

REBEL ANGELS

25 POETS OF THE NEW FORMALISM

Edited by

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Preface

Revolution, as the critic Monroe Spears has observed, is bred in the bone of the American character. That character has been manifest in modern American poetry in particular. So it is no surprise that the most significant development in recent American poetry has been a resurgence of meter and rhyme, as well as narrative, among large numbers of younger poets, after a period when these essential elements of verse had been suppressed. We hope to demonstrate that the poets known as the New Formalists have produced poems deserving attention for the beauty, accuracy, and memorability of their language, as well as their feeling and ideas. This anthology aims to entertain, but also to instruct by gathering the best work of twenty-five important new poets who write in a wide variety of forms—some traditional, some newly-minted—out of the experience of their generation. These poets represent nothing less than a revolution, a fundamental change, in the art of poetry as it is practiced in this country.

The poets collected here were all born since 1940. They came of age as writers at a time when meter and rhyme had largely been abandoned by American poets. The cultural upheavals of the 1960's and '70's, coming on the heels of modernism and two World Wars, produced a poetry in which traditional measures were thought to be antithetical to truth. The flourishing of free verse during the Cold War was itself a change, a revolution bred by the American character. Younger poets at that time read the work of Allen Ginsberg, Amiri Baraka, Diane Wakoski, Denise Levertov, and studied the shift in style from formal to free verse in poets like Robert Lowell and Adrienne Rich. Very often the result, as they imitated their elders, was a poetry that spoke to social concerns, but did so in a language of narrowing formal range. Poetry and prose became nearly indistinguishable, and "verse" a pejorative term. The alliterative heritage and bountiful vocabulary of English suffered, too, as the aural range of poetry shrank to the plainest diction possible.

Of course there were older American poets who never abandoned traditional forms, and some were teachers who kept older aesthetic values alive, withstanding attacks on their own work by critics who believed that measure was un-American. One thinks of J. V. Cunningham, Anthony

Hecht, Howard Nemerov, and Richard Wilbur, along with X. J. Kennedy and Mona Van Duyn, whose magazines *Counter/Measures* and *Perspective* remained friendly to writers of verse. One recalls that Donald Justice, who had abandoned the meters of his early work, returned to them in the mid-70's. These poets were courageous in their commitment to their art. But they were also, when young, trained in that art and immersed in the formal aesthetic of Yvor Winters, John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and the New Critics. They were inspired by what might be called "the high canon of literature," bred from English Renaissance ideas of art, irony, and decorum.

Though acknowledging their debt to these older masters, the New Formalists have largely different roots. These younger poets grew up in the era of rock music, the Viet Nam War, the Civil Rights Movement, birth control, drugs, and feminism. Not only was the America they inhabited radically different from that of the '30's and '40's, when many of their teachers came of age, but the literature that surrounded them had few ties to tradition. The very word "tradition" became routinely associated with some of T. S. Eliot's personal views, and was dismissed out of hand as anathema. Younger poets were schooled to be unschooled. Learning and artifice were regarded as politically suspect matters. American poetry had entered another romantic phase, like a late adolescence.

What is remarkable is not so much that a few older poets stood their ground before this onslaught, but that younger writers across the political, cultural, and racial spectrum began to turn away from the dominant literary trends. Out of need and affection, they rediscovered the inherent power of measured speech, even rhyme, and the power of narrative to convey experience, including minority or marginalized experience. They understood as well that an entire realm of pleasure was being denied to them by much contemporary poetry. Some of these younger poets were taught by Robert Fitzgerald and Elizabeth Bishop at Harvard, Yvor Winters and Donald Davie at Stanford, Allen Tate at Sewanee, John Hollander at Yale, and J. V. Cunningham at Brandeis. But a great many younger poets wholly without the advantage of such training sought out information about meter where they could, instinctively feeling that techniques common to popular music, for example, still had valid uses in poetry.

