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The New American Poetry, Personism, and the Cold War

Burt Kimmelman
New Jersey Institute of Technology

Stephan Delbos. *The New American Poetry and Cold War Nationalism*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2021. 240 pp. $139.99 hardcover; $109.99 e-book.

Stephan Delbos's deeply researched historical analysis provides new insight into American avant-garde poetry and art after World War II when, in its aftermath and the ensuing Cold War, certain poets and artists set American poetics on a new course. Delbos evaluates this movement from the perspective of recent Anglophone poetry whose concerns for identity and biography have left it oblivious to what was a fierce contest over a half century ago. Yet the famous anthology, The New American Poetry, 1945–1960, *has changed the terms of American poetry even into the present. The poets and editors involved in that bygone struggle were not immune to the Cold War's effects both at home and abroad; in fact both the avant-garde poetry and the contemporaneous avant-garde art, in being appropriated for the global struggle, also directly or indirectly reflected that struggle in the work.*

Keywords: Donald Allen / Charles Olson / abstract expressionism / anthology / open field poetics

The year America ratified its Constitution, Sarah Wentworth Morton published *Ouâbi: Or the Virtues of Nature. An Indian Tale.* Her poem justified its subject in perfect English poesy:

> 'TIS not the court, in dazzling splendor gay,
> Where soft luxuriance spreads her silken arms,

Burt Kimmelman (kimmelman@njit.edu) is a distinguished professor of humanities at New Jersey Institute of Technology. His recent books include *Zero Point Poiesis: George Quasha's Axial Art* (2022), *Steeple at Sunrise: New Poems* (2022), and *Visible at Dusk: Selected Essays* (2021).

> Where gairish fancy leads the so
> And languid nature mourns her
>
> 'Tis not the golden hill, nor flow
> Which lends my simple muse her
> But the black forest and uncultur
> The savage warrior, and the lonel

A century on, *The Nation*'s "New
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a natural response to the suffocation
the nation by its throat as a new *ne*
being met with revanchism.

> Where gairish fancy leads the soul astray,
> And languid nature mourns her slighted charms:
>
> 'Tis not the golden hill, nor flow'ry dale,
> Which lends my simple muse her artless theme;
> But the black forest and uncultur'd vale,
> The savage warrior, and the lonely stream. (Canto I, ll. 1–8)

A century on, *The Nation*'s "New and Noteworthy" column featured two books of poems—Browning's and Longfellow's. American poetry would become American sometime after that. By 1960, we knew what it was ("I know it when I see it," Justice Potter Stewart said about pornography, in 1964). In the late fifties, an editor at Grove Press in Greenwich Village, Donald Allen, picked up a gauntlet that Donald Hall, Robert Pack, and Louis Simpson had thrown down (more like "let slip" as they sauntered down a forest path). Three years after the release of their anthology, *The New Poets of England and America*, Allen published *The New American Poetry, 1945–1960*, essentially joining a poetry war. More anthologies appeared.

An anthology is about poetics, and a lot was at stake when Allen's anthology hit the bookstores. It was not just a snapshot. It was about poetry itself—more than this, in fact. It was about American language and culture in 1960. The *the* of the title made a claim for a definitive American identity. In 1962, Hall and Pack published their second edition, now titled *New Poets of England and America*. Was the missing definite article an unconscious concession? The flinch inferred there had been something more than a dust-up.

In any case, the anthologies were a symptom of America's international, geopolitical conflict of this time, which involved far more than poetry, or for that matter art, as Stephen Delbos makes clear in *The New American Poetry and Cold War Nationalism*. Poets in America were fighting over what poetry was; the nation's spies and military were fighting for nothing less than world supremacy in a new kind of struggle. The two "wars" resembled one another like a wavy funhouse mirror's reverse image.

Delbos smartly anatomizes by historicizing the disputes among poetry rivals taking place in the wake of our greatest human cataclysm, World War II. The United States was the nation left standing. But now a not-so-hot, yet in its own way equally dangerous, clash was in full swing under threat of nuclear annihilation.

