic" writing (317). Whereas most writers would use simile or metaphor to draw analogies, Metcalf set quotations from various sources in startling collision. In their most powerful applications, these juxtapositions are like an illustrated metaphor or a homology revealed. A wide range of different terms have been applied to his signature technique (*bricolage*, collage, montage, mosaic),

but by his late career, we know that Metcalf encouraged his readers to see his works as “narrative hieroglyphs,” or even totem poles (*Collected Works Vol 3*, p. 58).

The effect of such juxtapositions can be exhilarating. One or two examples from his late chapbook-length works are illustrative of this. Take *Firebird* (1987), for instance. This chapbook is comprised almost solely of quotations drawn from two separate registers: on the one hand, historical accounts of the cataclysmic flaming tornado that leveled the Wisconsin town of Peshtigo during the drought of 1871; and, on the other, descriptions of annual hawk migrations in New England. By collating descriptions of these two similarly airborne phenomena, Metcalf’s text seems to embody a hidden homology between two forms of swirling, turbulent energy, with the words on the page hanging in white space like particles of hot ash or birds in flight. The fusion of subjects is seamless and total, instantiated even in the work’s title: *Firebird*. One other such example is *Araminta and the Coyotes* (1991), in which accounts of undocumented border crossings by Mexicans in the contemporary era echo accounts of slaves heading north on the Underground Railroad a full century before. For a final example, one could cite *Willie’s Throw* (1979), a poem in which the physical forces behind an epic play from the outfield by baseball great Willie Mays are seen to coincide exactly with those of a discus thrower in ancient Greece. The idea of historical recurrence and similarity was thus an abiding interest for Metcalf. “Repetition of pattern, repetition of design in history fascinates the hell out of me,” he told his interviewers (Hurbert and Bocchi 36). Elsewhere, he wrote, “My effort in all the books [...] has been to collapse time, to create a plane on which events of all periods may occur at once” (*Collected Works Vol 3*, p. 56).

The typographic presentation in Metcalf’s books is frequently unusual or complex. Written alternately in prose and poetry, his composition makes use of hanging line breaks, variable indents, and sometimes multiple typefaces. These

typographic tendencies were surely a factor in the labeling of Metcalf's work as experimental. This was a characterization at which Metcalf balked, however. He saw himself as continuing in the poetic tradition advanced by Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, and Charles Olson, all of whom drew upon historical and documentary sources for their poetry while evincing similar typographic quirks. One reason Metcalf was quick to reject the "experimental" label was his wish to distance himself from other forms of poetic experimentalism ascendant in his day, such as that practiced by Gertrude Stein, John Ashbery, and by the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets. He tended to see such experimentation as vacuous or agnostic with respect to questions of meaning and representation. Metcalf believed that literature should be grounded in concrete subjects, not founder in abstraction.

Though it occupied him for much of his life, writing was rarely a significant source of income for Metcalf. After dropping out of Harvard and briefly pursuing training as a stage actor, he earned his living from 1940 to 1963 in many different capacities, including as a schoolbus driver, traveling salesman, store clerk, volunteer fireman, and termite exterminator. During these decades, he lived with his family in the south, most notably in the Asheville area in close proximity to Black Mountain College. In 1963, he and his wife purchased a three-story farmhouse in Becket, Massachusetts, in the Berkshire Mountains. It was here that he opened a real estate business, which he operated some dozen years before selling it. By that time, he had acquired a small inheritance and was at last receiving recognition for his writing, mostly in the form of grants, lecture fees, and visiting professorships. Thus, for the last two decades of his life, from the mid-1970s until his death in 1999, Metcalf's primary occupation was writing.

The rural farmhouse milieu was to prove salutary to Metcalf's art and activity for a number of reasons. First of all, it meant an active relationship to the land and the outdoors, something Metcalf valued all his life long. Tall and physically strong, he

believed physical work was every bit as important, if not more important than, the more sedentary work of writing. At the farmhouse, there was always work to be done. Second, the Becket farmhouse granted him a degree of independence from the literary currents of his day. In his writing and his attitudes, Metcalf was an individualist, wary of groups and ideologies, and the rural life suited him all the more for that. For his research, he had all the libraries he needed within an hour's drive: for general topics, the public library in Pittsfield, and for more specialized materials, the university collections of Northampton, with their interlibrary loan services, of utmost importance to projects like *Patagoni* and *Apalache*. Lastly, Metcalf had outfitted the small shed in the backyard as his writing studio, equipping it with a daybed, dictionaries, a typewriter, and rolltop desk. The brick façade of this tiny studio can be seen in several author photos from Metcalf's books, most notably on the title page of *The Middle Passage*.

Metcalf's publishing career spanned the second half of his life, 1956 to 1998. His twenty-odd books were published by small presses in small print runs. These editions tend to fall into one of two categories: elegant hardcover volumes, such as those published by North Point Press, Turtle Island Foundation, and Jonathan Williams's Jargon Society; or handmade, chapbook-length works, such as those published by Chax Press, Tansy Press, and various others. All of Metcalf's major works are preserved for posterity today in a three-volume hardcover edition of his *Collected Works*, published in 1996 and 1997 by Coffee House Press. His private papers are housed in the Berg Collection of the New York Public Library, where they may be consulted by appointment.

Early Life: 1917-1936

Paul Cuthbert Metcalf was born on November 7, 1917, in East Milton, Massachusetts, to Henry Knight Metcalf and Eleanor Melville Thomas Metcalf. Soon after Paul's

birth, the family moved to Cambridge, where Paul and his elder brother David passed their childhood. The family was keenly aware of New England history and tradition, being descended on both sides from illustrious ancestors. Henry was a direct descendant of Roger Williams, founder of Rhode Island, and also of William Bradford, second governor of Plymouth Colony. Among Eleanor's ancestors were the Revolutionary War colonel Peter Gansevoort, and Herman Melville, author of *Moby-Dick*.

The Metcalfs were well known and respected in their community. Paul's father Henry worked for most of his career as an insurance executive. Like so many, he lost his job during the Depression but was well liked enough in the community to be hired soon afterwards in a new position. Late in life, Paul would remember him as a very gentle man. He tended to have more mixed feelings about his mother, finding her influence and expectations constraining. Nonetheless, Paul's childhood in Cambridge was apparently a happy one. His early schooling was at the Shady Hill School in Cambridge, a private school with a large outdoor campus. Activities outside of school included baseball and canoeing on the Concord River.