The critic Robert McPhillips has observed that early volumes of poetry by Charles Martin, Timothy Steele, and others went largely unnoticed. By the late 1970's there were few critics who could see what was

happening, or could understand why a younger generation of poets would feel limited by the kinds of free verse most commonly published. McPhillips suggests that it was the publication of Brad Leithauser's debut volume, *Hundreds of Fireflies* (1982), that first drew major attention to the new trend. That may be true, and by the mid-80's there were anthologies like *Strong Measures*, edited by Philip Dacey and David Jauss, and *Ecstatic Occasions, Expedient Forms*, edited by David Lehman, to signal this new interest in meter. The first of these was too catholic in its definition of form to be of lasting use to teachers, and both books lumped older and younger poets together, blurring the distinctions between generations. Our anthology is more precisely defined in both formal and historical terms.

The term New Formalism, originally used as a dismissive epithet by critics hostile to the movement, is usually thought inadequate even by its adherents. Some poets like Frederick Turner and Frederick Feirstein found the term Expansive Poetry more to their liking, because it could include the related phenomenon of New Narrative poems, many of which are also composed in meter. The New Narrative, supported by journals like *The Hudson Review*, *The New England Review*, and *The Reaper*, has introduced a new kind of realism to contemporary poetry, influenced by Robinson, Frost, and Jeffers, but also by the whole range of modern fiction. The Calcutta-born poet Vikram Seth (partly educated in California, but now returned to his native India) published *The Golden Gate* (1986), a novel about twenty-something San Franciscans written in an elaborately-rhymed stanza borrowed from Pushkin. Julia Alvarez has written a fictionalized autobiography in the form of a sonnet sequence, "33." Andrew Hudgins' *After the Lost War* is a fresh, book-length treatment of the Civil War and its aftermath. This is to say nothing of a range of narratives by Dana Gioia, Paul Lake, Robert McDowell, and Mary Jo Salter, or the experiments in verse drama by Tom Disch.

We choose to retain the term New Formalism, however, because it best describes this movement and the distinction between free and formal verse. It is understood that a formalist writes primarily in the meters of the English tradition and often in the verse forms associated with those meters. That is the case with the poets gathered here. But the New Formalism also reflects trends of broad cultural significance, not unrelated to the return of melody in serious music, representation in the visual arts, and character and plot in fiction. The neglect of the maker's art in poetry resulted in a lit-

erary climate in which, for the first time in history, the artist's personal life and the correctness of his or her political attitudes became important aesthetic criteria. It is also true that hardly any significant new literary critics other than the feminists appeared among poets in the 1960's and '70's. As the New Formalists have taken on the responsibility of cogent criticism, the outlines of this new movement have become clearer. While the wide-scale abandonment of traditional forms—and whole genres like satirical, narrative, and dramatic verse—has proven too limiting, popular phenomena as diverse as cowboy poetry and rap music demonstrate that the rhyme and meter that characterize Emily Dickinson are just as American as the free verse of Walt Whitman.

One of the most notorious attacks upon poets who have the effrontery to use rhyme and meter was Diane Wakoski's essay, "The New Conservatism in American Poetry" (*American Book Review*, May-June 1986), which denounced poets as diverse as John Hollander, Robert Pinsky, T. S. Eliot, and Robert Frost for using techniques Wakoski considered Eurocentric. She is particularly incensed with younger poets writing in measure. Conflating political and aesthetic agendas, she refers to "this new generation coming along which cannot deal with anxiety of any sort and thus wants a secure set of formulas and rules, whether it be for verse forms or for how to cure the national deficit." The problem with pronouncements like Wakoski's is that they obscure any useful aesthetic distinctions. In this case, she actually refers to Hollander as "Satan." Wakoski talks about "a Whitman tradition" and William Carlos Williams' search for a "new measure," but expects her readers to take these vague ramblings on faith, never making it clear why Frost and Pinsky are any less American as poets, and never coming to grips with the contradictions in Williams' theories. Her essay is the verbal equivalent of flailing arms.