The early Cold War, on the home front, was characterized by stultifying conformity. Military and industrial regimentation had led America to victory in 1945. In keeping the good thing going during the Baby Boom with its conventionality and materialism, the war's bounty, a tension between complacency and radicalism came to undermine the social contract. The Beats, in the fifties, were a natural response to the suffocation. Cultural and political schisms were holding the nation by its throat as a new *new*, possessing élan and scary militancy, was being met with revanchism.

The poetry war, in the grand scheme of things, was a tempest in a teapot (the folks in *The New Poets of England and America* drank their tea—those in *The New American Poetry* smoked it). With hindsight, Delbos takes pains to show there was little difference between these warring tribes—considering how one or another poet's work could have been slid into the opposite book. It's true that Allen spent years corresponding with poets and others, trying to conceive what exactly his book would be. In the end, however, no poet in *The New American Poetry* appeared in *The New Poets*; no poet in that collection got included by Allen.

Through several editions *The New Poets of England and America* became the university seminar's book of choice. These "academic" poets—a slur flung with gusto by Allen's rag-tag newcomers (who mostly had no sinecures)—wore their scarlet "A" with pride. The insult was not of recent coinage. Theodore Roethke, a great poet who appeared in neither book (but whose aesthetic leaned toward the buttoned-up crowd), penned this poem in 1941:

> Academic
>
> The stethoscope tells what everyone fears:
> You're likely to go on living for years,
> With a nurse-maid waddle and a shop-girl simper,
> And the style of your prose growing limper and limper. (23)

The very existence of Allen's anthology was dissent; its poems disobeyed prevailing aesthetic and social codes.

Delbos shows how the poems need not have been taken as a repudiation of the past. The New American Poetry, seen by some as wild insurrection, was not premised on anarchy. A loosely construed modus operandi was explained in a "poetics" section of the book where "new" principles were, sometimes unceremoniously, set out. Prosody wasn't totally abandoned. The most famous of these statements of poetics was Charles Olson's "Projective Verse" ("the LAW OF THE LINE, which projective verse creates, must be hewn to, obeyed, and that the conventions which logic has forced on syntax must be broken open as quietly as must the too set feet of the old line" [392])—a turning point in American letters.

Form aside, these poems possessed the American spirit. "America I'm putting my queer shoulder to the wheel," Allen Ginsberg had proclaimed four years earlier in *Howl and Other Poems* (31). Jasper Johns's first American flag painting, in 1954, became, in the hands of Grove Press's designers, Allen's wonderfully brash cover featuring primary red and white stripes, and black fonts, together declaring the end of obeisance. Delbos situates both the painting and cover within the frame of the Cold War being waged abroad.

American isolationism no longer a possibility, at home there were the McCarthy hearings leading to black-listed writers and filmmakers (some suicides—others jailed), and the Rosenbergs' executions preceded by world-wide protests (intellectuals and artists in Greenwich Village thought them innocent). Abroad, North Korea crossed the 38th Parallel (the confrontation would draw in Mao's Chinese soldiers) and the war was captured in Frankenheimer's

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1962 paranoid film, *The Manchurian Candidate*. The Cuban Revolution, in 1959, prompted Castro to make an extended stay at the Hotel Theresa in Harlem, where he hosted Khrushchev; the two of them were instrumental in the Cuban Missile Crisis two years after.

The postwar years are now forgotten. Maybe the best of that time still holds. Delbos believes that "the model of American poetry we have inherited from Allen's book reflects the nationalist mindset of this period and created the framework we still use to think about poetry written in English since World War II" (53). One element of the Cold War story is vital to comprehending The New American Poetry, which changed the game. In 1958, the CIA sponsored a traveling exhibition of Abstract Expressionist art, titled *The New American Painting*.

It made stops in Western Europe before coming to New York's MoMA, and was meant to demonstrate something peculiarly American, which defined American identity overseas and at home. This use of art as political propaganda leads to later American Post-Modernist art that incorporated more sophisticated propaganda into an expanding media landscape (Norman Mailer's *Advertisements for Myself* in 1959 anticipated Andy Warhol's *Ads Portfolio* of 1985.) The art world's center of gravity shifted from Paris to New York.

