



# The New Conservatism In American Poetry In Spite of the "Expanding Canon"

DIANE WAKOSKI

Some time last spring, a press release from E.P. Dutton advertising a new book of poetry came in my mail; instead of instantly being relegated to my trash pile, it almost made me spill my coffee as I read these words:

"What a relief! Here are poems that do not 'take risks' or 'break new ground' or strike the latest dazzling posture a reader grows to distrust. Instead, modestly and seamlessly made, on happy terms with both tomorrow and yesterday, they enjoy the natural advantages of a sharp eye and ear, and have their own telling way with metaphor. My compliments to Jeffrey Harrison. The world comes to life in (and between) his quiet lines," wrote James Merrill in selecting *The Singing Underneath* a winner of the National Poetry Series competition. To be published by Dutton on May 1, 1988, *The Singing Underneath* is filled with illuminating poems about nature, childhood, and memory that are refreshingly clear and direct.

I immediately pasted this news release on my wall,

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assaulted with so many conflicting feelings on reading those words:

What a relief! Here are poems that do not 'take risks' or 'break new ground.'

This famous poet was praising writing for being timid and a bit dull? Why? What could this mean?

And why did it surprise me, Diane Wakoski, the poet who has been generating hate mail to *The American Book Review* since, in an essay called "The New Conservatism In American Poetry," in 1986, I compared what is happening in American poetry with our national political scene, in particular the deceptive economics of the Reagan administration? Why *should* this anti-intellectual conservative statement, pushing a new book of poems, surprise me? Did it surprise me, or only shock me, to see this New Conservatism in such a tangible form?

Before I continue this discussion, and develop my remarks about the ways in which I see the "canon" being exploded and re-established in the world of poetry, I suspect that you'd like to hear an example of Jeffrey Harrison's poetry, to locate in your minds what Merrill's remarks might mean. I myself was very curious. The poem that the press release quoted is the title poem. It is a tidy, neat, little poem, written in those vaguely symmetrical three-line stanzas that poets who might not have the skill for traditional prosody but want to write in "form" affect a lot these days. It's not a bad poem, nor is it so simple that it merits the drastic claims of James Merrill ("doesn't take risks or break new ground"). It reflects a young poet who has absorbed much Rilke, probably, and actually reads like Robert Frost without his edge, his now-recognizable meanness or sting. This is the poem:

### The Singing Underneath

The sun comes out, steam rises  
from the field and the ice-glazed trees

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begin to drip. A few prismatic drops

quiver on the branches like tiny,  
fidgeting birds. No, more like  
a visual singing of birds, as if

just underneath the world we see,  
there is silent singing that breaks out  
at moments, in flickering points of light.

As either a poetry teacher or a poet, I simply read this as an unfinished poem. There is the hint of a fascinating metaphysical revelation at the end and in the title — "The Singing Underneath," as if the poet were going to show us in some way, through figurative language, how the spirit and the flesh have some organic connection. We long in 1988 for these metaphysical revelations, which might combine Einstein's discoveries into some comprehensible quantum theory of reality. We'd like to know where and how the light that shines through as spirit, as singing, comes from and how it is connected to our DNA or our flesh. But we aren't old Romantics anymore (I think), satisfied with simply the acknowledgement of mystery or the mystery of life. The simple repetition of the word "singing" is not enough. This is where I *need* the poet to take a risk, to give some vision or insight into this mystery. I want him to take the risk that the reader will reject his vision.

This playing safe is that gesture of false profundity that a beginner or a timid writer makes to keep the reader from rejecting him and saying that the poet doesn't know any more than the reader does.

