

Opening the Field The New American Poetry

By the time that Melvin B. Tolson was composing *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia*, a group of younger poets had already dismissed the formalism of Eliot and his New Critic followers as old hat. Their “new” position was much closer to that of Langston Hughes and others whom Tolson perceived as outmoded, that is, having yet to learn—or advance—the lessons of Eliotic modernism. Inspired by action painting and bebop, these younger poets valued spontaneity, movement, and authentic expression. Though New Critics ruled the established magazines and publishing houses, this new audience was looking for something different, something having as much to do with freedom as form, and finding it in obscure magazines and readings in bars and coffeehouses. In 1960, many of these poets were published by a commercial press for the first time when their poems were gathered in *The New American Poetry, 1946–1960*. Editor Donald Allen claimed for its contributors “one common characteristic: total rejection of all those qualities typical of academic verse.”

The extravagance of that “total” characterizes the hyperbolic gestures of that dawn of the atomic age. But what precisely were these poets rejecting? Referring to Elgar’s “Enigma” Variations,

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Virgil Thomson wrote, “I call them academic because I think the composer’s interest in the musical devices he was employing was greater than his effort toward a direct and forceful expression of anything in particular” (Thomson, 189). By 1950, the New Critical focus on poetic devices must have struck young poets as at least indifferent to content. Direct and forceful expression was certainly discouraged, and often disparaged. According to Robert Creeley,

In the forties, when I was in college, it was considered literally bad taste to have an active interest in [Whitman’s] writing. . . . There was a persistent embarrassment that this naively affirmative poet might affect one’s own somewhat cynical wisdoms. Too, in so far as this was a time of intensively didactic criticism, what was one to do with Whitman, even if one read him? He went on and on, he seemed to lack “structure,” he yielded to no “critical apparatus” then to hand. (Creeley, 3–4)

Kenneth Koch put it more hilariously in “Fresh Air,” a poem that in its attack on “the poetry / Written by the men with their eyes on the myth / And the Missus and the midterms,” may well have served as *The New American Poetry*’s manifesto.

Who are the great poets of our time and what are their names?
Yeats of the baleful influence, Auden of the baleful influence,
Eliot of the baleful influence . . .
Where are young poets in America, they are trembling in
publishing houses and universities,
Above all they are trembling in universities, they are bathing
the library steps with their spit,
They are gargling out innocuous (to whom?) poems about
maple trees and their children,
Sometimes they brave a subject like the Villa d’Este or a
lighthouse in Rhode Island,
Oh what worms they are! they wish to perfect their form.
(Allen, 231)

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Now it demands an act of imagination to appreciate the rebellious character of *The New American Poetry*, since by comparison to decades such as the 1930s or 1970s its cast seems narrow. Among its forty-four contributors LeRoi Jones was the only African American. Nor did editor Donald Allen mention in his list of predecessors to this poetry one African American poet—not Langston Hughes nor Melvin Tolson, Margaret Walker, or Gwendolyn Brooks. His introduction did acknowledge H.D., Marianne Moore, and Elizabeth Bishop. But he included only four women in the anthology: Helen Adam, Madeline Gleason, Barbara Guest, and Denise Levertov.

As incredible as these numbers are, they probably overstate the anthology's diversity. On closer inspection, the group seems even more homogeneous in its attitudes. Legal segregation and the civil rights movement that opposed it are seldom mentioned; the preferred word for African Americans is *nigger*. A fear of and hostility toward women surfaces again and again. As Grace Paley has said more generally about Beat writing, "I thought they were nice, nice to see all those boys, and nice to see all those sexual feelings, but I knew it wasn't written for me at all" (Bach and Hall, 90).

But in 1960 American culture conformed to such a narrow standard that Donald Allen's anthology created quite a stir—and reaction. Writing in the *New Yorker*, Louise Bogan asked, "Does this new poetry arise from sources largely amateur, exhibitionistic, or otherwise out of hand? . . . [D]oes their violence stem from a deliberate attempt to extend consciousness, or are many of them actually out of control?" (200). Lorenzo Thomas, seventeen when the anthology was published, saw it from the other side of the generation gap.

[P]erhaps the academic institution that called itself "American poetry" in the 1950s *was* just that much of a Potemkin village

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that the appearance of genuine villagers exposed its much-chewed scenery for everyone. . . . *The New American Poetry* was a perfect introduction to the cultural confrontations of the 1960s. Just as that decade has permanently destabilized the uniformity of costume in everyday life (and it's not merely a matter of hat and gloves being superseded by a new standard of blue jeans and tennis), the Allen anthology disrupted the poetic fashion of the 1950s—which was marked by a conformity that reflected the gray happiness of Ike's America. *The New American Poetry* made a new set of approaches to writing poetry accessible.