Allen emulated the art of his time, particularly Abstract Expressionism that was American painting's break with Modernist art of European origin. *The New American Poetry* replicated both the posturing and design of *The New American Painting* show whose title, and the contents of its catalogue, stressed individuality of artistic vision—which becomes the model for the anthology's poetics section. The insights into Cold War culture Delbos provides and its effect on Allen are especially salutary. "The artist statements in the catalogue of The New American Painting weren't exactly an innovation." Even so, "each artist is given the space to present himself or herself as an individual" (79). In the catalogue, the "artists are presented as part of a particular tendency in contemporary American painting" (80).

AbEx inflected another, related tendency among certain American poets taking shape in the mid forties; Allen merged the two. William Carlos Williams, among his peers, was most fixated on the European art that arrived in America with the landmark Armory exhibition of 1913 (beginning its tour in New York, a day trip from his home in Rutherford, New Jersey). Of the three poets who arguably comprise the bole of the American Modernist tree, it was Williams who'd prove most in sympathy with later *American* art. He, Ezra Pound, and H.D. first met in 1905 in Philadelphia. Pound ("Oh Hale green song . . . That cooleth all my soul" ["Fragment to W.C.W.'s Romance" 246]) and H.D. ("The heavy sea-mist stifles me" ["Loss" 21]) left for Europe. Pound's early affection for Whitman's "barbaric yawp" waned. Simultaneously, it guided Williams toward a genuinely American idiom ("so much depends / upon // a red wheel / barrow" ["The Red Wheelbarrow" 74]). Williams's prose volume, *In the American Grain*, was the perfect companion to his monumental *Paterson*, that great amalgam of rhetorical modes comprising a new version of the epic poem

(which the old guard thought chaotic). The poem's landmark is the Paterson Falls. *Paterson* is rooted in place, and it's an American place. There were also his ekphrastic works, and more.

Yes, of course, Pound was especially important for poets of the Allen generation. Ginsberg, Olson, Paul Blackburn, and others corresponded with and visited him. Olson and Blackburn each made regular visits to see Pound at St. Elizabeth's Hospital in Washington, D.C. Ginsberg, later in life, visited Pound in Italy once he'd been released from the hospital. Olson and Blackburn carried on truly remarkable written correspondences with him. But Williams's work, absent from the college curriculum through the sixties, was the heart of what became Allen's book, especially once Olson began exerting a lot of influence on its editing.

"Projective Verse" was first published in 1950 (in the journal *Poetry New York*). Williams incorporated it in his *Autobiography* the following year. He had put Creeley in touch with Olson and the two developed, together, what became the famous essay. It carries forward in time Creeley's theorizing (the now famous "form is never more than an extension of content" [Creeley 12; Letter to Olson, 28 Apr. 1950]). Creeley's thinking came from Williams's introduction to *The Wedge* of 1944, which was reprised in a lecture Williams gave in 1948 (titled "The Poem as a Field of Action"—which became Olson's "composition by field").

Yet Allen ended up, Delbos reports, "[showcasing groups] of individuals supposedly united as much by time and place as by a shared set of stylistic and aesthetic beliefs" (80). An irony in this confusion reaches back to the now famous experimental Black Mountain College in North Carolina, where Olson served as its final Rector. The college's forward-looking beliefs and practices derived from its original faculty who were refugees from Nazism. The first Rector was the abstract colorist painter Joseph Albers (his wife Annie worked in textiles).

An outgrowth of German totalitarianism, Black Mountain College gave rise to art and literature that were appropriated in the Cold War to combat Soviet totalitarianism. Most of America's future artistic avant garde were nurtured at Black Mountain. Neither Jackson Pollock nor Jasper Johns participated in the college but the majority of our best-known Abstract Expressionists did—the de Koonings, Franz Kline, Robert Motherwell et al.—along with the art critic Clement Greenberg who bears some responsibility for these painters' meteoric rise. John Cage and Merce Cunningham were there too, among many other notables. Robert Rauschenberg was there, whose influence on Johns, leading to his flag paintings, is well documented. The *Black Mountain Review*, edited by Creeley, was one of the principal poetry journals Allen turned to in creating his book.

