The American Poetic Tradition We Could Have Had

How one classic anthology tells the story of twentieth-century American poetry

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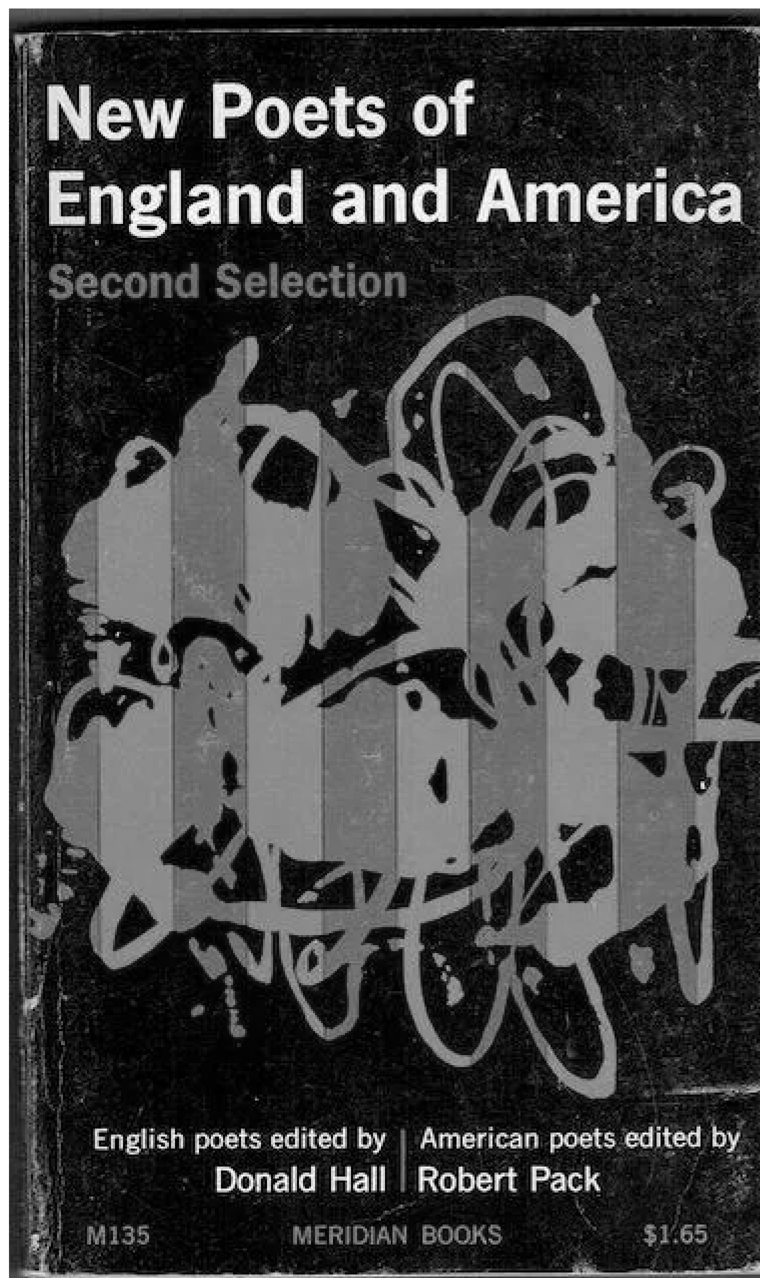
This essay is part three in James Matthew Wilson's "Notes on Form" series. Click here for part one, "Second Thoughts on the Poetic Line" and here for part two, "Joyce's Tetrameters."



When the American poet Richard Wilbur passed away a few years ago at the age of ninety-six, I found myself pondering all that he meant for our country's literature, both in his distinctive achievement and in his representative qualities. Wilbur stood out as an unusual figure, not merely for the spritely wit and the grave power of his lyric poems, but for a simpler reason: Wilbur was one of a small number of American poets who had attained a national audience and received substantial public honors, even as he continued to write poems in rhyme and meter rather than in the broken up prose misleadingly called "free verse." He managed to stand athwart the tendencies of the age without suffering anything worse than the envy of his contemporaries.