A life-altering moment in both Eleanor's and Paul's lives came in 1919, with Eleanor's discovery of the manuscript of *Billy Budd: A Sailor*, stored away in a breadbox in the family attic. Written at the end of Melville's life, the manuscript had never seen the light of day. Eleanor approved its first publication in 1924 in an edition edited by the scholar Raymond Weaver. This chain of events coincided with, and also contributed to, a spike of interest in Melville's writings and legacy, now known as the Melville revival. During the 1920s and 1930s, numerous Melville scholars visited the Metcalf home to discuss the great writer, transforming their living room into something of "a Melville salon" (*Enter Isabel*, p. 10). In later decades, Eleanor would go on to edit and publish two editions of Melville's writing, *Journal of a Visit to London*

and the Continent (1948) and a collection of family correspondence, *Herman Melville, cycle and epicycle* (1953). She also wrote poetry, on occasion self-publishing it for family and friends.

Another key incident in Metcalf's childhood arose around a potentially serious medical issue that became apparent around the age of seven. Around 1925, Paul was found to have a "misplaced" nerve in his spine, and he underwent a risky surgery to have a piece of vertebra removed. The surgery was successful, but the presence of such a medical condition would later lead to Metcalf's exemption from military service during World War II.

Another pivotal moment came in 1931, when a young Melville scholar named Charles Olson, then in the very early stages of research for his Melville book, *Call Me Ishmael* (1947), came to pay his respects to the author's descendants. According to Metcalf, Olson was the only visiting scholar to take an interest in him as anything besides the son of Eleanor. He was fourteen years old at the time, Olson twenty-one. The friendship between the two was to prove long-lasting and formative, although it was not without some competitiveness and some wariness, by Metcalf's own admission. A full remembrance of Olson may be found in Metcalf's essay collection *Where Do You Put the Horse?* (1986), reprinted in the third volume of his *Collected Works*.

Early Adulthood: 1936-1946

After graduating with honors from the Taft School in Watertown, Connecticut, Metcalf enrolled at Harvard. To say that formal study did not suit him would be an understatement. Most of his time he spent at a bar and grill across from Harvard Yard. When the first exam period came, he dropped out. He soon followed his elder brother David to the Hedgerow Theater in Philadelphia, aspiring to become a stage actor. The

Hedgerow was then under the direction of Jasper Deeters. During the Metcalf brothers' time there, the company's productions included an adaptation of Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*. Anderson was on site overseeing rehearsals, which brought the Metcalf brothers into brief contact with Anderson, a much admired author in his day. It was around this time Metcalf first expressed an ambition to become a writer, telling his girlfriend so. His first literary efforts from this time were plays — not very good ones, he would add; he never sought to have them published.

Responding to her son's interest in literature, Eleanor Metcalf arranged for him to spend some weeks during the summer of 1941 living and studying with the writer Conrad Aiken at a house on Cape Cod. In this mentoring role, Aiken introduced Metcalf to books by Kafka and Faulkner and also taught him how to compose a sonnet. The introduction to Faulkner was of especial importance, for it led to an early immersion in the Mississippi novelist's fictions. This influence can be felt very much in Metcalf's first publication, *Will West*.

After a couple years in Philadelphia, culminating in a romantic split with his girlfriend of the time, Metcalf left the Hedgerow for Charleston, South Carolina, where he took a position as publicity director for the Dock Street Theatre and joined a playwrights group under the direction of Dubose Heyward. It was during this period that he met a young debutante, Nancy Harman Blackford. It did not take long for the two to fall in love, and they were married on Memorial Day, 1942. It was to be a long-lasting union, terminated only by Paul's death fifty-seven years later.

For the first two years of their marriage, Paul and Nancy lived in Spartanburg, South Carolina. They soon moved to New York City, taking lodgings first in Manhattan, then Brooklyn. In 1944, Paul and Nancy became parents when Nancy gave birth to a daughter, named Anne. It was around this time that Metcalf discovered the modernist poets Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams, whose work struck him

with the force of a revelation. It was the work of Williams that was to be particularly formative, namely *Paterson*. A canonical text of American modernism, Williams's *Paterson* is a long poem sequence composed around the notion of a city. The book blends lyrical poetry with the prose of private letters, found texts, stories and anecdotes printed in old newspapers, even a table of geological substratum with corresponding depths taken from a site along the Passaic River. The use of documentary materials and of a nuanced visual prosody (marked by multiple typefaces, variable line breaks, and multiple levels of indent) all provide an early model for Metcalf's mature work.

The Metcalfs' time in New York was not to last, however. By 1945 Metcalf had contracted a case of tuberculosis. So the family moved briefly to Cambridge, then to a rural property in the Nacoochee Valley in the mountains of North Georgia owned by Nancy's family. The move was based in part on the antiquated notion that mountain air would expedite Metcalf's convalescence. Perhaps it did; Metcalf would later report having done "all the reading I would have done in college, and more" during this time of recovery (*Willie's Throw*, front inside flap). Not long afterwards, he embarked on his first substantial writing project, a novel titled alternately *The Statue* or *Household Gods*. In his later career Metcalf would describe it as domestic, entirely conventional, influenced by his reading of Proust, and not very good. Metcalf tried to find an agent and a publisher for it, but to no avail.

North Carolina: 1946-1963

With Metcalf's convalescence more or less complete, in 1946 the small family moved to the mountains of western North Carolina to be nearer to Nancy's parents. They first lived for a number of years in Skyland, a suburb of Asheville, and in 1956 moved into a wood cabin at the more remote location of Merrill Cove. The time and place are pivotal to Metcalf's development for three reasons. First of all, the land itself is a strikingly

beautiful region, situated in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Appalachia, and it clearly impressed the author. It is vividly depicted in two works from the period, *Will West* and *Merrill Cove*. Second, and equally important to Metcalf's development, was the Asheville community, especially the nearby Black Mountain College. Although Metcalf was never a student or a regular at Black Mountain, its associations were to prove invaluable, for it indirectly led to a lifelong friendship with fellow writer Jonathan Williams, the founder and publisher of *The Jargon Society*. Metcalf's meeting with Williams came about in 1954 through the intermediary of Charles Olson, then teaching at Black Mountain. Williams would eventually go on to publish six of Metcalf's books in editions of stunning design and quality.