Olson personified, physically and artistically, what might now be understood as the implicit "propaganda" of Allen's ultimate creation. A huge intellect, Olson stood tall at 6'9"—the physicality and affect apropos of his early magisterial work on Melville, *Call Me Ishamel* (1947). Its first section remains profoundly stirring today, as in this passage:

I take SPACE to be the central
now. I spell it large because it co

It is geography at bottom, a hel
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New American Poetry, embracing
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> I take SPACE to be the central fact to man born in America, from Folsom cave to now. I spell it large because it comes large here. Large, and without mercy.
>
> It is geography at bottom, a hell of wide land from the beginning. 'That made the first American story (Parkman's): exploration. (Olson, *Call Me* 11)

Its insistence upon exploration emblematized something Allen realized in his valorizing of the "new," "American," and linguistic experimentation. *The New Poets of England and America* looked backward across the Atlantic to Europe. *The New American Poetry*, embracing the expanse and optimism necessary to journey to the Pacific, looked away from America's origin.

For acolyte poets, reading the Allen book in the sixties was a revelation. I was transformed, having found it in Greenwich Village's Eighth Street Bookshop in 1965. Years later, Rachel Blau DuPlessis wrote to me about her own first encounter with the book. She'd found Robert Duncan's poems, feeling her "first HIT of that person, the absolute gasp and sense of desire—to do something like THAT!" ("An Epistle"). At Barnard, she'd been assigned *New Poets of England and America*, while Williams's *Spring and All* "in the Rare Book Room of Columbia University" was "a VERY important discovery—for the elegance and wildness at once, and a discovery of the hybrid text" ("An Epistle").

Allen's organization of the anthology has had its long-lasting effect. He placed Duncan in his book's "Black Mountain" grouping rather than the "San Francisco Renaissance" though he was a San Francisco fixture. Joel Oppenheimer, also to be placed in the "Black Mountain" section, was not pleased—as he voiced in a 1958 letter to Olson: "the shit of it, . . . i find, from him [Allen], I ain/t a new york poet, that/s o/hara and his boys. isn't that nice. i live here, work here, write here, and where will he get a label?" (qtd. in Gilmore 24). LeRoi Jones (later Amiri Baraka) and Blackburn, neither part of the college, were also assigned there; both lived in New York. Their distinctive poetries partook of a common set of presumptions shared with Oppenheimer.

Were Allen's groupings really prescient, though? In his time, Allen got it all pretty much right (the same goes for Hall, Pack, and Simpson)—but is saying this now being a bit unreliable? Still, I can't picture John Ashbery's work sitting easily between the covers of *The New Poets of England and America* (Hall seriously considered this, notes Delbos [35]), juxtaposed with poems by Philip Larkin or Thomas McGrath. Conversely, Ashbery fits nicely within the Allen collection.

In the earlier years, poets to be classified by Allen as "New York School," "Black Mountain," and "San Francisco Renaissance" attended each other's readings, drank, ate, and sometimes slept together in downtown Manhattan. The first typescript of Ginsberg's *Howl* was made by Creeley. Beyond these facts, there's a likely reason why Allen put Ashbery in the "New York School": he was an art critic.

All the poets in this section of the anthology were collaborating with visual artists; some of them like Ashbery were writing art reviews or, like Frank O'Hara,

curating art shows. Poets in the other groupings were also intimate with the world of visual art. The New American poets breathed the same air as the artists.

Their poems could seem illogical, maybe filled with disparate combinations of things. The nature of their work tells us how their lives were led, of the concerns in their poems either on the surface or within their fabric. Those poets who'd spent time at Black Mountain College were deeply involved with the artists there. Afterwards, as true for the poets in the "San Francisco Renaissance" grouping, many of the poets were involved with individual artists.

The difference, in this regard, from the lives of the people represented in the Hall-Pack-Simpson anthology, is striking. Was Allen especially drawn to *The New American Painting* exhibition because it was organized by O'Hara (a poet who was part of the downtown scene as well as a curator at New York's MoMA)? Involved especially with the AbEx painters and their attendant critics—they all socialized together—O'Hara was close with Ashbery (as well as with poets eventually placed under one of the other headings such as "Black Mountain" who, even if they were not writing art criticism, nevertheless were working with artists and their artworks in various ways, such as Creeley, Jones/Baraka, Blackburn, Basil King, and others).

