

Literary Men in Blue Jeans

Ted Berrigan and
Ron Padgett

Since its publication in 1960 *The New American Poetry* has continued to be the landmark American poetry anthology of the second half of the twentieth century. The cover of the recent reprint issued by the University of California Press proclaims “more than 100,000 copies sold.” Though that’s a meager figure for books other than poetry and computes to less than three thousand copies a year, it’s an impressive figure for a poetry anthology. In addition, books by contributors Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Gregory Corso, and Gary Snyder have also sold well and remain in print fifty years after their first edition. Paul Hoover built on this foundation his expansive *Postmodern American Poetry*, and *The New American Poetry* figures more prominently in the afterword Ron Silliman wrote for his revised *In the American Tree* (1999) than it did in his preface to the original 1986 edition. Though editors Donald Allen and George Butterick substantially revised *The New American Poetry* in 1982 and retitled it *The Postmoderns*, it is the original collection that remains in print. What is the call of this outdated anthology of mostly white male poets that continues to attract readers in a world that has changed drastically? Perhaps it

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is the vision of an alternative America, liberated from fundamentalist repression and cash value morality, that led and leads readers, particularly young readers, to these poets. Their pulsing lines continue to be admired by aspiring poets, but I suspect it's the strains of intellectual and sensual liberation, anarchism, pacifism, Zen Buddhism, sensitivity to nonhuman nature, and general rebellion and restlessness that attract other readers.

At the same time that *The New American Poetry* gathered readers, the civil rights struggle fostered the black arts movement and gained national recognition for Amiri Baraka, David Henderson, Sonia Sanchez, Jayne Cortez, Larry Neal, Carolyn Rodgers, Nikki Giovanni, Ishmael Reed, Quincy Troupe, and Haki Madhubuti. With the revival of the feminist movement, women were rediscovering predecessors such as Zora Neale Hurston, Meridel LeSueur, and Tillie Olsen. Alice Walker, Anne Waldman, Bernadette Mayer, June Jordan, Diane di Prima, Hettie Jones, Diane Wakoski, Grace Paley, Rochelle Owens, and Adrienne Rich published before 1970. Maureen Owen, Susan and Fanny Howe, Lucille Clifton, Sharon Olds, Alice Notley, Cleopatra Mathis, Patricia Spears Jones, and Alicia Ostriker began publishing in the next decade. After Stonewall, the burgeoning gay and lesbian movements encouraged a new openness among poets such as Tim Dlugos, Eileen Myles, Dennis Cooper, Steven Hall, Judy Grahn, and Olga Broumas.

Throughout this burgeoning of populist poets, class lines were being obscured. Well, not entirely. The Academy of American Poets remained a high-rent club for comfortable white men. When asked why Gwendolyn Brooks was not a member of the academy's Board of Chancellors, James Merrill reportedly replied, "I just don't think she's a Master." Was this boorish insensitivity to connotation, or simply the mot juste for admittance to the last bastion of antebellum gentility?

There were low-rent alternatives, most of them downtown. Perhaps the most notable were the Poetry Project at St. Mark's

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Church In-the-Bowery and, later, the Nuyorican Café. Not only could you feel comfortable attending a reading at the church in jeans and T-shirt, casual dress was so common that even the elegant John Ashbery dressed down to flannel shirt and jeans to read there. At Project benefits, penniless poets sat among rock stars, actors, and rich patrons. The Nuyorican Café at that time occupied a small storefront on East Sixth Street. Inside were a bar, a stage, and maybe twenty chairs. Most evenings the same few regulars took turns reciting their poems to each other, while patrons drifted in and out, but because Miguel Piñero, Lucky Cienfuegos, and Miguel Algarin were heavily involved with Joe Papp's Public Theater, celebrities of stage and screen also frequently showed up. It was a community anyone could enter without class credentials. Most of both audiences lived in neighborhood tenements that had yet to be gentrified. Though my friends and I lived in a building where we had no heat or hot water during the first two winters I lived there, we felt ourselves doubly lucky. Not only was rent cheap, but many of the other tenants were poets, including Allen Ginsberg. It wasn't rare to take out your trash and run into Andrei Voznezhensky or Robert Creeley.