A more dangerous interpretation might be that the poetic seismograph was really recording the shattering of certain 19th Century fictions of a homogeneous WASP culture. (Thomas, 153)

The anthology was countered by one edited by Donald Hall, Robert Pack, and Louis Simpson that collected the poets of the academies and conservative publications. The War of the Poetry Anthologies was on. On one side were the beatniks, boys who celebrated “all those sexual feelings,” many of whom were pacifists and anarchists, all opposed to New Critical hegemony. On the other were the young admirers of Eliot, Tate, Ransom, and Frost, whose response to the war years was to embrace a return to a social hierarchy most eloquently expressed in iambic pentameter.

Looking back from the Reagan era, Donald Hall attempted to downplay the fierce partisanship of the “war of the poetry anthologies” to which he contributed as much as anyone. As poetry editor of the *Paris Review* in the 1950s, Hall regularly published James Dickey, W. D. Snodgrass, Geoffrey Hill, Adrienne Rich, James Wright, Robert Bly, Thom Gunn, and Simpson. Though ten years later most of these poets were themselves writing in “open poetry,” in 1960 they were known for their devotion to traditional forms. Hall rejected submissions from Frank O'Hara and Allen Ginsberg, and in a published article

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insulted Robert Creeley. Yet, Hall insists, by 1965 that war was over.

As the 1960s unfolded and the society was wracked by the turmoil of civil rights agitation, Vietnam War protests, riots and arson, dropouts and turn-ons, widespread police and military harassment culminating in the murder of students on state college campuses at Jackson, Mississippi, and Kent, Ohio—the poetry “wars” came to seem small potatoes. Before the more violent assault on American society, aesthetic differences paled in import. An uneasy truce was effected among poets who, whatever form they chose to write in, marched in the streets side by side.

Hall has said that he was “abashed by the rigidity that defended [his] citadel” and tired of being “Archbishop of Academic Poetry” (*Death to the Death*, 46). He fondly recalls that he, Creeley, Bly, and Gary Snyder sang “Yellow Submarine” in the aisle of a plane en route to an antiwar reading. When he came to edit another anthology for Penguin, he included the aisle-warblers and Denise Levertov—though still excluding Ginsberg and O’Hara. He recommended his former student Tom Clark to succeed him as poetry editor at *Paris Review*, and invited Ted Berrigan to be his houseguest at Ann Arbor, even though Berrigan stole all his pills. (Clark and Berrigan were closely associated with many of the “New American poets.”)

Indeed, Hall reminds us again and again that the anthology war was largely a competition among classmates. John Ashbery, L. E. Sissman, Kenneth Koch, Peter Davison, Frank O’Hara, Robert Bly, Robert Creeley, Kenward Elmslie, and even Adrienne Rich (Radcliffe) were at Harvard during the same years as Hall. So was Mitchell Goodman, a poet and novelist who married Denise Levertov. Their writing instructors included John Ciardi and Archibald MacLeish. Richard Wilbur was around campus as a fellow; Richard Eberhart, Robert Frost, and Robert Lowell were living in Cambridge. Hall admits that the lot were

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ambitious and the competition murderous, but claims that the principal division was between those inspired by Yeats and Hardy (Hall's crew) and those taken with Wallace Stevens and Auden (Ashbery, O'Hara, Koch, Elmslie).

This gives a different slant to the war of the anthologies, with some of the animus between the factions stemming back to undergraduate competition and slights actual and perceived. Poetic politics gets reduced to personal relations. Inclusion or exclusion from an anthology depends more on remarks made at undergraduate bashes than on the quality of a particular poem. The gap between antagonists, though perhaps more deep-set and to the bone, loses aesthetic and political significance.

Hall's forthright witness would persuade us that ambition is intrinsic to poetry, that every poet wishes to measure up against the greats, just as young ballplayers dream of being compared to Barry Bonds or Pedro Martinez. But the Legends of Poetry don't compete on the same field nor to the same ends. The language of poetry evolves with the languages of humans, is modified by circumstance and value, is composed for a panoply of occasions. Even those who attend Harvard bring idiosyncratic luggage, learn conflicting lessons, carry off conflicting ambitions. And then there are so many others.

who passed through universities with radiant cool eyes
hallucinating Arkansas and Blake-light tragedy among the
scholars of war,
who were expelled from the academies for crazy & publishing
obscene odes on the windows of the skull,
who cowered in unshaven rooms in underwear, burning their
money in wastebaskets and listening to the Terror through
the wall . . .
who lit cigarettes in boxcars boxcars boxcars racketing through
snow toward lonesome farms in grandfather night,
who studied Plotinus Poe St. John of the Cross telepathy and

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But frist of all wipe my glasses and drink the water
to clean the smelly mouth.