Rejecting the sentimental notion that meter is un-American, New Formalists have contributed to a new consensus, defending the material value of verse against the encroachment of prose, while simultaneously defending popular subjects against the charge of philistinism. These are, after all, poets who came of age when television was the most powerful medium. Ultimately, though, the rediscovery of meter by younger writers reminds us that language requires renewal by each succeeding generation.

The act of making poems in measured speech assumes a valued civility, putting a premium not only on technique, but also on a larger cultural

vision that restores harmony and balance to the arts—an idea of great importance in critical books like Frederick Turner's *Natural Classicism*, Dana Gioia's *Can Poetry Matter?*, and Bruce Bawer's *Prophets and Professors*. As Timothy Steele has written in his scholarly treatise, *Missing Measures: Modern Poetry and the Revolt Against Meter*:

What is essential to human life and to its continuance remains a love of nature, an enthusiasm for justice, a readiness of good humor, a spontaneous susceptibility to beauty and joy, an interest in our past, a hope for our future, and, above all, a desire that others should have the opportunity and encouragement to share these qualities. An art of measured speech nourishes these qualities in a way no other pursuit can.

A new generation of American poets was bound to discover this aesthetic common ground despite their varied social and political backgrounds. Our anthology will demonstrate this variety. The New Formalism unites poets as different as Marilyn Hacker and Sydney Lea, Rafael Campo and R. S. Gwynn, poets who are chatty and elegiac, satirical and gently moving. Their range of subjects and forms has already done much to restore vitality to the art. Our anthology marks this flowering and gathers these individual poets together between covers for the first time. These twenty-five writers are among those who will lead American poetry into the 21st century.

The editors of this volume have set several criteria for inclusion. First, we gathered only American poets born in 1940 or later, who came of age as writers in the 1970's, '80's, and '90's, and are still developing their art. As we revised this anthology, we left out many fine poets, some for reasons as arbitrary as citizenship, others because they had not yet published a book. Second, we chose only poems in which the use of form was rigorous and commanding. New Formalist poets have not always been strict adherents of accentual-syllabic meter. Some use syllabics or accentual meters. Some of the poems collected here are experimental in their meter, but we did want confidence in both line and rhetoric. There are no "pseudo-formal" poems, to use Dana Gioia's term. Third, we wanted no poems that were merely formal. That is, poems that were sound exercises in prosody, but did not move or convince us in human terms, were excluded.

It has been a challenge to choose examples from some poets' work. Some have done their best writing in book-length sequences and narratives. We have tried to excerpt where possible or to choose shorter, more

self-contained poems. Finally, we wanted to include the work of several newer poets with at least one book in print, along with poets who were better known. This suggests that the New Formalism as a movement has not been a narrow one, but has continued to attract new adherents from many backgrounds. The question of omission from and inclusion in anthologies is always imperfectly addressed, and ours is no exception. Readers can find suggestions for further reading in the back of this volume.

If we make a special claim for the New Formalists, it is that there is more variety in their approach to form and subject than in some work of previous generations. At times in their work we see fluent elegance and skill, at others a vital roughness. In their poems there is an audible discovery of something lost, a sense of recasting from scrap, of reinventing the wheel, of new forms exploding from old ones. As Americans, these poets share a love of the unliterary. They find their subjects disguised in unlikelihood. Because they are formalists, they give a new vernacular life to ancient forms, but they also invent new forms of their own. Surely this is a function of that innate revolutionary bred into the American character. Whenever a fundamental change has taken place, and old, discarded forms have been rediscovered, their revival will include a reconfiguration. In the hands of these poets, traditional forms like blank verse and the sonnet, while still conforming to their ancient rules, seem brand new.

Readers who take pleasure in form, or who want a map to guide them through the shifting and variable and endlessly fascinating landscape of contemporary American poetry, will find joyful illumination in the poems that follow.

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