In 1969 I graduated from Siena College, a small Roman Catholic commuter college in Loudonville, New York. The first college graduate in my extended family, I sailed through school with so many scholarships that I made money by attending college. I continued to work with my stepfather on his moving van, maintained a daily newspaper delivery route to newsstands and slot boxes, and earned enough money bowling on TV to buy my parents a small swimming pool that enveloped the tiny backyard of their tract house. At the urging of several of my teachers, I decided to enter the graduate program in English literature at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. My parents thought it odd that a twenty-one-year-old man would wish to continue in

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school, but I always paid my own way, received aid from Wisconsin, and might be deferred from serving in Vietnam for another couple years, so they didn't object.

During my years at Siena I made friends with several other "brown-baggers" (commuter students) with literary interests. When we were not in class or the library or the gym, we spent our time at a table in the commuter cafeteria, known as "the pit," discussing literature, politics, and philosophy. We were all from blue-collar backgrounds, and the only literary people we had ever known were professors and priests. In 1969 none of us was entering the priesthood, but several of us were heading to state universities to prolong our literary apprenticeships. Most impressive was the clarity of my pal Jim Legasse, who was off to Ohio State, where, he had already determined, he was going to write a doctoral thesis on James Thomson, author of *The Seasons*. I had collected more than forty credits in undergrad lit courses, but with total disregard to period or concentration. Mostly I just signed up for what struck my fancy—or was offered that term. I did respond strongly to the poems of Ben Jonson and John Donne, so went to Madison with some vague idea about the seventeenth century.

The poets with whom I spent most of my time at Madison were Wordsworth and Andrew Marvell. But I also derived a contemporary reading list from *The New American Poetry*. By the mid-1960s, copies of Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* and Ferlinghetti's *Coney Island of the Mind* were everywhere. It was easy to find books by Olson, Creeley, Levertov, Corso, and Duncan. But in Madison bookstores you could also find O'Hara's *Lunch Poems* and *Meditations in an Emergency*, Paul Blackburn's *The Cities*, Kenneth Koch's *Thank You*, Gary Snyder's *Riprap* and *The Back Country*, LeRoi Jones's *The Dead Lecturer*, and even first editions of John Wieners's *Hotel Wentley Poems*. Most fortunate for me, in the university library I also came across Ted Berrigan's *Many Happy Returns* and Ron Padgett's *Great Balls of Fire*. Here was

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the next generation of poets, and even more than the poets in the anthology, they were the first poets who seemed to be writing in my language.

I didn't consider Berrigan and Padgett to be as imposing as Frank O'Hara or Charles Olson, because they weren't as quick as O'Hara or as authoritative as Olson. And if I had learned anything about poetry, it was that it was supposed to be condensed and difficult. But more than any poets I had ever read, Berrigan and Padgett seemed to be recognizable people living in a familiar world—with incredible zest and resourceful imagination. These guys were making poems out of materials that lay to hand, and they were doing so without the heavy existential angst that afflicted so many of the New American poets. Instead they were fresh, totally irreverent smart-asses grabbing words that sailed so near in the air that it was almost impossible to make them stay on the page. They were not archaeologists of morning, not visionary bards, not wailing in the wilderness, not even Harvard wits. They were neither desperate nor frail nor mystic initiates. They were simply young American poets of talent but no special privilege.

The poets that I met from the generation preceding them were often bearing existential burdens that precluded common pleasures. I always think of Gregory Corso's putdown of Joel Oppenheimer, "Oh, you're one of those domestic poets." You rarely think of marriage and the Beats; though few served in the military, they shared the barracks chauvinism of the World War II generation. Few were comfortable for any length of time in the company of women. Berrigan and Padgett weren't yet feminists, but they were "domestic poets" who enjoyed and wrote about family life. They didn't hold themselves apart or above their neighbors, didn't come on like illuminati or initiates. Their sense of humor was often crude and impersonal; they said things that you might hear in a dugout or locker room. I didn't feel as if I had to rid myself of my past before I could be born into

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poetry; I could carry everything along, so long as I continued to write like crazy. Because of their reading of the New York poets as well as the Beats, they were children of Stein *and* Whitman. That is, they recognized the genius of Stein's demotic experiments and the democratic embrace of Whitman, without vaunting an avant-garde self-importance. They made you feel that the distinction between major and minor poetry was for academics; they pissed on hierarchy in any form. Their spirit was anarchic, fun-loving, amiable, irreverent, tolerant, and peaceable. Their books fanned my desire to go to New York and have a good time writing poems and meeting other poets and artists.