By 2017, this made Wilbur a curious character indeed. The first fashion for free verse, which arose in the early twentieth century, lasted only a short time. Very soon, poets were drawing from whatever good that fashion had made possible even as they had generally returned to the ordering principles of meter and rhyme. When Wilbur published his first book of poems soon after returning from the Second World War, most poetry in English was being written either in meter or something that meaningfully approached it. But in the early 1960s, the tide turned once again. The Beats in San Francisco had attained considerable popularity. More ominously, their influence had shaken the confidence of other prominent American poets—most notably Robert Lowell—and led them to loosen or abandon metrical form in pursuit of a more colloquial, "raw" kind of language.

That second shift to free verse proved more enduring than the first. When the term "new formalism" was coined in the mid-1980s, the poets gathered under the name mostly composed in *both* meter and free verse and advocated a formal pluralism in American poetry. They were partially successful, but most American poets whose work was reviewed in the larger magazines and was given public awards, grants, and honors wrote exclusively in free verse. Wilbur proved a (almost *the)* notable exception.

His loss provoked me to take stock of his individual achievement. I had once considered Wilbur the best poet in an otherwise bad age for poetry. But I gradually came to realize that the age was not quite so bad as it had seemed (if one knew where to look) and that Wilbur's work would appear great in itself in any age. And yet, his unusual reputation at the end of his life still filled me with melancholy, because I knew that he had once fitted into the literary landscape as a more conventional figure. Once, he had been a leading light among a talented generation, rather than a solitary and persistent workman in an age of hacks. What became of that age?

In search of an answer to that question, in search of the tradition in which Wilbur comfortably fit, I turned to a classic anthology: Donald Hall, Robert Pack, and Louis Simpson's *New Poets of England and America*. First published by World in 1957, it went through ten printings over the next decade. The anthology provides a portrait of the young but established poets who defined one

period just before it collapsed and gave way to another. It is, in brief, a look at something good soon to be wrecked by a storm.

The Late Modernists

The editors of *New Poets* offered a composite view of a particular stage in English and American poetry which is often called, unfairly, "academic formalism" but which I describe as "late modernism." The poets gathered there had long since digested and taken for granted the various experiments of literary modernism—its rejection of meter, its building up of the poem by slapped-together fragments. T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* appeared the same year many of them were born and they had arrived at college or university long after F.R. Leavis and I.A. Richards established the study of modern English poetry as an academic subject in the British academy, and John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and others had done much the same in America.

Ransom and Tate's disciple, Cleanth Brooks, published his *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* just before the War (1939). In it, he frankly demonstrated that the modernists and late modernists, alien though their poems looked at first, had maintained a filial closeness to their ancestors among the great Elizabethan playwrights and metaphysical lyric poets of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. English poetry had not suffered a rupture, he claimed. The tradition remained a coherent whole and the modernists were faithful heirs carrying on old work in new ways. They had meter, wit, and intelligence as of old; their work was rich with tropes, irony, and polysemantic depth. If Brooks was right, and I think he was, then "academic formalism" seems an inadequate term to describe the work of the period. Late modernism lasted as the chief period for roughly thirty years, from the 1930s until the early 1960s.

The British Invasion

On its first publication, *New Poets of England and America* served to introduce late modernist English poets to an American audience and in so doing captured the chief style of English poets during the period.

I would divide these English poets included into three rough groups. First, some slightly older writers who came into maturity before the War and register markedly the impact of free verse. Second, the poets who became known as "the Movement," as those who led a reaction against modernist experimentation and established a new voice for contemporary English poetry that drew more obviously on Thomas Hardy than Eliot or Pound. In both these groups, meter is generally practiced but one gets a clear sense that they have understood and, in some ways, learned from free verse. A third and final group of poets, barely represented in the anthology, maintained a certain continuity with the Movement but strove to continue and develop more of the experimental features of modernism than the Movement could abide.