Also during this period, Metcalf made the discovery of Dianetics. The brainchild of L. Ron Hubbard (of later Scientology fame), Dianetics was a new "science of mental health" aimed at a kind of liberation from traumatic or unhealthy psychic traces (so-called "engrams"). We know that Metcalf served in the role of "Dianetics auditor" for several years. Such a role probably entailed offering guided talking therapy to other followers or potential recruits. Several of the tenets of this so-called science appear as latent organizing principles in *Genoa*. Fortunately, Metcalf's adherence to Hubbard's dogma was not long-lived.

Will West

Metcalf's first published work was a novella-length fiction titled *Will West* (1956). Although it is a minor work with a few awkward passages, it nevertheless announces many of the themes that would hold his attention for decades to come: the land, its history, the natives and the early explorers. With the book's interpolations, set in italics to distinguish them from the narrative's third-person realist viewpoint, one can see

Metcalf developing a technique of documentary juxtaposition that lays the ground for its more liberal and daring use in *Genoa* and later works.

The protagonist Will West is a Cherokee of mixed blood, raised on “the Cherokee Reservation in the Great Smoky Mountains of Western North Carolina” (*Collected Works Vol. 1*, p. 4). In the book’s opening, he is standing on the pitcher’s mound, preparing to pitch before a crowd of thousands in the eighth inning.

Interpolated with the third-person point of view paragraphs are italicized paragraphs representing Will’s interior monologue. One passage in particular articulates an ethos that could be said to guide Metcalf’s work:

It is those of us who cannot untangle ourselves from the past that are really dangerous in the present because we are only partly here our eyes are blind because our appetites are turned inward or backward chewing on the cold remnants of our inheritance of our facts of our history to try to find who we are what we are where we came from what is the ground we stand on to whom does it belong and did it belong. (*Collected Works Vol. 1*, p. 7)

The ballgame spectators have been taunting Will with Indian whoops. Will throws the pitch, and the batter scores several runs; now in anger and shame, Will flees the scene. Next, he is alone on the beach and chances upon a woman walking alone. Without a word exchanged, she and Will tussle and frolic on the beach and in the breaking surf. They mingle at the foot of a dune and fall asleep. Later, in the rolling surf, Will inexplicably kills the woman by strangling her. In the next scene, Will is at his mother’s cabin, smoking a pipe, about to say a final goodbye and flee west. Interpolated with the main narrative, a second italicized voice relates Cherokee rituals and myths. After an emotional goodbye, Will is arrested at the door. He flees his captors and takes a bullet

in the shoulder. Next we see him crossing the Appalachian divide near Lake Fontana. The final chapter depicts Will hitching a ride with a trucker driving a freight of peaches to Dallas. Picking Will up near Jackson, Mississippi, Ferd the driver and Will share conversation and cigarettes. Juxtaposed in the italicized register are incidents from the 1539 march of the early Spanish conquistador Hernando De Soto through Mississippi, including the slaughter and enslavement of the natives and De Soto's death. As the car passes Vicksburg National Military Park, the narration alternates with passages describing Grant's maneuvers at the Battle of Vicksburg. The short book ends with driver and hitchhiker crossing the Mississippi River by bridge, and Will thinking that this is only the first of his border crossings, with the Rio Grande still ahead.

Metcalf did his research for the historical and anthropological aspects of the book at the Sondley Reference Library, a historical collection of the Asheville Pack Memorial Public Library. A map from the 18th century depicting Cherokee territory, provided by the librarians, figures prominently on the cover. Five hundred copies of the book were printed, with costs covered by Metcalf's parents.

Genoa: A Telling of Wonders

With *Will West* complete, Metcalf began to conceive of a project that would engage the legacy and writings of his great-grandfather. Sensing that he had been avoiding him, he set out to read the entirety of Melville's writings in their original order. An outgrowth of this completist reading, *Genoa: A Telling of Wonders* (1965) is in part an inquiry into the mystery of Melville's genius. Yet it is not quite a work of biography or scholarship; rather, it is a novel with a fictional protagonist, incorporating hundreds of direct quotations from Melville's work and sundry other sources. In other words, it is a book

in which “fact and fancy, halfway meeting, interpenetrate, and form one seamless whole,” to quote Metcalf, quoting Melville (*Collected Works Vol. 1*, p. 90).

The fictional plot line revolves around two brothers, Carl and Michael Mills. Alone in the attic of his Indianapolis farmhouse through the night, Michael is attempting to comprehend his brother Carl’s life and death, along with the mystery of his own inability to heal. Both brothers are dysfunctional each in their own way: Michael is a clubfoot, a trained medical doctor who does not practice but instead works at the local auto plant for a low wage; his brother, a convicted kidnapper and murderer, has recently been executed by the state. This far-ranging quest for understanding is refracted through sundry quotations lifted from the books in his library, including the writings of Christopher Columbus, medical textbooks (*Gray’s Anatomy* and *A Textbook of Embryology*), H. Bondi’s *Cosmology*, and so on. Citations for these volumes figure in the body of the narrative as well as in the bibliography, announcing the explicitly intertextual, quotational nature of the narrative.

The divergent nature of this quoted material can be overwhelming. Running throughout *Genoa*, there are at least three or four different storylines. Melville and Columbus, for instance. Do their life trajectories make for two different stories, or a single twinned fate? Furthermore, what is the relation between the two brothers and the Columbus-Melville dyad? What is certain is that the notion of multiple time-tracks, an idea Metcalf borrowed from Dianetics, informs the book’s use of parallelism and simultaneity.

Yet another idea taken from Dianetics important to *Genoa* is the idea of a link between physiology and memory. Accordingly, as Michael Mills probes his memories, he experiences and describes many disturbances of mind and sensation: split vision, blurry vision, hemiplegia. It is as if the reckoning with his past causes Michael Mills to experience a series of physiological changes in his brain, and concomitantly in his

perception of time and space. Metcalf's fascination for the brain's mysterious workings would reappear in such later works *I-57* and *Dept. of Interior*.

Typographically, *Genoa* is complex. Various levels of indent, italics, and two different fonts are used to signal the shifting of registers of quotation. The juxtapositions here are more bold and visionary than in *Will West*, bridging scales (microscopic and macroscopic) and reaching across divergent disciplines (medicine, cetology, biography), even to cosmology. In what is arguably the book's visionary climax, the arrival of Columbus in the New World is likened to the arrival of a spermatazoon at an ovum, commencing a new form of life.

