

J.D. McCLATCHY, ed., *The Vintage Book of Contemporary American Poetry*, 2nd. edition, New York: Vintage, 2003, 617 pp., ISBN: 1-4000-3093-5.

THE BATTLE OF ANTHOLOGIES

Poetry has never ceased to dispute its own place, though recently some critics have questioned whether it is still alive or if it has been cast into oblivion in our contemporary society. Of course, in America many theorists share reasonable doubts about the social presence of poetry. For example, Joseph Epstein's essay, «Who Killed Poetry?» published in *Commentary* and Morris Friedman's «How Dead Is Poetry?» in *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, along with other meaningful data like the explicit negative of *The Los Angeles Times* and *The Houston Post* to review poetry books, are evidence that the death of poetry has been foretold.

However, in great part, this threatening view is strongly contrasted with other evidence that indicates that the American poetic scene is full of poetry readings, performances and publications, organized either by private institutions or community groups, as seen in the monthly *The Poetry Flash* published in San Francisco. It is also worth mentioning that poets are continually hired by English Departments or Creative Writing Programs in American universities, and commercial and academic publishers are passionate participants in this field. In this sense, poetry anthologies appear not only as mere epiphenomena, residues of the literary system, but as a powerful source of developing aesthetic patterns which at the same time still perform quite well in the market.

From this perspective, the recent publication of the revised second edition of *The Vintage Book of Contemporary American Poetry*, compiled by J.D. McClatchy, clearly responds to the interest of many Americans to have a representative *florilegium* that unpacks the essentialist new modes in this literary field. Obviously, McClatchy is not free from the typical battle of anthologies that recurrently appears with this sort of publication. Lynn Keller has already criticized

McClatchy's first edition of *Vintage* for its exclusive defense of the canonical side, «Under the guise of non-partisanship, McClatchy perpetuates the received canon and its erasure of huge portions of literary history, presenting once again the predictable roster of prize-winning white academic poets»¹. In fact, the first impression of this *Vintage* second edition follows the same line, since McClatchy only adds a few poets at the end who also align themselves with the proposals of the three generations of poets appearing in the first edition, «Each has touched the hidden nerve» (xxv), says McClatchy in referring to the included poets, appropriating for himself an expression used by Alexis de Tocqueville in 1840! We should recognize that the title of this anthology claims to be pluralistic, «diverse and intrepid» (xxv), despite disregarding a whole range of avant-garde work within the U.S. borders. Among them, those defined by McClatchy as the «less talented extremists of any persuasion... loopy Language poets, dry-as-dust New Formalists, or New York School clones» (xxxiii). The reason for these omissions is inevitably that as McClatchy, editor of the U.S.'s oldest university quarterly—it goes back to 1819—*The Yale Review*, confirms in his introductory note to *Vintage*, in making this selection he has been led by his own tastes (xxix). Hence the correlation between his personal experience and the final choices collected in this anthology is clear. So the pretended pluralism finishes up as is no more than personal taste.

This anthology covers a period of poetic practice in America from World War II to the present. The first sentence in McClatchy's introductory note is «There is no need for any anthology to choose sides» (xxiii), though it becomes clear that McClatchy's conservatism is noticeably reflected in the selection of the 75 poets collected in the 2003 *Vintage*. To include poets such as Sylvia Plath, Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, Elizabeth Bishop, John Ashbery or W.S. Merwin, is a

¹ Lynn KELLER, rev. of Jed Rasula's *The American Poetry Wax Museum: Reality Effects, 1940-1990*, *Sagetrieb* 16.3 (Winter 1997): 143.



sign of a schooled and hibernated editor, who likes being around «especially older writers because they know more and write better»². Indeed, W.H. Auden, James Merrill, Robert Lowell, or Anne Sexton, can easily be found resonating in his own poetry. This same emphasis on the personal material led Edmund White to define McClatchy as poet who writes with «the sensitivity of a Keats and the efficiency of an executive secretary» (Stein 39). This is remarkably visible in McClatchy's editorship in *The Yale Review*, where he has published writers such as Joseph Brodsky, Mona van Duyn, Eavan Boland, John Ashbery, or Charles Wright, to name a few.

