

# Cold War Poetry?

Fall 2022

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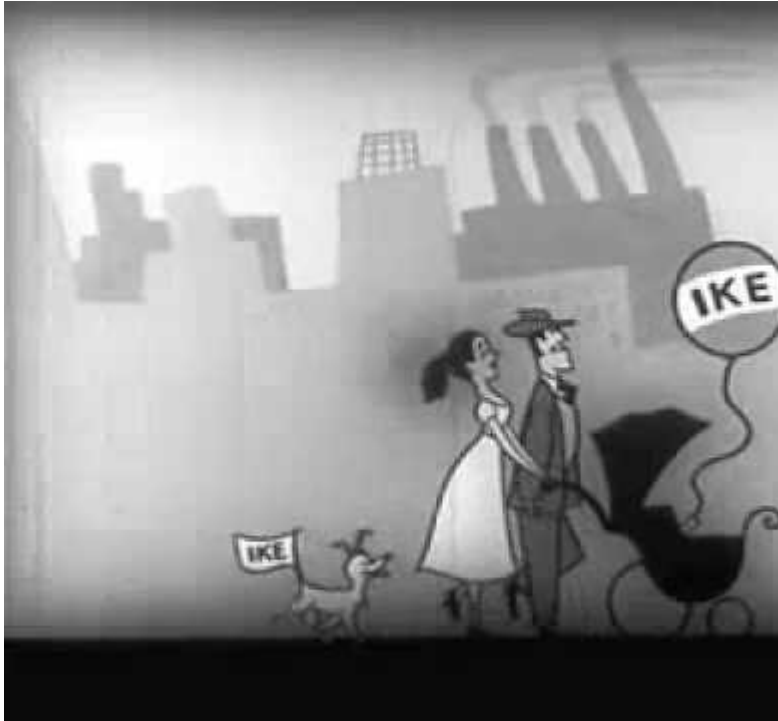
# Political and social background

- ASSUMPTIONS:
  - Post WW II: **victory**, complacency, technological superiority, **containment**
  - **Normativity**: GI Bill and the rise of the middle-class economy; Levittown
  - Sociopolitical **conformity**: McCarthy's anti-communism, heteronormativity
- CONFLICTS:
  - Korean War 1950-1953
  - Race and social unrest from the mid-fifties onwards
  - "Sputnik shock": 1957
  - Youth culture and Hippies mid-to late sixties
  - Vietnam War: 1964 / escalation 1968 / end 1975





# Eisenhower Presidency 1953-1961



Serentil 1960

# For the anxiety that comes from not fitting in

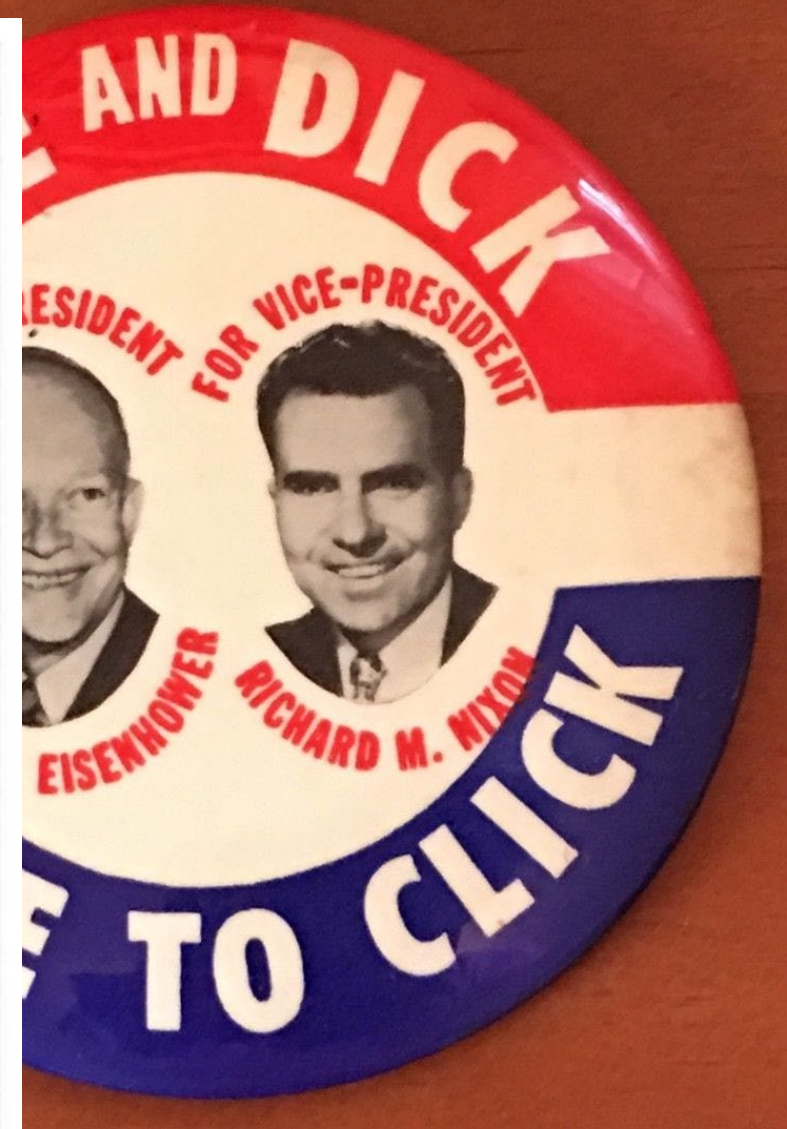
The newcomer in town who can't make friends. The organization man who can't adjust to altered status within his company. The woman who can't get along with her new daughter-in-law. The executive who can't accept retirement.