Genoa was published by The Jargon Society in 1965, by which time Metcalf was living only a short drive from Arrowhead, the house where Melville had lived from 1850 until 1863. The initial print run was 2,000 copies, and the printing costs were paid in large part by Paul's mother Eleanor. Charles Olson was also involved in publication, as he read the book in manuscript form, provided written comments to Metcalf, and contributed text for the jacket copy.

Metcalf had written a very fine book, some would even call it his best, but not until *Patagoni* would he be free of the onus of finding the money to cover his own printing costs. Today, *Genoa* remains Metcalf's most widely read and most frequently reissued work. It is also the only one of his books to have been translated into a foreign language, German, in 2000.

Patagoni

Metcalf's next book, *Patagoni* (1971), shows a turn towards the geographical perspective that would continue to occupy him for the rest of his career. This book was begun as early as the spring of 1959, for it was then that Metcalf traveled alone to Peru and Bolivia. Essentially, the book depicts a sharp contrast between the cultures of the

two Americas. On the one hand, South America, Peru, its ancient civilizations, folklore, terrain, flora and fauna. On the other hand, North American modern industrial society, epitomized in the text by Detroit, car culture, and the life and times of the cranky and eccentric inventor Henry Ford. By adopting a vertical, north-south perspective on the Americas, Metcalf hoped to bypass the familiar east-west axis along which narratives of American history are normally viewed.

The lion's share of its text is devoted to South America. The long opening poem "Tihuanacu" details the ecology of the western coast of South America, along with its native creation myths and ancient folklore. The text is dense and unpunctuated, multilingual and neologistic. Here, as so often in his mature work, Metcalf seems to delight in the peculiarity of place-names and to indulge his penchant for forming new compounds. The landscape is depicted as teeming with all manner of gigantic exotic species in interaction: sundry species of birds, jaguars, anacondas, alligators, bats, termites, etc. One section makes ample use of the specialized language of geology to dramatically depict the orogeny of the Andes mountains. Another, set in prose, consists of a "recipe" lifted verbatim from George Catlin's memoirs, instructing the reader on how to prepare a mosquito soup (while not being eaten alive). This chapter concludes with an ekphrastic description of the ancient Tihuanacu temples and the animistic worldview of their builders. It is a dizzying, almost kaleidoscopic view of a region seen in simultaneity from multiple perspectives, and it is as heavily researched as anything Metcalf ever wrote. Over a hundred works on South America are cited in the appendix.

The last and longest section is the travelogue "Diario y Cartas" (literally, "diary and map"). It is made up of journal entries and letters Metcalf posted to his wife Nancy during his travels to Peru in 1959. It records immediate impressions of his visits to Tihuanacu, Machu Picchu and other archaeological sites, as well as his experience of

the many hotels, buses, and friendships struck up along the way. It also serves as a testing ground for some of the bold ideas behind the book's conception. At one point, Metcalf ventures that the "western hemisphere is a man"; Patagonia would then be his foot, Brazil his torso, and North America his oversize head (*Collected Works Vol. 1*, p. 381). In another entry, he muses that early man was a nomadic hunter until permanent settlements enabled agriculture and more complex civilizations to emerge. He goes on to observe that the advent of car culture has made humankind "once more nomadic" (*Collected Works Vol. 1*, p. 376). It is in these final musings that the book's unusual, fractured form begins to come clear: the master metaphor of *Patagoni* might be circulation, mobility, the displacement of peoples.

Visually, the first edition of *Patagoni* is stunning. Various illustrations signal the odd juxtaposition of subject matter. The front dust jacket shows a frontal view of a Model T superimposed on the Incan motif of the creator god Viracocha, while the back dust jacket sets a photo of Henry Ford alongside a photo of an Andean Indian. The inside cover pages feature a reproduction of two stock-cars in high-speed collision on a racetrack, while those in the back in the back depict a sea of rapt faces in a stadium crowd. The text includes such eclectic matter as a one-page extract from an edition of McGuffey's Eclectic Reader, sheets of musical notation for Peruvian songs, and several pages from a manual for the assembly of the Ford crank box. To top it all off, bold Incan motifs decorate the book at its title page and at every chapter division. Such elaborate ornamentation and design led the book's sale price to be relatively costly, \$8.50, a factor that surely hindered sales.

After completing *Patagoni*, Metcalf would claim to have experienced a brief period of indirection in his writing. Perhaps it was the anti-climax of publishing *Patagoni*, a book over a decade in the making, that was responsible for this short hiatus. In any case, the lull didn't last, for Metcalf soon began gathering material and taking

notes for his next two books, *Apalache* and *The Middle Passage*, both of which appeared in 1976. Chronologically, they mark the midpoint of Metcalf's publishing years and also show him at the height of his powers.

Also in the wake of *Patagoni*, Metcalf began contacting university English departments around the eastern United States in an attempt to secure temporary employment, either as a visiting lecturer or an invited speaker. The great majority of these attempts were unsuccessful, but in due time Metcalf would be offered numerous invitations of that kind.

The Middle Passage: A Triptych of Commodities

Published by The Jargon Society, *The Middle Passage: A Triptych of Commodities* (1976) was a slim paperback volume, shorter than any of the books Metcalf had hitherto published. As such, it is the first chapbook-length work in Metcalf's oeuvre. Its subject matter is three-fold, the book being divided into three parts of roughly equal length. The first ("Ludd") narrates the Luddite uprising of 1811 and 1812, when English textile workers entered factories and mills and destroyed weaving machinery, culminating in violent armed clashes and executions. The middle section, "Efik," draws on first-person accounts of the horrific conditions aboard slave ships, and is thus in a double sense "the middle passage" of the book's title. The last section, "Orca," views whales from a cetological perspective with a focus on lifecycle, behavior, and anatomy, and also from the perspective of whaling captains, who like the fictional Captain Ahab sometimes suffered their wrath.

The relationship between these three subjects is stated nowhere in the text. Though the subtitle suggests commodification as the central thread linking whales, slaves, and Luddites, it was in fact suggested to Metcalf by a Marxist friend who read the book in manuscript when the draft was all but complete. The book's triptych

structure grew out of intuitive association, then, not as an illustration of a preformulated idea or concept.