In the first group, I include John Heath-Stubbs (1918-2006)—whose free verse lines seem to have been chosen, one by one, only for their echoing an earlier and grander age of oratory— and the short-lived William Bell (1924-1948), whose work displays youthful genius that has not yet found its theme, as in his sequence of Elegies:

For in your dream you wandered in a country
ringed by immaculate mountains, mountains where
a line of marble warriors kept sentry
gazing across the empires of the air,
watching the distant fronts of cloud, which seeming
as white and frozen as that carven stare
acknowledged their defeat,
for no extremity of gold nor heat
could interrupt the purpose of your dreaming.

If such poets showed a certain grandeur, it was the more modest and concerted block of Movement poets who define the English contributions to the anthology and the age it represents. Kingsley Amis, Donald Davie, Elizabeth Jennings, Thom Gunn, and above all Philip Larkin take their definitive place in the volume, their poems disillusioned yet stout, stiffened by wit and rigorous poetic forms, while softened by nostalgia for the transcendent, and deliberately expressive of the English national character as it then seemed to be. Jennings had not yet written her greatest poems; Amis and Davie had written their few; while Larkin's "Church Going," perhaps his greatest before "The Whitsun Weddings" (which was still seven years away), defines the Movement in sensibility and style.
Larkin's poem is in some ways the quintessence of late modernism, with its rueful nostalgia for an age of classical form and sublime spiritual conviction, as well as its use of poetic form as a single, tenuous link between the desire for beauty found in the present and the vanquished beauty of the past. The poet, out on his bicycle, visits a country church, unsure why he's come and unimpressed by what he finds, but nonetheless lured there by the haunting presence of something grand. It concludes:

A serious house on serious earth it is,
In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,
Are recognized, and robed as destinies.
And that much never can be obsolete,

Since someone will forever be surprising
A hunger in himself to be more serious,
And gravitating with it to this ground,
Which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in,
If only that so many dead lie round.

The third group really comprises three names. The early work of Geoffrey Hill, which was probably also his best work, stands apart from the Movement poets by its metaphysical and epic ambitions, as in "God's Little Mountain" and "Genesis," the first of which displays some of the confident religious symbolism of Eliot's *Four Quartets*. Thom Gunn, who, we noted, was part of the Movement, might also be mentioned here, not so much because his work differs from his fellows, but because he would wield a distinct kind of influence after his emigration to California. Michael Hamburger, who was better known as a translator but whose "A Song about Great Men" is the best single English poem in the volume besides Larkin's. All-in-all, the anthology suggests that English poetry is best expressed by the Movement, and the Movement served chiefly to confirm that what the Americans were doing back at home was on the right track.

In the American Grain

What was it that the Movement ratified? What *were* the Americans doing? To answer this, we can also divide the American contributors into three groups. One group includes poets who were then composing tightly-wrought metrical poems in a classical plain style and who continued to do so for the rest of their careers. Most of these poets had some meaningful association with the California poet, Yvor Winters, who, with Ransom and Tate, helped define the late modernist style in America through both his own poems and his thrilling, dogmatic, yet genteel literary criticism.

In 1957, Winters was invited on a radio program to discuss the Beats and the so-called San Francisco Renaissance. He declined. There was no point. Such writers were "punks" who bored him and whose ascent to celebrity amounted to a "present plague." Winters knew what real poetry was and persisted. He refused to entertain imposters. That spoke well of his integrity but probably worked to the advantage of those figures who were swiftly crowding out both him and his disciples.

In *New Poets*, we find a good number of those who followed and admired Winters: Edgar Bowers, Henri Coulette, Catherine Davis, Charles Gullans, Thom Gunn (who first came to America to study with Winters), Robert Mezey, and Wesley Trimpi. That is a considerable number in itself. Nearly all of them can justly be called important poets, but nearly all of them also remained obscure of reputation throughout their lives, a special preserve of those few readers of poetry who savored wit, reason, and the chiseled style and sound meter that Winters had fostered by example.