These common adjustment problems of our society are frequently intolerable for the disordered personality, who often responds with excessive anxiety.

Serentil is suggested for this type of patient. Not simply because its tranquilizing action can ease anxiety and tension, but because it benefits personality disorders in general. And because it has not been found habituating.

# Serentil<sup>®</sup>

(mesoridazine)



Consider these lines:


"...and the Republic summons Ike / the mausoleum in her heart."

"These are the tranquilized *Fifties* / and I am forty"

"no agonizing reappraisal"

"A father's no shield / for his child"

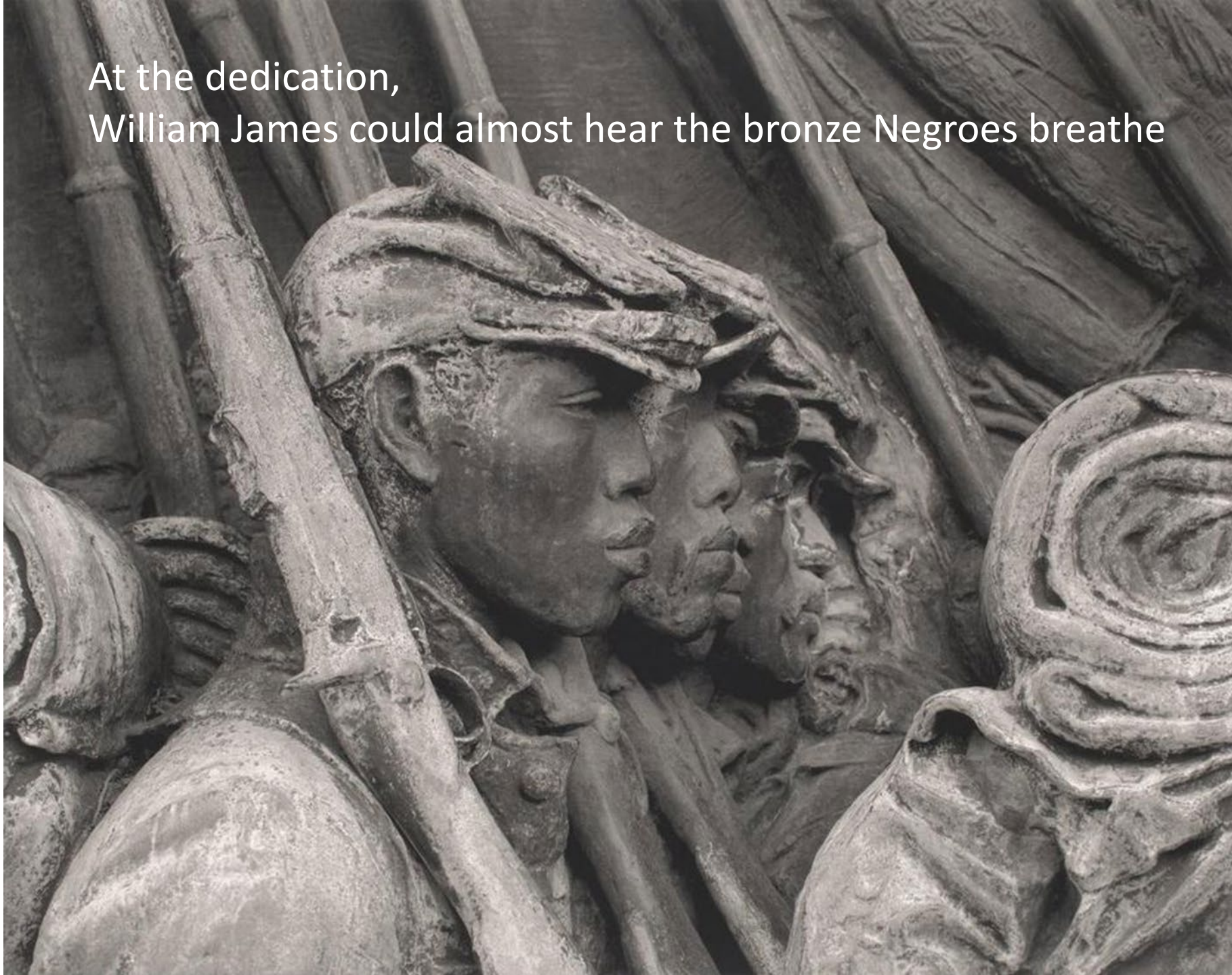




Their monument sticks like a fishbone  
in the city's throat.  
Its colonel is as lean  
as a compass needle