The visual presentation of *The Middle Passage* is again quite striking. The original edition has a bright-yellow cover displaying floorplan diagrams of slaveships — vaguely resembling whales in outline — and also a patent drawing for a bobbin machine. The quoted material is presented variously in blocks of prose and free verse. Chapter divisions reproduce further supporting visual motifs drawn from archives: images of whales, looms, and slaveships.

Apalache

Apalache (1976) was published in an elegant hardcover binding by the Turtle Island Foundation. Inexplicably, in his introduction to Metcalf's *Collected Works*, Guy Davenport does not single it out as a work that might merit the name of masterpiece, an honor he reserves for *Genoa*, *Patagoni*, and *Waters of Potowmack*. This omission notwithstanding, *Apalache* is a work of equal scope and ambition, and perhaps Metcalf's crowning achievement. It also probably the most typographically nuanced of his books. At the request of the typesetter, Clifford Burke, Metcalf made a tape recording of himself reading the entire book, so that he "could gather my intentions as to layout from the way I spoke it" (*From Quarry Road*, p. 42).

Shaped by its author's signature techniques of condensation, juxtaposition, and collage, *Apalache* is Metcalf's New World epic, a poem cycle or long poem in the manner of Olson's *The Maximus Poems*, Williams's *Paterson*, or Pound's *Cantos*. It recounts the continent's primal beginnings, its geology, its native languages, its discovery by the Vikings and by Europeans, and the vicissitudes of contact between settlers and natives. In its reliance on records of early America and in the multiplicity of its perspectives, it could be said to be the most archaeological and panoramic of

Metcalf's books, dedicated to exhuming North America's deep past. Fittingly, the dust jacket and chapter divisions of the original edition are adorned with images of prehistoric artwork.

Exploration and first contact are a central motif, along with the sense of wonder that the first Europeans to arrive in the New World must have felt in such new surroundings. The first section begins by drawing on the rich, antiquated, Elizabethan language of Philip Amidas and Arthur Barlowe's accounts of their 1584 expedition to the coasts and islands of North Carolina prior to the founding the failed colony of Roanoke Island. Subsequent sections detail episodes from the expeditions of such famous explorers as Leif Erikson, Robert de La Salle, Jacques Cartier, and Sebastian Cabot. The more harrowing side of contact is depicted through Pierre Esprit Radisson's seventeenth-century account of his captivity and torture by the Iroquois. The potential for more harmonious relations is illustrated through the figures of Roger Williams (incidentally, Metcalf's ancestor) and William Blackstone. Both men were freethinkers expelled by their Puritan communities, contested the right of the English to take the natives' soil, and earned the friendship and trust of the natives.

Elsewhere, *Apalache* contains a wealth of information about the Amerindians. The chapter "Bash Bish" features a section consisting solely of native words for places and trails located in eastern North America. Some of these might sound vaguely familiar to the reader (*patawomek* and *chesiopeek* sound like Potomac and Chesapeake, for instance), but most are foreign. This dense cross-section of the indigenous language of America is striking for its poetic and musical effect. Yet another section describes the migrations of native tribes in proto-historical times as recorded by oral traditions, while the last chapter, "Beothuk," is named for a tribe that vanished. Among other things, *Apalache* is a paean for the lost peoples and cultures of North America.

As elsewhere in Metcalf's books, simultaneity and recurrence are here organizing principles. In "Cocoanut Indians," for instance, two historic New England fires seem to unfold seamlessly: that of the Great Swamp Fight of 1675, when a colonial militia torched a Narragansett village in present-day Rhode Island, killing women and children; and that of the Cocoanut Grove nightclub fire that took place in Boston of 1942, resulting in nearly five hundred deaths. Likewise, the chapter "Telemaque" uses a two-column layout to set the tale of Denmark Vesey's failed slave uprising of 1822 alongside accounts of Robert F. Williams's actions with the Black Armed Guard in Monroe, North Carolina in 1961. A single scenario thus appears to play out in two different times and places.

I-57

Metcalf's next significant project after *Apalache* was *I-57* (1988). In fact, the text of *I-57* may have been nearly complete as early as 1976. Among the circumstances delaying publication, foremost was the problem of finding a publisher. Metcalf's attempts to find a commercial publisher through a New York literary agent came to naught.

In the preface, Metcalf describes it in the following way: "Not a poem, not a novel, not a history, not a journal, yet at times some or all of these — *I-57* is an idiosyncratic approach to a place, a region, and to an interior and exterior life" (*Collected Works Vol. 2*, p. 3). The book would be tantamount to a journey, "from madness to sanity," "from inside the skull [...] to outside, [...] from *me* to *you*" (*Collected Works Vol. 2*, p. 3). As Metcalf explained in an interview,

I wrote *I-57* as a random challenge to myself. I was 57 years old at the time, and I made the Interstate Highway, I-57, running north and south through Illinois,

the focus of the book, much as a river is the focus of *Waters of Potowmack*. [...]
the highway is the center, the spine, if you wish, holding together the land, the
history, the people around it. (Myers, Jr.)

Conceptually, *I-57* advances the metaphor of land as human anatomy while taking it in the direction of symptomology and medical memoirs. Divided into five parts, it opens by quoting from myriad first-hand accounts of psychiatric disturbances as recorded in the memoirs of persons suffering from schizophrenia and other illnesses. This section is a sparsely punctuated poem, with Metcalf assuming the first-person “i” of various speakers and adapting their words to construct stanzas from them. Part two, the briefest, initiates the movement away from subjectivity towards objectivity by employing specialized medical terminology to describe anomalies in the brain tissue of schizophrenics as revealed by various medical techniques such as tissue staining. Part three takes the reader through the historical record of the upper Mississippi region while juxtaposing various landmarks with the terminology of cerebral anatomy, such as the cranial fossae, the crista galli, the vagus nerve, and so on. Thus, one’s progress through the Illinois landscape (seen in chunks of historical quotations) is seen to correspond with a progress through parts of the brain, while the branchings of the Mississippi with its tributaries are seen to correspond to branchings of nerves and arteries. The fourth section, organized as a sequence of original poems, goes even further to drive home the homology between the human body and the Midwestern landscape. The epidermis, the body’s most exterior layer, would be an analogue for the earth’s crust, with further analogies between subcutaneous and connective tissue and the earth’s various layers. The last and longest section is a travelogue from a journey taken by Metcalf and his wife Nancy in April 1974, heading northward along I-57 from Sikeston, Missouri to Chicago, Illinois. This section is more eclectic than any of

the preceding sections, incorporating itineraries, landscape description, text lifted from guidebooks and gazetteers, photos, graffiti, and the like. There are perhaps two moments worthy of brief comment. One occurs when Paul and Nancy track down a 102-year-old woman who was the subject of a newspaper article, and are welcomed into her home for a visit with her and her companions. Metcalf whimsically gives the episode the loose structure of a play for the stage, beginning playfully with a “CAST OFF CHARACTERS” (*Collected Works Vol. 2*, p. 79).