The first reading I attended in New York was at the Gotham Book Mart. Ron Padgett, Maureen Owen, and Larry Fagin were the readers; perhaps they had all recently published books. I knew no one in attendance and hugged closely to the upstairs gallery walls, enduring the interminable party chat between the announced and actual time of reading. Once it began, I was challenged and delighted, and knew I had at last, at the ancient age of twenty-five, come to the right spot. I rued only that it had taken me so long to find this place.

After that evening, I began to regularly attend poetry readings in New York City—at Dr. Generosity's, the Tin Palace, the Donnell Library, the Ear Inn, occasionally the Ninety-second Street Y, Chumley's, the New School for Social Research, the Cedar Tavern, the West End, the White Horse, and numerous other bars, bookstores, art galleries, and lofts where readings were held for an evening, a season, or several years. At many of these I was a regular on weekend afternoons or midweek evenings, but once Michael Scholnick and I became roommates in our sixth floor walk-up on east Ninth Street, we began to spend four or five nights a week at the St. Mark's Poetry Project or Nuyorican Café. Many nights we would hit both, beginning the evening with a reading at St. Mark's Church, then meander-

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ing to Sixth Street afterward, where the old Nuyorican Café remained ablaze with voices until early in the morning. For two years I made a living by driving cab, and though I usually drove five or six nights a week, the schedule was flexible. I didn't have to decide whether I was working that night until it came time for shape-up. I quit only after being hired as a recording engineer for the Talking Books division of the Foundation for the Blind—a plum of a job where I was actually paid to listen to Broadway's best read everything from Gothic romances and shoot-'em-ups to *The Sound and the Fury* and the poems of Edna St. Vincent Millay. Because most of the actors were performing uptown in the evening, we didn't begin recording until 10:00 A.M., allowing me time after the Poetry Project or the Nuyorican to write into the early mornings.

By the time I arrived in New York, it was no longer novel for children of the working class to pursue careers as poets or painters. The democratization of the art world was tied closely to the explosion of higher education in this country. Those who reached college age in the United States between 1945 and 1980 had unprecedented access to postsecondary education. In most states, tuition at state universities for in-state residents was nominal or free. Still, as we moved through the New York art world, we remained uncomfortable about our origins. The size of the chips on our shoulders made it almost impossible to fit through some of the doors that were opened for us. Few from the working class understood that success as an artist was achieved with the same social skills that made any professional successful—and those who did know it didn't necessarily have those skills.

Berrigan and Padgett had been fortunate to bring with them to New York their cohort from Tulsa, Oklahoma. They met when Padgett was a high school student working in a bookstore, Berrigan a Korean War vet studying on the GI bill at Tulsa University. Pat Padgett, the poet Dick Gallup, and writer and artist

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Joe Brainard were from Tulsa too. Though Ron Padgett later described Gallup's and Brainard's fathers as "lunch-pail kind of guys" and his own family as "lower class," the young Tulsans tended to view themselves as bohemian poets and artists, a group that less literary Tulsans often lumped with "beatniks" and even "Commies." *The Outsider*, by Colin Wilson, had been a "big book" for the entire group.

For Padgett, his attendance and graduation from Columbia College (the Ivy one) complicated his sense of class. He saw immediately that the name of his alma mater gained him a certain entry into polite conversation. People responded to him differently than if he identified himself as the son of a bootlegger. And by being a poet in 1960s New York, he gained another *passé partout*. During an interview I conducted with Ron and Pat Padgett, Ron said, "The one thing I really liked about being a poet in New York is that it gave one a lot of social mobility. Not that one moved up or down in one's station. It's almost as if one weren't in a station in New York. So one night I would find myself walking the streets of the lower east side with Harry Fainlight, the next night I'd be at a salon or party at Lita Hornick's, or I would be at Andy Warhol's, or at a party at the Tibor de Nagy gallery and I'd meet Larry Rivers. . . . I could be in all kinds of milieus, from real uptown to real downtown. I felt that was terrific. That was exactly the kind of nondefinition of my status that I was looking for, that I wanted to perpetuate."

When I asked him, "After attending Columbia, living in France, about forty years of being a poet in New York, do you think that your writing is still inflected in any way by your lower-class background?"

Ron: Yes. (Silence.) You asked me a yes-or-no question. The answer is yes.

I: How?