At the dedication,  
William James could almost hear the bronze Negroes breathe



# Consider these lines:

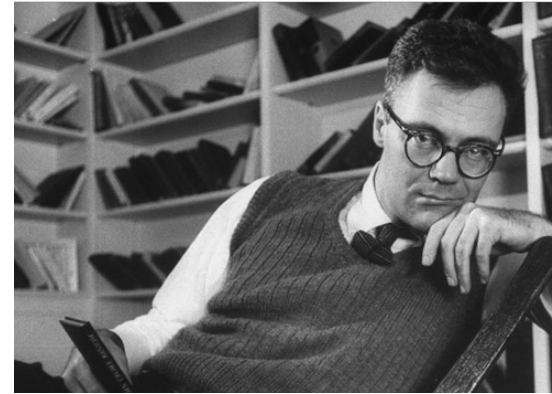
"... the tingling Statehouse,  
shaking over the excavations, as it faces Colonel Shaw  
and his bell-cheeked Negro infantry  
on St. Gaudens' shaking civil War relief,  
propped by a plank splint against the garage's earthquake"

"When I crouch to my television set,  
the drained faces of Negro school-children rise like balloons"





# Robert Lowell



June 2, 1967

- 1917-1977
- Boston patrician ("Brahmin")
- Harvard, Kenyon
- Catholic during the 1940s
- Conscientious objector during WW II – jail term
- Manic-depressive 1949 to ...
- Married to Jean Stafford, Elizabeth Hardwick, Caroline Blackwood
- Change in poetics in the 1950s under the influence of Allen Ginsberg and William Carlos Williams
- Public figure in the 1960s: Refusal of Johnson, March on the Pentagon, etc.
- **Poetry and the State / governmental power**



# "Mid-century" - writers ?

- Poets who found their voices and wrote their major works from 1945-1970
- "Anxiety of influence" (Harold Bloom):
  - The fear that modernist poets **must** not be imitated and **could** not be surpassed
  - Writing **against** the "heroic impersonality" (Edward Hirsch) of Eliot and Pound
  - Write instead:
    - "a messy humanity"
    - "a harsh luminosity"
    - "a well of tenderness" (Edward Hirsch)

Recent term: "The middle generation":

After the serious moderns, **before** the randomly playful postmoderns

- Possible members:

- Robert Lowell
- Elizabeth Bishop
- Randall Jarrell
- John Berryman
- Theodore Roethke
- Lorine Niedecker
- Delmore Schwartz
- Allen Ginsberg
- Robert Hayden
- Gwendolyn Brooks
- Karl Shapiro
- Adrienne Rich
- Anne Sexton
- Sylvia Plath

- Have in common:

- Difficulty and complexity of **poetic form**
- Acknowledgement of poetic **tradition**
- Struggle with **personal imbalance**  
(mental, alcoholic, depressive, unstable partnerships)
- Witnessed and wrote about America's **cultural** instabilities and transformations
- (in some) tendency to suicide



# "Memories of West Street and Lepke"

- The "tranquillized Fifties"
- Fervor of conscientious objection abated
- Domestic comfort lulls conscience
- Advertising language has entered consciousness
- Lepke's "Murder Inc." -- domestic jail cell
- Geopolitical situation of the U.S.: "agonizing reappraisal"
  
- Poetic technique:
  - Understated humor
  - Absurd juxtapositions
  - Experiments with line breaks and rhyme words (man/-can; fruit/suits)

Fall 1961

Back and forth, back and forth  
goes the tock, tock, tock  
of the orange, bland, ambassadorial  
face of the moon  
on the grandfather clock.

All autumn, the chafe and jar  
of nuclear war;  
we have talked our extinction to death.  
I swim like a minnow  
behind my studio window.

Our end drifts nearer,  
the moon lifts,  
radiant with terror.  
The state  
is a diver under a glass bell.

A father's no shield  
for his child.  
We are like a lot of wild  
spiders crying together,  
but without tears.

Nature holds up a mirror.  
One swallow makes a summer.  
It's easy to tick  
off the minutes,  
but the clockhands stick.

Back and forth!  
Back and forth, back and forth—  
my one point of rest  
is the orange and black  
oriole's swinging nest!