Farther along their itinerary, the couple make a brief stop in the hamlet of Metcalf, Illinois. However implausibly, Metcalf’s narration would suggest that his discovery of the town is a total surprise. He stops in at the post office and purchases the town’s centennial book for a dollar, at which point the travelogue is interrupted by five pages of historic talk-of-the-town from that publication. The travelogue concludes with Paul and Nancy’s arrival in Chicago and their approach to Chicago O’Hare International Airport.

In addition to the two dozen photos taken by Metcalf during his journey, the book also features a dozen “photo-images” created by the artist Leni Fuhrman. The latter images range from an x-ray of a skull to collages suggestive of rivers and the human circulatory and nervous systems. *I-57* would eventually be published in 1988 by Longriver Books in a trade paperback binding. One hundred copies were specially bound and signed by the author.

U.S. Dept. of the Interior

Another slim volume, *U.S. Dept. of the Interior* (1980) resumes some of the ideas set forth in *Patagoni*: the origins of life in the two Americas, and the metaphor of continent as human anatomy. The geographic point of view is again hemispheric, given to speculations about early indigenous human habitation in the Americas, namely

through the Bering Strait and Alaska. There is also an emphasis on seismic activity, with two sections being accounts of earthquakes, respectively, the New Madrid earthquake of 1812 and the Anchorage earthquake of 1964. Another section, “Megrim,” is a collage of symptoms and terminology corresponding to disturbances of mind and vision, such as migraine, neuralgia, scotomata, etc. Through subtle cues, these two themes are juxtaposed so as to suggest the equation of seismic activity with brain disturbances, the equation of continent and cranium, both traversed by tremors. The *interior* of the title would then be not only the North American interior, centered on the fault line running below New Madrid, but also the interior of a migraine sufferer’s skull, or even the subjective experience of madness. A chapter title, “NEW MAD’-rid,” with its emphasis on the “mad” of Madrid, concatenates these motifs in typical Metcalf fashion. Like *I-57* and *Patagoni* before it, *U.S. Dept. of the Interior* features a travelogue as its longest section. “Alaska in Transition” is a lively travelogue written during Metcalf’s trip to Anchorage in April 1978. He had been invited to give a talk at a conference of that name by Saradell Frederick, at the behest of anthropologist Steve Langdon and historian Bob Frederick. Included in the text are notes from his talk, including the following “proposal,” which might serve as a cogent description of his geographically inspired approach to literary composition:

Proposal: a series of regional research and cultural projects—attack each region—using students, locals, natives, whatever—and from every angle, every scholarly discipline, every mode of expression. In the end, for each region, produce a book, and an arts festival. (*Collected Works Vol. 2*, p. 208)

Both

Metcalf's next book, *Both* (1982), began as a sort of inquiry into the mentality of the American south. Like *The Middle Passage* before it, it is structured in three parts. First and last are capsule biographies of two famous southerners, Edgar Allan Poe and John Wilkes Booth. Under Metcalf's pen, the similarities between Poe's and Booth's lives are made to appear striking and uncanny. Foremost among these coincidences is the suggestion that both men were each in their own way actors. Poe, we are told, "always seemed shrouded in an assumed character"; it is suggested that his life involved a confusion of actor and role; and his reading voice was once observed to resemble that of Booth's actor brother, Edwin (*Collected Works Vol. 2*, p. 270). John Wilkes Booth was a professional stage actor and, furthermore, his assassination of President Abraham Lincoln occurred at Ford's Theatre, where Booth rose to the role of actor upon the stage of history. This more or less simple juxtaposition of personages is richly complicated by the book's middle and longest section, "Waterworld," itself divided into two sections. The longer of these is the historically true story of Thomas Dudley, a shipcaptain hired to sail a small yacht with a small crew from Britain to Australia in 1884. After shipwreck, the crew survived together in a lifeboat for several weeks to the point of starvation, at which point cannibalism ensued. After the rescue and return to England of the crew, the case was heard in court and led to a famous legal precedent, (*R v Dudley and Stephens*), establishing that necessity is no excuse for murder. Publicly disgraced after some time in prison, Dudley moved to Australia, where the tale continues in a much more fantastical vein. Indeed, Metcalf's version of the tale relies strangely on a much-embellished account of the shipwreck and its aftermath, *Blood on the Sea* (1962) by Donald McCormick. Suffice it to say that the relation between parts in *Both* is enigmatic, a riddle left to the reader to solve. After receiving funding from the National Endowment for the Arts, *Both* was published by The Jargon Society in a large, luxurious hardcover binding in 1982.

Waters of Potowmack

Metcalf's next book *Waters of Potowmack* (1982) is by contrast very unified in theme. It is a documentary history of the Potomac River and its watershed. In preparation for the project, Metcalf spent a year immersing himself in the literature of the region. Quoting from letters, journals, scholarly works, and official documents, the book takes readers through the prehistory and history of the region. Because this region figures so centrally in the history of the United States of America, *Waters of Potowmack* has the feel of a national epic or saga. It incorporates excerpts from the letters of the Founding Fathers and reveals the sad tale of Pierre Charles L'Enfant's involvement in the design of Washington, D.C. The book's dramatic climax would appear to be structured around events of the Civil War, especially the uprising of John Brown, the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln by John Wilkes Booth, and lastly Booth's own assassination by Boston Corbett. After such high drama, the last chapter, treating of the modern unrest of the 1960s, serves as something of a denouement.

By comparison to Metcalf's use of jarring juxtapositions elsewhere, in *Waters of Potowmack* the choice of source texts and presentation here is logical and chronological, much closer to the methods employed in traditional scholarship. It is thus the most staid and scholarly of his books.

Waters of Potowmack was published in an elegant hardcover binding by North Point Press in 1982. It was published with the cooperation of the Library of Congress and the National Archives, who provided archival maps, drawings, and photographs for reproduction in the original edition.