A nock on the door, a cat walks in, behind her the Zoo's baby
elephant demanding pancaks—I can't stand hallucinations
any more.

(Orlovsky, from "Second Poem," in Allen, 213)

Were poets such as Gregory Corso, Peter Orlovsky, or Ray
Bremser working-class poets? Well, not exactly. Though from
humble origins, they saw themselves not as workers but as
refuseniks, dropouts, drug addicts—outsiders who had been
involuntarily confined, in prisons, reform schools, mental hospi-
tals, or some combination of the three. They didn't want a
square job and didn't envy those who did; those who "sold out"
for middle-class conveniences earned their opprobrium. I recall
recommending Kerouac and Ginsberg to a friend forming a lit-
eracy class for working-class Vermonters, only to be rebuffed by
the reply, "But they're Columbia boys!" But at the height of the
Cold War, for many young people they represented the only
rebellion around against conformist American values.

During the 1960s, these "outsider" voices in *The New American
Poetry* inspired me and many of my friends too young to recall the
"proletarian poets" of the 1930s or to know more esoteric alterna-
tives from the 1950s. It wasn't necessary that their poems be
among our favorites in the anthology, simply that they be included
among the other poets, signaling to our imaginations a wilder pos-
sibility. Phil Whalen, Gary Snyder, Lew Welch, Paul Blackburn—
we searched out everything they had written, astounded that peo-
ple who had jobs like washing lab equipment or driving a taxi were
respected as poets. In a 1992 interview with the *Paris Review*, Gary
Snyder explained some of the differences between the "New
Poetry" and the mainstream poetry that it challenged.

I: What were you finding in Chinese poetry at that time?

GS: The secular quality, the engagement with history, the

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avoidance of theology or of elaborate symbolism or metaphor, the spirit of friendship, the openness to work, and, of course, the sensibility for nature. For me it was a very useful balancing force to set beside Sidney, *The Faerie Queene*, Renaissance literature, Dante. The occidental tradition is symbolic, theological, and mythological, and the Chinese is paradoxically more, shall we say, modern, in that it is secular in its focus on history or nature. That gave me a push. (Plimpton, 279)

Snyder's college roommate and friend Philip Whalen began a 1999 interview with David Meltzer by listing the jobs he had held since graduating from college, beginning with a year in an airplane factory and including working for the Forest Service as a lookout, "washing laboratory glassware" at the Poultry Husbandry Department at Berkeley, working for a friend who was a judge in Oregon, and teaching English for thirteen years in Kyoto, Japan. He didn't separate the ways he earned his living from his friendships, writing, or longtime Zen practice, but offered all as pertinent to the subject, Philip Whalen. Just as a lawyer friend of mine was initially drawn to Wallace Stevens by the example of a poet who managed a successful legal career, I remember the excitement with which I first encountered Snyder and Whalen, poets who worked for a living at the same kinds of jobs I had held myself. Perhaps I too could attend poetry readings and submit poems to magazines, even though I hadn't been to Harvard, lacked a résumé of grants and fellowships, or paid my rent by loading trucks, unloading boats, or working in kitchens.

But even among contributors to the anthology, there were class-based tensions. Paul Blackburn was a hero of the Lower East Side poetry scene and founder of several reading series. When his *Collected Poems* were published, Marjorie Perloff's sardonic review set him up against the genius of Frank O'Hara so she could dismiss him as "second string." (For good measure, she took the opportunity to insult poets Joe Ceravolo and Dick

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Gallup, two contributors to the *Anthology of New York Poets* notable for not belonging to “some elegant minority.” Ceravolo worked as an hydraulic engineer in northern New Jersey; Gallup has been a San Francisco taxi driver for many years. Though Perloff is one of our most distinguished academic critics, every imagination has its limits.)

At a panel discussion of Blackburn that I later attended at the Poetry Project, I was not surprised to hear the panelists respond to Perloff’s attack, but was startled by the approach. Edith Jarolim, editor of Blackburn’s *Collected Poems*, understandably attacked Perloff’s review as class-based. Blackburn, Jarolim told the sympathetic downtown crowd, was “our poet,” singer of the sidewalks and subways. Of course, Jarolim explained, Perloff would be attracted to the poets of the elegant minority, such as O’Hara and John Cage. When I mentioned Jarolim’s response to Ron and Pat Padgett, Ron said, “When you mentioned Blackburn, I immediately thought ‘downtown poet.’” But Pat defended O’Hara as being from “kind of a working-class background himself.” And they felt it unfair to compare almost any poet to O’Hara.

