



# Physics Envy: American Poetry and Science in the Cold War and After

*Peter Middleton*

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At the close of the Second World War, modernist poets found themselves in an increasingly scientific world, where natural and social sciences claimed exclusive rights to knowledge of both matter and mind. Following the overthrow of the Newtonian worldview and the recent, shocking displays of the power of the atom, physics led the way, with other disciplines often turning to the methods and discoveries of physics for inspiration.

In *Physics Envy*, Peter Middleton examines the influence of science, particularly physics, on American poetry since World War II. He focuses on such diverse poets as Charles Olson, Muriel Rukeyser, Amiri Baraka, and Rae Armantrout, among others, revealing how the methods and language of contemporary natural and social sciences—and even the discourse of the leading popular science magazine *Scientific American*—shaped their work. The relationship, at times, extended in the other direction as well: leading physicists such as Robert Oppenheimer, Werner Heisenberg, and Erwin Schrödinger were interested in whether poetry might help them explain the strangeness of the new, quantum world. *Physics Envy* is a history of science and poetry that shows how ultimately each serves to illuminate the other in its quest for the true nature of things.



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