Having based his own aesthetic terms on a strict formalism McClatchy has incorporated his goals into this anthology deciding that contemporary American poetry should still only meet the canonical pretension of concept-formation that would clarify the reader's ethical reading. His commitment to the lyrical ego and conventional forms designates the harmony he is searching for: A group of skilled poets, as Lorin Stein says of McClatchy's own poetry, who «include triumphs of this moralizing, deceptively chatty, unmistakably Audenic voice» (36). This 2003 *Vintage* edition similarly makes the reader to address the question: «What is an editor?» If his strategy consists of merely presenting textual editing, short biographies of the poets, or historicizing their work, then the task is quite simple. But since the litany of extratextual motives are present in his selection, searching for an equilibrium between representation, academy, analysis, audience/classroom, and market conditions, then this anthology continually reveals the collision of canonicity with other traditions. Due to McClatchy's use of the expression, «contemporary American poetry», we inevitably tend to contrast his anthology with other titles like *The Longman Anthology of Contemporary American Poetry* (1989) edited by Stuart Friebert and David Young, A. Poulin's *Contemporary American Poetry* (1991), Eliot Weinberger's *American Poetry since*

1950: Innovators and Outsiders (1993), Paul Hoover's *Postmodern American Poetry* (1994), Douglas Messerli's *From the Other Side of the Century: A New American Poetry, 1960-1990* (1994), Dennis Barone and Peter Ganick's *The Art of Practice: 45 Contemporary Poets* (1994), Leonard Schwartz, Joseph Donahue and Edward Foster's *Primary Trouble: An Anthology of Contemporary American Poetry* (1996), Lisa Jarnot, Leonard Schwartz and Chris Stroffolino's *An Anthology of New American Poets* (1998), Gerald Constanzo and Jim Daniels's *American Poetry: The Next Generation* (2000), or Cary Nelson's *Anthology of Modern American Poetry* (2000). All these select and recapitulate on contemporary poetry, empowering the perspective of presenting texts/poems written by «new»/contemporary poets to a wide readership composed of the general public, students and critics.

Cary Nelson, the editor of *Anthology of Modern American Poetry*, has recently written about the particularities involved in his own editorial work for Oxford University Press. He was aware of the power of anthologies to shape cultural memory but also felt confronted and «was determined for the first time in any anthology to give adequate representation to long poems and poems sequences» (318)³. Nevertheless, he had to adapt his own goals to the market necessities, which were of primary importance for Oxford University Press. Oxford sent out a questionnaire to specialists and developed a marketing research for this book. Faced with an important budget of \$200,000, and able to set various poetic modes into dialogue, Nelson provides a detailed account of the intellectual and financial history of his anthology in this essay. He presents a paradigmatic process in which critical perceptions, economic possibilities and the tensions between traditional and disjunctive poetic modes configure the organization of an anthology. His catalogue of strategies and final epistemological choices portrays

² Lorin STEIN, «Confessions of a Poet: A Profile of J.D. McClatchy», *Poets & Writers Magazine* 26.1 (January-February 1998): 35.

³ Cary NELSON, «Murder in the Cathedral: Editing a Comprehensive Anthology of Modern American Poetry», *American Literary History* 14.2 (Summer 2002): 311-327.



an infinite interconnectedness of the real world in which literature exists. Maybe McClatchy was attached to this spirit of pressures, like «cultural heritage», «critical response», or «cheaper edition». By the way, McClatchy's anthology is performing moderately well since, according to the amazon.com sales rank, 80,609 copies were sold by mid-November 2003.