Ron: Oh no, I knew you were going to say that. It's hard for me to distinguish the influence of class in my work. It's as if a

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plate of food's in front of you with different things like potatoes and peas on it. Say the peas are your class. While you're eating them it's very clear what they are. But once you're finished dinner, it's not so clear anymore what's happening to them. I think that early influences, whether artistic or any kind, become so transformed throughout one's life that it's not that they're not there anymore, it's just that they take subtle and different shapes, blended to such a degree with the other things you are that it's very hard to sort them out. However, I could go through some of my poems and point out ways in which the class I grew up in has affected what the work tries to talk about and doesn't try to talk about, the level of diction, the tendency to avoid large claims or make definitive statements, a penchant for the colloquial. I can't seem to get away from those tendencies. I'm not sure that I want to, although it would be interesting to try to write a *Paradise Lost* with elevated diction and enormous claims. I've thought about ways that I might do that, but I can't figure out *a* way to do it.

Pat: Do you think that the fact that you don't want to make any large claim is a result of coming from the working class?

Ron: Partly. Because there's a fear of pretension among a lot of the working-class people I know. Putting on airs is very inappropriate: You're stepping out of your class, you're pretending you're something you're not, you're trying to be highfalutin'. Along with that fear comes a modesty that says, No, you can't do that. You can't say, "Of arms and the man I sing."

Pat: It's not just a matter of diction then.

Ron: No. It's also that large claims imply a presumption of authority. Lower-class people think that they don't have any authority. Maybe subconsciously they feel that they *shouldn't* have any authority.

Pat: They don't have the wherewithal.

Ron: If they did, why are they near the bottom of the social lad-

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der? I have rarely worried about where I am on the social ladder, but it *is* hard for me to get up on a soapbox and make grand pronouncements in poetry. It's not that I shy away from major themes—reportedly, life, death, love, suffering—but I do shy away from making pronouncements about them. I feel that if I'm going to make a pronouncement, why don't I write an essay or a speech? My main interest in writing is not to make pronouncements anyway. But the taking on of a very large complicated structure in a long poem is made even more difficult than it would be ordinarily. To write something good and beautiful, and to do it in a new way—that's hard enough. But when I have the underlying feeling that it's wrong for me to “go grand,” perhaps it's the gravity of social class tugging me down from the big structure that I might want to erect.

Berrigan, a graduate not of Columbia, but of Tulsa University, had an even stronger sense of class limits. He admired the elegance of John Ashbery, Frank O'Hara, Kenneth Koch, Edwin Denby, and James Schuyler—and realized that it was not his strength. Instead, he thought of himself as “loutish,” a swaggering Irish guy who compensated for a lack of refinement by a totally incredible energy. One day I ran into Ted and his pal, the poet Steve Carey, who were waiting for a bus. It was one of those New York City February days when it snows and rains in the same cutting wind. All three of us were wearing light jackets and hatless. I had recently married and was wearing a new pair of leather gloves. After we said hello, Ted joshed, “New gloves? Louise give them to you? Soon you'll be wearing a hat! And then . . . you'll have an umbrella!”

His class loyalties were pronounced and unabashed, but he acknowledged the complexities of human aspiration. In a lecture given at the Naropa Institute, he remarked,

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In the long ago past, poetry was a court activity. . . . The ladies-in-waiting and the hand-maidens and the courtiers and the friends of the duke and the king and so on, they all wrote poetry. In China and in Japan and in the European countries, it was expected of you that you do that. It was somewhat of a surprise when someone like Shakespeare, say, wrote poetry. But it wasn't too much of a surprise, because being an attractive youth and being attracted to members of the court, he aspired to that kind of social circle . . . and then there were the peasants who had hoed the field all day. Now they didn't write any poetry. You don't write any poetry if you hoe the field all day. 'Cause at night you're tired. And besides the people in the court come and take away two-thirds of what you hoe, so that they can write poetry some of the time.

That's one of the reasons that poetry is a business; it's a full-time business; it doesn't take up all your time the way working in the A&P may take up all your time, because you don't have to be on the job in that respect all the time; you don't have to go there and be there for so many hours a day and come out. But being a poet is a twenty-four-hour-a-day-thing. (*On the Level Everyday*, 51–52)

The ambitions that Ted ascribes to Shakespeare in this lecture may have reflected his own relations to the courtly social circle of his heroes O'Hara, Ashbery, and Koch—whom James Schuyler called the Harvard Wits. Speaking about Frank O'Hara, Berrigan said,

He was open to everything, of course. He was the most open person I ever met. Much more open even than Paul Blackburn, who thought of himself as very open but had a natural aversion to people who seemed like they were from some elegant minority: the way that Frank O'Hara and Kenneth Koch and John Ashbery must have seemed to him. . . . [B]ut they didn't seem that way to me. I wasn't bothered by it in the least. (*Talking in Tranquility*, 48–49)