Of those named here, only Trimpi became better known as a literary critic than a poet, and was soon surpassed in any case by his wife, Helen Pinkerton Trimpi, whose absence from the anthology is baffling. Davis's brief "*Passerculi*" nicely exemplifies the classical plain style of these poets and how it deliberately eschewed the indulgent formlessness about to overtake our literature in the next decade:

If you would have dark themes and high-flown words,
Great albatrosses drenched in sacredness,
Go read some other work, for I confess
I cannot make my verses to your taste.
And though they are not trifles made in haste,
Mine are to those such light things, little birds,
Sparrows among their kind, whose one last shift
Is shelter from the universal drift.

A second group of American poets are those who, like Wilbur, began their careers writing in the late modernist style and managed to continue developing and refining that style in the decades after, without having their reputations pushed out of our literature's public center. Of such poets, we find Anthony Hecht, John Hollander, Donald Justice, Robert Lowell, and James Merrill in the anthology and producing work of great power. Lowell and Wilbur are each given more than thirteen pages, the most of any poets in the volume. This reflects Lowell's status as slightly senior (he was born in 1917) and as the obvious leader among contemporary poets. The generous selection from Wilbur seems no less appropriate, as he would win the National Book Award (for *Things of This World*) the same year the anthology appeared. Lowell was a less consistent poet, but an ambitious one; Wilbur never wrote a bad poem, but Randel Jarrell and other contemporaries took his early work to task for not "taking a chance."
The selections in the anthology make it almost impossible to choose between the two. In reading Lowell in such a context, I came closest to the sensation I was hunting for, whereas it was not entirely clear that Wilbur towered from the shoulders up over the other poets of his generation. Lowell's later work changed but lost as much as it gained, as he sought to draw on the energies of the Beats without entirely betraying his love of intricacy in the name of frank confession. Wilbur's, in contrast, remained steady in excellence, gaining somewhat in ambition in his middle years but losing some of its charm, before the poetry of his last two decades equaled and crowned the early work. Lowell's ingenuity was gothic and full of intricate shadows, as in the opening of "Her Dead Brother,"

The Lion of St. Mark's upon the glass
Shield in my window reddens, as the night
Enchants the swinging dories of its terrors,
And dulls your distant wing-stung eyes; alas,
Your portrait, coiled in German-silver hawsers, mirrors
The sunset as a dragon.

"New Year's Day" and "The Holy Innocents" are probably his most perfect early lyrics, but other poems included have a vast and more dramatic historical scope. All of them, however, display an artisan's genius of construction that compares well with Wilbur's more baroque style (an adjective used advisedly as "A Baroque Wall-Fountain in the Villa Sciarra" was probably his most perfect single poem). Lowell, Wilbur, and the others mentioned in this group were the figures who appeared most likely, in 1957, to shape the future of American poetry. Their talent was great enough to earn them accolades in the decades that followed, but a changing culture ensured their achievement was recognized by many but influenced none—at least in the "mainstream" of American letters.

The Errant Pioneers of Free Verse

What frustrated their influence? That question was what had drawn me to the anthology in the first place. In consequence, what most gripped my attention in the anthology were just those poets who belong to a third and final group. Among them are the editors, Hall, Pack, and Simpson, as well as Robert Bly, William Meredith, W.S. Merwin, Adrienne Rich, William Jay Smith, and James Wright. All these poets began writing in the intricate, well-measured late modernist style of the other poets mentioned; each of them would follow and then go beyond Lowell in proclaiming the style, in Hall's words, so much "bad Wilbur," and declare their allegiance to free verse as the natural evolution of American poetry. Each of them became lesser poets, in consequence, and guided our literature toward mediocrity, a flaccid prosiness and vatic pretension that hardly repays a reader's patience.