This network of friendships and collegiality would become, in the eyes of the old guard, a liability. In his introduction to *New Poets of England and America* (the anthology's second edition), Pack compares the community of "the university" with "the literary cliques, the poetry societies, the incestuous pages of little magazines" ("Preface," 15), some of them containing work by artists. Delbos supplies a 2019 rejoinder to Pack by Nathaniel Tarn (recently republished in *Dispatches from the Poetry Wars*): "When we lost the Whitmanian notion that there should be marriage between poet and people, poet and public, or poet and 'reader,' if you will, we entered incest. And the great nuclear breeder of incest has been the university" (32). Pack had a point, even so. There *were* the "cliques," and some of the magazines were out-and-out "incestuous." Poets in physical proximity, hearing each other read, socializing with each other, in the 1950s, did often find themselves in the same journals.

The social setting became even more the agenda during the so-called Mimeograph Revolution. "When the Allen anthology came out," writes Steve Clay in *From a Secret Location*, "several of the featured poets had barely been published. Of necessity, they existed on the margins, outside mainstream publication and distribution channels" (n.p.) Therefore, Clay finishes his thought, "they invented their own communities and audiences (typically indistinguishable), with a small press or little magazine often serving as the nucleus of both" (Clay n.p.).

Given how low-budget these ventures could be, local geography became an especially significant part of the equation. Correspondence was not as easy or cheap then as it is now. Neighborhood publications became meeting places, especially when institutions like The St. Mark's Church Poetry Project, in the East Village, were founded. As Jerome Rothenberg recalls, the "existence of independent bookstores meant that it was actually possible to find these publications in

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two pages" ("Personism").
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this I do that" poetics (282) where
of the poem—that's really what it
Allen's book, here are the openin

> I am not a painter, I am a poet.
> Why? I think I would rather be
> a painter, but I am not. Well,
>
> for instance, Mike Goldberg
> is starting a painting. I drop in.
> "Sit down and have a drink" he
> says. I drink; we drink. I
> look up. "You have SARDINES i
> "Yes, it needed something there." (

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all their raw homemade beauty" (qtd. in Clay). As happens with a journal, perhaps because of who's editing it, a particular taste becomes recognizable.

Allen's poetics section was a large appendix. For his contribution to it, in 1959, O'Hara submitted his now famous essay, "Personism: A Manifesto." It would appear in the journal *Yugen*, edited by Jones and his wife Hettie Cohen. Allen had rejected it. So O'Hara tried an untitled, brief, also personal, statement that contrasted to his concerns in "Personism." There's a fleeting moment in the substitute, even so, which echoes the intent of the more substantial essay: "What is happening to me," O'Hara writes, "allowing for lies and exaggerations which I try to avoid, goes into my poems" (qtd. in Dowell).

His "personism," in the picture he made cohere, during a tectonic shift not just in poetry but all of American life, describes a way of living and working to be viewed as key to the moment's specifically cultural transformation. His idea, in the larger excursus, of his composition process focuses on "the poem" as being capable of metamorphosis within a social sphere. What gets written by O'Hara, he explains in "Personism," is presented as existing "squarely between the poet and the person, Lucky Pierre style." ("Personism"). The result is that "the poem is correspondingly gratified. The poem is at last between two persons instead of two pages" ("Personism").

Personism becomes the art of what Brad Gooch later named O'Hara's "I do this I do that" poetics (282) wherein the social world, at ground zero, is the scene of the poem—that's really what it's all about, if it's actually *about* anything. From Allen's book, here are the opening lines of O'Hara's "Why I Am Not a Painter":

> I am not a painter, I am a poet.
> Why? I think I would rather be
> a painter, but I am not. Well,
>
> for instance, Mike Goldberg
> is starting a painting. I drop in.
> "Sit down and have a drink" he
> says. I drink; we drink. I
> look up. "You have SARDINES in it."
> "Yes, it needed something there." (243)

The shaggy-dog tale continues. *Personism* is the emblem of what Delbos nicely calls "the community of love," in part because it "renews the function of the poem as communication and not merely verbal icon" (111). How this is communication, on its face, involves what's essential in the situation O'Hara commemorates.