As a college student, two of the books I cherished most were Blackburn’s *The Cities* and O’Hara’s *Lunch Poems*. Since then, I have grown only more appreciative of O’Hara’s inimitable poetry. Blackburn’s legendary generosity fostered a horde of imitators, whose widely published work sometimes obscures the freshness of Blackburn’s own poems. Saddened by his premature death, his friends published much work that the poet might have suppressed or further refined. Blackburn’s work is also marred by attitudes toward women too prevalent during his lifetime. But there are still poems and stretches in Blackburn that are as melodious and moving as any written by his contemporaries—which, because of his keen ear for the idioms of street speech, may appeal with special force to those who do not belong to an elegant minority. While I wouldn’t dispute Perloff’s claims for

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O'Hara, her attack on Blackburn rankled me as at least insensitive to issues of class.

Yet Blackburn's poems, for their downtown character, can not be called poems of the working class, in the way that the proletarian poets of the 1930s claimed to be representative. In the aftermath of World War II, class distinctions in the United States were felt as strongly as ever, but people were losing the vocabulary to frame them. Perhaps it was advertising, perhaps just television, but in the "Great Society" truck drivers, cops, secretaries, carpenters, clerks, and plumbers began to describe themselves as "middle class." As they yielded their working-class identity, their children replaced it with longings and lacks: longing for managerial-class perks and portfolios, a new car, or college degree. The only classes left were More and Less, Haves and Have-Nots, Squares and Beatniks, the Organization Man and the Outsider, the Rich and the Not Rich. As Denise Lever-tov wrote in a letter to William Carlos Williams: "All the passion and illusion of the thirties that fizzled out with the war is denied to one in the '50's because one's damned if one's going to be tricked and bamboozled" (MacGowan, 57).

Despite its insensitivity to problems of race and gender, *The New American Poetry* signaled an opening of the field to prospective poets of diverse social backgrounds. Like the Declaration of Independence, it offered freedom to those who were not represented in its drafting. Other things were obviously happening in the country, and it's out of line to claim for the anthology any credit for the burgeoning black arts movement of the late 1960s or the rise of feminism. Lorenzo Thomas's *Extraordinary Measures* and Aldon Nielsen's *Black Chant* provide invaluable testimony about African American avant-garde poets of the era whose work was sadly excluded from almost all the "white" anthologies, including those of the New American crowd. In addition to the four women in the anthology, Gwendolyn Brooks, Muriel Rukeyser, Diane di Prima, and others gave

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example to young women poets. But by foregrounding content and connecting poetic measure to the individual breath, the anthology expanded the boundaries of American poetry and signaled a welter of different voices.

If only five poets in the anthology were African American or women, a large number of them were homosexuals at a time when homosexuals were viciously scorned and oppressed. During a decade dominated by World War II vets, a number of these poets were pacifists, conscientious objectors, or recipients of dishonorable discharges. Although the poets from the East Coast still looked to Europe, a number of West Coast poets looked to Asia. Many were or later became Buddhists. All were seeking an alternative to the status quo of Eisenhower America, an opening or enlargement of poetic space.

Only twelve years old when the anthology was published, by the time I got to college I had made my choice. I admired many poets that we studied in class, including T. S. Eliot, Robert Lowell, Robert Frost, and W. H. Auden. (We got lots of Eliot; Pound, still confined in St. Elizabeth's, was not read. At the University of Wisconsin in 1970, a progressive young professor still thought it daring to add Williams to his syllabus.) But *The New American Poetry* was another world, one we visited on our own time and talked about over beer, coffee, and dope. Every poem was an antidote to the authoritarianism of Eliot and the New Critical tradition. Even when the poets were Christians, such as Brother Antoninus or Jack Kerouac, they revived the benign tradition of St. Francis in "A Canticle to the Waterbirds" or composed Buddhist blues. And if few of the poets were working class, at least Whalen, Snyder, Ginsberg, Blackburn, Kerouac, and Lew Welch showed familiarity with manual work, respect for those who did it, and comfort with working-class speech and milieu. There was a healthy Whitmanic respect for occupations, and popping up throughout, the dream of a classless society.

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the beauty of America, neither cool jazz nor devoured Egyptian
heroes, lies in
lives in the darkness I inhabit in the midst of sterile millions
the only truth is face to face, the poem whose words become
your mouth
and dying in black and white we fight for what we love, not are
(O'Hara, "Ode: Salute to the
French Negro Poets," in Allen, 254)