Hall's early "Sleeping Giant" is an exemplary poem of the time and contrasts starkly with his later work, as does another early success, "My Son, My Executioner," whose third stanza runs,

We twenty-five and twenty-two,
   Who seemed to live forever,
Observe enduring life in you
   And start to die together.

Hall had himself studied with Winters, and one senses it here. And one can also see some basis for his later complaint that late modernism began to sound like "bad Wilbur," if not for his total turning away from it for the rest of his career.

Late modernist lyrics are self-consciously minor; they are "sentimental" in Friedrich Schiller's sense of looking back with a sense of loss upon a naïve condition, when meaning, significance, and form structured thought and life. Their intricate meter, use of metaphor, and all the generative couplings of poetic wit insist to us that there was once perceived an order in the world, to experience, and to human reason, while history, in its still-unfolding disaster balks and says, no, all is disorder, absurdity, and destruction. Their lyrics frequently seek to acknowledge history while looking for consolation and restoration in the artifice of poetry.

A convention of the age was the lyric of a modern mind in solitude, contemplating a work of public sculpture that depicts a historical hero or another grand personage. The lions of the past, the diminished present, and the frustration at being able to bridge the gap between faith and doubt only by the sculpture-in-words of meter and stanza are all integral to this period style. And this intimates that the style itself was so closely bound up with a metaphysical perspective, that form was so shackled to content (and content to a particular attitude), that to express a different perspective seemed to require one also to abandon the style.

This is what Rich felt obliged to do, for example, in abandoning such perfection as her early "At a Bach Concert," in the name of the feminism that came to dominate her poetry at the expense of style. She thus was forced to betray her poem's keen insight that

Form is the ultimate gift that love can offer—
The vital union of necessity
With all that we desire, all that we suffer.

A too-compassionate art is half an art.
Only such proud restraining purity
Restores the else-betrayed, too-human heart.

Rich at least never so entirely betrayed her art that she disowned it. This poem may be found in her collected works along with other brilliant early poems. Contrast this with Bly who would go on to have a prominent career as a poet, translator, and masculine guru in the last decades of the twentieth century. His later poetry often unfolds in prosaic, plain-spoken free verse that sometimes is written in long lines and sometimes simply gives up and shows itself as prose.

But the first poems Bly published were generally in a loose iambic pentameter and frequently rhymed. “A Missouri Traveler Writes Home: 1830” (later renamed “Schoolcraft’s Diary Written on the Missouri: 1830”) particularly stands apart from almost every other poem in the anthology. It is not lyric and minor; it is a narrative of considerable scope, a dramatic monologue in blank verse that unfolds with the stark landscape and visceral violence of the frontier, as here:

The Sioux believe all people, scalped or choked,
Are locked out of Paradise, yet I have seen
Small Sioux women hanging from scraggly trees;
On scaffolds stretch the acres of the dead,
Corroding in their sepulchers of air

Bly retained “Missouri” at least as late as his *Selected Poems* (1986), but somewhere along the line it dropped from the canon and does not appear in his more recent *Selected* or his *Collected Poems* (2018). What should have become a classic of our literature now lies forgotten and out of print, replaced by inferior poems whose chief qualities eschew everything that was valuable in the late modernist lyric.

The loss of Bly’s poem to his canon and to our literature is thus symbolic of a still greater loss. Over the sixty years since *New Poets* first appeared, American letters managed to retain at its margins those fine poets who wrote under the influence of Winters, and, closer to its center, a handful of old masters like Wilbur and Hecht. But in the main, it went the way of Bly. A tradition that was at once sophisticated, musical, and well-formed, but also metaphysically weighty and, at its best, capable of expressing the rawhide particularities of the American experience, was rejected and abandoned through a sudden loss of confidence. The early promise of Bly was never fulfilled, though that did nothing to hinder the success of his reputation, and we are left with a handful of early poems, and many other poems included in this anthology, as indications of what might have been. They are early achievements of a modern American literary tradition that could have flourished but which, like so much else in history, was forsaken by those who should have loved it.

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