Delbos's exhaustive research turns up many gems including publications that conflated poetry and art. One of them is *A New Folder, Americans: Poems and Drawings*, edited by Daisy Aldan (also in 1959). In considering it, Delbos shows that Allen wasn't inventing the wheel; there were other collections like it for him to mull over in trying to shape his book. It's difficult to see how *A New Folder* could not have been an influence.

Edward Field, whose poems appeared in both collections, later described *A New Folder* as "more inclusive of the poets in New York than Donald Allen's was" (qtd. in Delbos 60), and Delbos notes gatherings of visual artists and poets in a number of journals and the like. Aldan featured works by the leading Abstract Expressionists. Her editing "prefigure[d] Allen's insistence on the shared affinities between modern poetry and modern painting and achieves a symbiosis between poetry and art that Allen could only hint at" (60).

Common to Aldan's and Allen's collections is the predominance of white males. A portion of Delbos's nuanced study focuses on this exclusivity. Where were the women writing poems then, and poets of color? Allen knew of Bob Kaufman, Ted Joans, Clarence Major, Steven Jonas—their work in some way experimental. As for the Hall-Pack-Simpson book, there were six women among the fifty-two poets—all Caucasian. There were four women of forty-four poets in Allen's book—forty-three Caucasians, one African American.

But I wonder if Delbos, in looking back more than a half-century, misses something a member of the older generation wouldn't. Our present culture has emerged from events now lost to common memory (while it's for Delbos to recover the "New American" poetry world). As he emphasizes, a significant number of Allen's poets were openly gay. His book, a symptom of its time, was cathartic in and beyond the poetry world. Yet few people grasped the extent to which wrenching change had been set in motion. (Why would they?)

In 1960, the FDA approved the first birth-control pill; the first US soldiers were sent to Vietnam; anti-Jim Crow sit-ins began; Dwight Eisenhower signed the 1960 Civil Rights Act (following the Civil Rights Act of 1957); John F. Kennedy won the presidential election; Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* was released; Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* was published. Many more transmogrifying events were still to come such as new birth control options; widespread use of cannabis and LSD (later hard drugs too) within the middle class; Title IX; the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965; the creation of Medicaid and Medicare, as part of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society, also in 1965; the Loving v. Virginia Supreme Court decision in 1967; the Pentagon Papers and Tet Offensive in Vietnam (precipitating America's first ever military defeat, a war that dragged on until 1975); the assassinations of President Kennedy, Attorney General Robert Kennedy, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King, Jr. all in the sixties; the release of *Star Wars* and publication of Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*; the onset of the digital technology revolution (on a par with the Gutenberg revolution).

Who mingled with whom in the 1950s? It's fair to say, recalling Pack's disparagement of coterie, that it won out over objectivity. (I question how rigorous the process was among the "academics.") How much do social interactions and shifts in the art and poetry worlds coincide with, at the same time anticipate, future cultural transformations? In 1960, Le Roi Jones was married to Hettie Cohen (*Yugen* was another feeder to the Allen anthology) and they were raising a family in the Village.

James Baldwin had already published *Notes of a Native Son* and *Giovanni's Room*, though not yet *Nobody Knows My Name* and *The Fire Next Time*. In 1964,

his play *Blues for Mister Charlie* premiered, as did Jones's *Dutchman* (the play was written in one night after a workshop session at the Playwright's Horizon—Edward Albee was his classmate); *The Slave* also premiered that year. In 1965, following Malcolm X's death, Jones became Amiri Baraka and founded the Black Arts movement. The following year, he and Sylvia Robinson, who became Amina Baraka, returned to Newark, New Jersey from Harlem where he'd moved from Greenwich Village. (*The Slave* is a thinly disguised account of his metamorphosis up till then.)

To look at America in the 1950s from 1965 (when I first set eyes on *The New American Poetry*) is to witness a life already becoming unrecognizable. The question of white male hegemony then, nonetheless, is something far more than a reference point. Delbos recounts this history with remarkable aplomb, taking us up to our present. He finds the warring tribes—"academic" and "experimental"—sharing a basic premise and posture. The two initial anthologies embodied a passion and focus: the love of form, of craft. He classifies the poets of the respective anthologies as "cooked" and "raw" (1 ff.)—a metaphor that was championed by Allen in that moment when it seemed to make sense—yet they all down deep remained interested in prosody.