Golden Delicious

In 1985, yet another short work in the triptych form appeared: *Golden Delicious*. Published as the inaugural work of the newly formed Chax Press, *Golden Delicious* is Metcalf's appraisal of the theme of manifest destiny in American history. The book's first section portrays the messianic aspect of New England's founding by the English Puritans. According to the Puritans, the colonists would be a new chosen people, akin to the ancient Israelites; New England would be an earthly paradise, the New Jerusalem. Part two presents an ironic counterpoint to this, being a polyphonic text composed from letters and diaries of west-bound pioneers in the nineteenth century undergoing unimaginable hardships on the Oregon Trail. This section is extraordinarily rich in the number of sources it uses and the range of experiences that it conveys. It is variously repetitive, comical, and chilling, marked by a great variety of historical vernaculars, unorthodox spellings, and grammatical faults. For his research, Metcalf consulted half a dozen archival manuscripts at Yale University, in addition to sundry other published sources. The section climaxes in a harrowing retelling of the disastrous Donner Party expedition of 1846-1847, when a number of pioneers found themselves stranded in the mountains and resorted to cannibalism for survival. The section concludes with accounts of the pioneers' arrival in the promised land of California. The book's third and final part resumes the theme of a terrestrial paradise with a focus on the successful cultivation of fruit trees, in particular apples (whence the book's title, *Golden Delicious*, which, in a rich irony, might also refer to the cannibalism to which members of the Donner Party were driven). The structure of the triptych is thus a depiction of one version of America's destiny, with the final section (the wondrous fertility of the soil and fruit cultivation) positioned as the fulfillment of the messianic hopes of America's Puritan founders. Although it is by length a decidedly minor work in Metcalf's oeuvre, in quality it stands with Metcalf's best work. The first

edition was limited to 150 handbound copies, decorated with a series of linoleum cut illustrations by Wendy Osterweil.

Plays for the Stage

After dropping out of Harvard, Metcalf's first ambition had been to be an actor, and then to be a playwright. This dalliance with the theater may appear short-lived, but in due time Metcalf did indeed become a dramaturge. His involvement came about in the following way. In February 1979, Metcalf was introduced to John Dillon and Sara O'Conner, respectively the artistic director and managing director of the Milwaukee Repertory Theater. The two had been reading some of Metcalf's books and invited him to put together a play made up of materials from his various books and to come to Milwaukee to direct it. The play that Metcalf devised, titled *An American Chronicle: A Two-Act Documentary Drama*, adopts a roughly chronological perspective to suggest the changes and discontinuities in American life from the precolonial period up to the Civil War. Each scene incorporates some documentary source, whether Cherokee myths, Christopher Columbus, an Indian captivity narrative, the speeches of John Brown, and so on. The play had four actors, each playing numerous roles. The stage set consisted simply of two platforms, and the costumes were likewise plain: blue jeans, T-shirts, sneakers.

The Players: A Documentary Comedy-Drama has a somewhat more whimsical construction. Its characters are Walt Whitman, John Burroughs, and two contemporary major league baseball personalities: umpire Ron Luciano, and pitcher Mark "The Bird" Fidrych. (Hence the book's title, a double entendre referring both to the professions of actor and athlete.) The lines spoken by the characters are drawn from their writing or reported speech. Perhaps the most moving aspect of the play is its depiction of an intimate, ambiguously sexual relationship between Whitman and

Burroughs. A later scene shows Burroughs's later cooptation by Henry Ford, and his fraught relationship to automobiles and modern technology. Yet the leitmotif that ties the four characters together seems to be birds. *The Players* may lack the focus evident in Metcalf's major works, but it is strange and bewitching. It was performed in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, in the summer of 1986 with Metcalf in attendance.

Metcalf also adapted several literary works for the stage, including his own novel, *Genoa*, which was performed by the National Theatre for the Deaf in the 1970s or 80s. Other of his adaptations for the stage include Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, and Melville's *The Confidence-Man*. Of these, only *The Confidence-Man* is published. Other unpublished works for the stage include an early domestic drama, *Brockhaus*, and an experimental play about cetaceans, *Balaena*.

Commissions

In 1987, Metcalf was recognized for his contribution to American letters by the American Academy and Institute of Arts & Letters. He was awarded the Morton Dauwen Zabel Award, given biennially to a writer of progressive and experimental tendencies. The award carried a cash prize of several thousand dollars.

More late recognition for Metcalf's work came in the form of several commissions for writing projects. The most significant of these came about when Metcalf was approached for a project detailing the history of a hilly peninsula north of San Francisco, known as the Marin Headlands. From the late 19th century until about 1950, the Headlands had been home to a military fort; in the 1970s the fort was decommissioned, beginning a slow transfer of the land to public use under the stewardship of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area. Such was the context for Metcalf's commission. As conceived by the Headlands Center for the Arts, the book would celebrate the land's transition from military to public use.

In the fall of 1987 Metcalf flew to San Francisco to begin researching and exploring. It was the first of four visits he would make to the Headlands. As he outlines in the introduction, his exposure to the site took place on four different levels:

the physical experience, by car and on foot, of the land and its constructions; indoctrination by various experts in the many disciplines involved — geology, archeology, botany, ornithology, civilian and military history, and so on; interviews with earlier tenants, military and civilian; and finally, the research, digging into the archival resources. (*Headlands*, p. ix)

Metcalf was to be in charge of text, with others in charge of photography, archival images, and book design. Collaboration often calls for a kind of restraint, and accordingly Metcalf's text is more straightforward in its organization and presentation than we find in many of his books. There are no charged juxtapositions here as in his other work, no typographical complexity. The text is organized into the following chapters: General History; Military History; Interviews; Shipwrecks; Farms, Marincello; Plants, Wildlife; Geology, Weather. Although the organization and presentation are conventional, the work is nonetheless a powerful portrait of a single plot of land through the ages. It concludes with an extraordinary description of the flux of fog in and around the bay.