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Again, O'Hara and Blackburn are made class representatives, but this time the working-class guy chooses the open model of O'Hara over class resentments, though Ted also liked to boast about the time he knocked Kenneth Koch down at a party where they competed for a young woman's attentions—the classic working-class response to the silver-tongued ladies' man. Maybe it was because the stamp of class was so evident in Ted's speech, mannerisms, and dress that he felt little urge to proclaim his affiliations, that instead he devoted so much of his life to proclaiming the merits of that “elegant minority,” the New York school. The poems of Alice Notley, who was married to Berrigan and shared the trials of their bohemian poverty, are much more outspoken about class resentments. But Berrigan did address the following lines to his brother-in-law in 1979:

from the

next year on, Jr-High School, on into & thru
High School, at various jobs, thru one
semester at Catholic Providence College, then
3 years in the Army, Korea, and return
to College in Tulsa, Oklahoma (1957) right
up to about 1960, no matter where I
was, in what situation, with the exception of
on the football playground, in card games, and at
home, reading, I didn't
know the language and I didn't know
the rules; and naturally I didn't
know what it was I didn't know, nor
therefore, what was it I did know, be-
cause I did know *something*. In the
army I began to learn about knowing
the rules, and so about myself and rules.
Back in College, while easing
into knowing the rules & what to do with that,
I evidently had begun *bearing* the language. In

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1960, & from then on, I got hit by that special useful sense that one could, easily, anytime or where, pick up, & so “know” the language *and* the rules. It all had to do with Surface, and it didn’t have to be shallow.

(*Talking in Tranquility*, 170)

Alienation arrives with the self-consciousness of adolescence, the growing awareness of class difference and individual befuddlement about social expectations. It is only when he begins “*hearing* the language” that the young Berrigan begins to “know” the “language *and* the rules”—and to write poetry. Though the subtext is class, the dynamic is particular.

Around 1976 a poet friend (who must have been tiring of my enthusiasm for Ted Berrigan’s work) warned me not to be fooled, that Berrigan was only a “literary man in blue jeans.” While I appreciated the wit of the comment, I did not find the judgment so scathing. Somehow the adjective lost any effete implications when applied to Ted Berrigan’s often disheveled, sometimes threadbare clothes, and a profounder political critique was blunted by my own confusions. Surely I had no sympathy for any political program that couldn’t accommodate such a figure—or underestimated the liberating possibilities of aesthetic joy.

Yet it’s significant that though Berrigan and Padgett never obscured their origins, and have suffered occasional critical disdain because of them, they felt that the kind of poems they wrote distanced themselves from the people they grew up among. Berrigan’s assertion that the peasants didn’t write poetry, for instance, could be contested by pointing to the folk music that Berrigan himself cherished and spoke about often. Forty years earlier, in the pages of the *New Masses*, Lee Hays made precisely such a case, chiding those poets who showed traces of reading

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T. S. Eliot and Hart Crane, and celebrating instead the songs heard in union halls and on picket lines. But Berrigan was discriminating precisely between forms, just as Padgett did when he told me, “The very fact that Ted and I became poets and especially the kind of poets we became, that is, not traditional poets—we didn’t write ‘The Cremation of Sam McGee’—ejected us from our class.” They believed that they could remain artists within their class only by accepting folk or popular conventions. To move beyond those conventions destined them to a place neither outside nor inside the class into which they were born. To complete the Padgett quote,

So it’s very interesting to have grown up in a certain class and still feel in many ways that it made you who you are, and yet know that you can never really be a part of it again because of your interest in art and writing. It’s really weird. And one’s writing continues to be influenced by—not only by the origins, but by the knowledge of the distance between you and your origins. So it’s not only the presence of the class, it’s the absence of the class at the same time.

What some might see as class denial, or at least irresponsibility, has always struck me as visionary optimism. Because they remain open to inspiration from any source, Berrigan’s and Padgett’s poems are stunning hybrids of sensibilities, traditions, possibilities, imaginations. Hart Crane, frequently insecure about his own lack of a college education, awkwardly called this quality “alert blindness”; the Cockney Keats more mellifluously termed it negative capability. It’s a refusal to filter particulars according to preconceptions, to order by classification, to class off. Its products are motley and democratic, though seldom smooth and never homogenized. Shaggy commingles with combed. Every imaginative speaker alters and refines each dialect. The language constantly changes. At the same time, its history informs everything the poet writes.