Nowadays, "raw" vs. "cooked" needlessly complicates our understanding of contemporary American poetry. "Tracking current controversies in the avant-garde shows just how far we've come" (194). Delbos is quick to add that our longitudinal view

> shows how the cooked and raw binary, outdated as it may be, continues to influence older generations of influential critics who agree on the importance of a formalist framework for judging poetry despite the fact that they favor different poets. Allen's anthology, which insisted that the poets included were anti-academic but were also intimately concerned with form, won entrance into the formalist framework. (193)

Who could have foreseen the day when our two reigning scholars of modern American poetry, Helen Vendler and Marjorie Perloff, representing the two warring camps, would find themselves back on their heels after expressing displeasure over Rita Dove's 2011 edition, *The Penguin Anthology of Twentieth-Century American Poetry*? Delbos takes delicious pleasure in highlighting this *contretemps*:

> The myopia of critics in the 1950s, who could not or would not take avant-garde poets into account, has developed into a critical model that cannot or will not take poets of color and identity based and socially minded poets into account. But this framework, founded on outdated principles and binaries, has begun to collapse as American poetry and society become more diverse and pluralistic than ever before. (193)

Olson's pivotal essay "Projective Verse" holds to a theory of poetry that has not actually abandoned formalism. "Open Field Poetry," the rules of Olson's version of tennis, was radically different yet it was still tennis (with the net). Today, in contrast, "judgments about poetry that privilege form over content and theme are inadequate" (195). What's abundantly clear, though, is

> that issues of race, identity and subjectivity have taken center stage while an older generation of critics clings to the formalist framework established after World War II. It is also clear that now more than ever editors need to be aware of the racial and gender imbalances of their publications, as these imbalances will no longer pass unnoticed, nor should they. (Delbos 192)

Is the Cold War distantly responsible for the present state of American poetry, which Delbos finds to be a reinvention all its own, even if one that finally ignores the matter of *verse*? He points out that the very nature of "[t]he formalist argument" depends upon

> sublimating everything to form, poets avoid the subjectivity that makes social poetry less sophisticated. But it should be clear at this point that critical judgments about poetry that privilege form over content and theme are inadequate, especially because recent avant-gardes have not transcended subjectivity, despite their best efforts. These formal arguments have always been used as a way to benignly discount politically questionable poetry. That may no longer be possible in today's less hierarchical literary and political discourse. (Delbos 195)

Allen's anthology laid claim not merely to *American* identity, wresting it from the clutches of America's establishment poets who were invidiously charged with resting contentedly within one or another, "limper and limper," style (as Roethke put it), which is now out of synch with the national zeitgeist. Trying to be even handed, Delbos points to Allen's inclusion of rhyming poems and traditional forms generally—such as Creeley's "Ballad of the Despairing Husband." The ballad form was to be mocked, however. "Oh come home soon," Creeley's pleading persona "write[s] to her. / Go fuck yourself, is her answer" (80). Beyond the use of obscenity, Creeley's cadence is brought forth by idiom relying on end rhyme to furnish this sad-sack comedy. The poem contains no sweetness and light. Allen's selections, more often than not, possess a world view mostly absent in the earlier collection.

In *The New American Poetry and Cold War Nationalism*, Delbos uniquely contextualizes Allen's anthology within America's postwar, socio-political milieu caught up in dramatic, unrelenting reinvention. The shortcomings—not merely of Allen's anthology or *The New Poets of England and America* but rather all of America as it entered into a new form of geopolitical struggle—are spelled out meticulously. It's inevitable that we back-read from our present moment, falling victim to its premise. That doesn't mean we should ignore this amazing history, factoring in the official and unofficial savage sexism and racism of immediate postwar America. Yes, the Civil Rights movement was making gains—but could that actually have manifested in an anthology assembled in the fifties? The two anthologies' common predilection for craft is a fact to be considered only in hindsight with respect to this particular history—certainly in contrast to so much of American poetry today, which is principally interested, as Delbos says, in telling stories of personal identity. This is something quite other than *Personism*.

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