A year later, Metcalf was offered another commission, this time, by the Addison Gallery of American Art, located in Andover, Massachusetts, to write an essay on Winslow Homer, whose work would be on exhibition there in 1990. This essay, "Winslow Homer and His Era," gives a brief biography of the New England painter, an artist with whom Metcalf shared two important things in common: namely, a Cambridge, Massachusetts upbringing; and an eschewal of formal study in favor of

autodidactic discovery. The essay begins in the mode of a traditional biographical essay before loosening up to include quotations in counterpoint collage from Melville, Thoreau, Dickinson, and others. These quotations build up a sense of historical background against which Homer's life appears in sharper contrast. Metcalf declares the artist Homer to be an "American original" and a staunch individualist in the manner of Melville and Thoreau.

One other work might be said to fall into a similar category, although it was not a commission per se, but a collaboration. During his last decade, Metcalf began research on a local history project with another resident of his area, Lucia Saradoff. The subject was the industrial village of Farnams, located near his home in Becket. Their project would tell the story of Farnams, a community, mostly made up of Italian immigrants that arose around the extraction of stone from a local quarry and the industrial production of lime. By the 1990s, Farnams had been a ghost town for almost thirty years, the lime plant having shut down in the 1960s. This book would eventually be published posthumously as *Working the Stone: The Natural, Social, and Industrial History of the Village of Farnams, Town of Cheshire, County of Berkshire, Commonwealth of Massachusetts* (2003). Metcalf's contribution to the project, left somewhat incomplete at the time of his death, was his synthesis of the region's geological history and its early historical records. Lucia Saradoff compiled the oral history through interviews with residents and former residents of Farnams.

Collected Works

In the early 1990s, Metcalf attended a talk on the history of books and printing in Northampton, Massachusetts, given by Allan Kornblum, the founder of the Minneapolis-based Coffee House Press. After the talk, Metcalf approached Kornblum and gave him a manuscript for a long poem about the great Peruvian earthquake of

1970, titled *Huascarán*. After a year's silence on Kornblum's end, Metcalf contacted him, at which prompting Kornblum at last read it and was enthralled. On October 14, 1994, Kornblum wrote to Metcalf to suggest something far more ambitious: a complete (or nearly so) edition of Metcalf's published works, itself containing *Huascarán*. Any author would be flattered at such a proposal; but for an author whose work was published exclusively by small presses in small print runs (rarely, if ever, were more than 2,000 copies ever printed), Kornblum's proposal held a special significance. Thus, the *Collected Works* of Paul Metcalf would come to be published in 1996 and 1997 in three hardcover volumes, and that is where they are preserved for posterity. Little is known about the typesetting process, but it must have been an arduous one, given the typographic complexity involved. As for the presentation of texts, Metcalf and Kornblum decided early on that they would be arranged chronologically by publication date, roughly in the order that Metcalf came to write them. Per the contract Metcalf would receive \$10,000 against royalties — likely the largest sum by far that Metcalf had ever gotten from a publisher. The project received funding from an institutional benefactor, the Lannan Foundation.

Merrill Cove

The last work published in Metcalf's lifetime also happens to be one of his rarest and most little known publications, *Merrill Cove* (1998), published by Rain Taxi in an edition of 300 copies. It is a very minor work in the context of Metcalf's career, but it nevertheless brings his publishing career full circle and provides a fitting conclusion to our story.

A tiny sixteen-page chapbook, *Merrill Cove* amounts to a poet's take on the history of his cabin and the environs: its off-kilter construction, the former inhabitants (among which, a suicide), its previous use as a den of debauchery. It is bracing to see

Metcalf explicitly using what one might call an “oral history” approach at this early stage of his career, talking to neighbors and incorporating their interpretations of the land’s history into the fabric of his text, seemingly verbatim. There is no fictional element, only the first-person perspective of the poet surveying his family in bed, the cabin, the locals, and the land. The poem ends with an invocation of those prior inhabitants, with the poet saying, “I was here before them / an Indian (Cherokee / whose ghost I raise in bone and flesh // and I am moving in again” (p. 16).

Final Years

By the publication of his *Collected Works* and *Merrill Cove*, Paul Metcalf’s life was nearing its end. From the time of his recovery from tuberculosis in 1945 until the 1990s, he had enjoyed robust health, with very few medical issues besides chronic back pain. In the mid-1990s, still in good health, he had ordered a wood coffin custom built from a local carpenter. This was done in a spirit of good cheer, not doom and gloom. But in his final years, Metcalf sustained injuries on two separate occasions to his leg and knee while operating a chainsaw at his farmhouse property. These injuries naturally limited his mobility during the time of his recovery, and caused him no small amount of frustration. They may also have been factors in his fatal heart attack, which took place near Pittsfield on January 21, 1999. He had been buying apples at a farmer’s market not far from Herman Melville’s former home, Arrowhead. At the time of his death, he was eighty-one years old. He was interred in his hometown of Becket, Massachusetts. He and his life partner Nancy Metcalf share a black granite headstone there.

Conclusion

Today, it remains difficult to gauge the size of Metcalf's readership and the extent of his influence. Strictly speaking, his work has never entered the mainstream of American writing. His obituary in the *New York Times* called him a "cult writer," meaning presumably that he had a small but devoted readership. Nevertheless, we know that his work was read and admired by many of his peers, including Robert Creeley, Howard Zinn, William H. Gass, Charles Olson, Susan Howe, Guy Davenport, and many more.

It also remains difficult to calculate the influence of Metcalf's writing on younger generations. In a way, his signature technique of collage and quotation may seem to anticipate the so-called "uncreative" or appropriative writing practices of the digital age. Anachronistically, some of Metcalf's works might even be called "remixes," or "mash-ups," labels that have been applied likewise to T.S. Eliot's *The Waste-Land*, for instance. However, Metcalf for his part never owned a computer, and these terms are probably misleading. Furthermore, Metcalf's quotational practice has rarely been acknowledged by American theoreticians and practitioners of conceptual or "uncreative" writing. (He doesn't receive so much as a mention in Kenneth Goldsmith's *Uncreative Writing* (2011), nor in Marjorie Perloff's *Unoriginal Genius* (2010).) Perhaps it's for the better; Metcalf's categorization among these contemporary practitioners might be misleading. One thing the reader of his complete works gathers is that Metcalf didn't just excel at quotation and arrangement; he had a strong and a distinctive voice of his own, capable of assimilating and adapting itself to many others. Consequently, it is often very hard to tell where Metcalf's quotation ends and where his own words begin. In fact, the two seem to blend into a single voice. This is in a way Metcalf's greatest achievement. He made the chronicles of early America sing forth from the page after decades, in some cases even centuries of silence. He was America's great chronicler.

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