Then, the perspectivization of this anthology is to present models, which offer the reader an opportunity to visualize the contours of a long period of fifty years in American poetry, through «75 outstanding poets», as it is specified on the cover of *Vintage*—beginning with Robert Lowell and ending with Carl Phillips—. The voices and aesthetics McClatchy has collected correspond to formalistic poetic practices, since most poets awaken old-fashioned devices like imagery, metaphor, or descriptive standards, to assume transparency and an emotional discourse in the reader. Well-known poets like Lowell, Sylvia Plath, A.R. Ammons, James Merrill, Elizabeth Bishop, Allen Ginsberg, Adrienne Rich, or Richard Wilbur co-exist with others who have published much less and are still on the poetic tenure: Li-Young Lee, Henri Cole, Heather McHugh, Carl Phillips, or Kay Ryan. Critical views on omissions and exclusions have been exposed in the usual literary magazine reviews. For example, where are Muriel Rukeyser, Jackson Mac Low, John Cage, David Antin, Robert Bly, Edward Dorn, the controversial Language poets like Barrett Watten, Charles Bernstein, Ron Silliman, Lyn Hejinian, or New Formalists like Dana Gioia or Robert McDowell?. In any case, variety is not an issue McClatchy was worried about since in the end there is a clear prevalence of the formalistic over avant-garde, postmodernist, or experimental work, though these latter tendencies have also become canonized today by the university and academia.

Without going into exceedingly rigorous analysis, I should say that short generalized biographies of some poets do not help. In this sense, Carl Phillips's literary career is summarized in these terms: «His poems work intuitively through layers of speculation towards metaphors larger than the truth» (586). Jorie

Graham's efforts «can seem like freshly minted sensations or thoughts» (549). McClatchy foregrounds Sharon Olds in much the same way, «Olds has learned how to build suspense, and to juxtapose panels of the banal and the extreme» (497). And along with these generalizations, this anthology also suffers from a problematic undatedness, since the texts are not dated and historicizing the poet's achievement becomes an arena of suppositions and hypotheses.

Obviously, McClatchy's selection is neither inclusive, authoritative, nor useful to observe the complexities of the diverse American poetic modes generated in recent decades. Against variation he has imposed the repetition of his goals in the first edition of *Vintage* in 1990. He appears too passive to be interested in reworking his own exegesis, shadowing innovations already fully incorporated into American poetry and throwing them into a fetishistic silence. One may argue, of course, there is no room for such diversity, but cutting down on the inclusion of old poets would have made space to other poetic modes committed to anthropology, sound, visual representation, language-centeredness, minimalism, or e-technologies. The 617 pages of *Vintage* provide a clear entrance into the lyrical ego's dilemmas, as established by Pulitzer prize-winners, Iowa Creative Writing Program, or the National Books Critics Circle Awards. It is true that permission fees, reduced space, and conventional academic inertia confront any anthology intended to be easily available and widely read. Excluding the poets or tendencies mentioned above, and I realize I have not yet mentioned the ethnic dimension, does not help to eliminate the battle of anthologies. Of primary importance in this shift is the consciousness that heterogeneity is co-substantial in contemporary American poetry, in which the challenge of continually altering political and cultural positions is present, «What we need... are artists willing to look up and respond to, put on again, language's torn, charged fabric»⁴.

⁴ Thomas GARDNER, «American Poetry of the 1990s: An Introduction», *Contemporary Literature* 42.2 (Summer 2001): 196.

Furthermore, heterology of American poetry can consider both «taste» and risk and cannot be traced without the assistance of a wide and diverse panorama of modes participating in a discursive reality, rather than exclusively fixing it on the verisimilitude of experience of the self.

Noting McClatchy's narrow preference for overly sentimental and rhetorical-skilled poets, I believe he does not celebrate the many facets of the truth. The result is clearly not pluralism. Hank Lazer finds three motives to justify the production of anthologies: 1) economic, individual books are more expensive, 2) authors appear contrastively suggestive, and 3) they help to create values, that is, they are representative of modes of production and serve to express a social commentary⁵. The Vintage, Harvard, Oxford, and

Norton anthologies have all created values and shaped a social body, but the editors of these anthologies do little to provide authentic representation without creating the interplay of diversity, so necessary to cross-reference the different approaches that govern humanity. An anthology is a treasure of poems compiled with a lot of effort. To descend to a level of stylistic self-limitation undermines the authority of the anthologist. Being generous in diverse presentations could have given McClatchy the satisfaction of showing the readership newer tendencies in ubuweb, poetry readings and performances, blogs and of course, in academia and universities.

MANUEL BRITO
Universidad de La Laguna

⁵ Hank LAZER, *Opposing Poetries: Issues and Institutions* (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1996) 133.