Well, I tabled Jeffrey Harrison for a while, though the press release stayed on my wall over my desk provocatively for some time. A month or so after I pasted it up there, I attended a poetry conference organized by an avant garde poet and translator, Clayton Eshleman, editor of *Volta* magazine; and once again I had an almost coffee-spilling experience while listening to a paper given by

the brilliant critic, Marjorie Perloff. Her subject was a titillating one: how differently Europeans perceive American poetry, from the American's self-view. Historically, it was European poets who first paid homage to Walt Whitman as *the poet of America and the American voice*, even though Emerson is given that credit. The "barbaric yawp," Whitman's term for American speech, was as exotic and interesting to 19th-century Europeans as cowboy myth and movies and blue jeans have been in the 20th century, and it took European ears to hear this speech as beauty rather than crudeness or vulgarity, just as Europeans were the first to wear blue jeans to the opera.

However, what Perloff presented, in her meticulous way, was a comparison of a French anthology of American poets with an American anthology, both recent. Her point was that the Europeans were interested in the American poets whom we might refer to as avant garde, poets such as John Ashbery, or the language poets, such as Michael Palmer or Charles Bernstein, performance poets such as Jerome David Antin or ethnopoetics poets such as Jerome Rothenberg, probably all poets who would be described by Merrill, were he asked, as "risk-taking," or "breaking new ground". By contrast, she quoted from the introduction to an American anthology of younger poets, edited by David Bottoms and Dave Smith.

The introduction was a long litany of what these mostly under-40 poets all had in common: Most of them have MFA degrees, most of them teach in colleges and universities, most of them are married and have children. Perloff noted that none of the poets represented in the French anthology were in the American one. However, what made the whole piece most astonishing — this is when my coffee sloshed — was the final sentence of the editor's introduction: "Not one of these poets is eccentric."

That line buzzed into my head like a chain saw. What was this disclaimer all about? There was Merrill's voice again, in my head: "What a relief! Here are poems that do

not 'take risks' or 'break new ground.' *Here* are poets who are not eccentric.

I began to see even further, how immersed the poetry world is in its new conservatism.

Being at the *Sulfur* conference where I was purely an observer, I began to notice something odd. Until then I had seen the Left wing as the avant garde, the experimental, the writers of "pure language," the abstract artists. And the Right wing as the conservators of tradition, writers of old fashioned or traditional prosody. But what I began to hear was a common set of aesthetics in these two seemingly opposite positions. Both groups of poets talk a great deal about wanting to get away from ego, from the "I" of Walt Whitman's anthrocentered universe. Both groups of poets, not just the avant garde, speak disparagingly of the plethora of contemporary poems about people's families, about their personal relationships, and about the "Romantic" subject of one's personal selfhood — especially poems of nostalgia about the past or one's childhood. Such treatments seem equally repugnant to a new formalist, such as Alfred Corn, or a language poet such as Ron Silliman. I reminded myself that the far Right and the far Left often share goals. The avant garde want to leave behind the personal-ness of the present. The conservatives want to go back to pure forms of verse and also leave behind the personal-ness or eccentricity of the present. Thus family, current events, life as it is presently going on seem uninteresting to either group — unless either very new or very old forms are superimposed upon the material.

Ron Silliman may hate James Merrill's poetry, and John Hollander may hate Lynn Hejinian's poetry, but collectively they all have more respect for each other, Right and Left, than they do for the poets who write *about* subjects rather than ideas, *about* people or events, especially personal ones, rather than history, and *about* feelings, rather than *using* feelings.

Formalists? Experimenters? Are they not in the same camp? Both care more about the way a poem is written

than the subject matter or content.

If that is the case, then perhaps my definition of Right and Left in the poetry world needs to be re-examined. And if we hold these two as Right and Left — the avant garde, the seekers of abstraction, and the conservative, the users of old forms — we must see them as having a strange coalition based on political goals that are identical but at total disagreement on aesthetic means toward these goals. Conservative poets rely heavily on solving problems of history, often writing dramatic monologue, often using the first person "I" when speaking in the voice of, say, Darwin, or some forgotten woman pioneer, or a slave, or a writer of the past like Thomas Hardy. They do not see this as the egotistical "I" of Whitman's "Song of Myself." Rather, the "I" is seen as an impersonal speaker, an abstraction of self embodied in the figure of someone totally outside of self because not personally known to the writer.

The experimental writers often side with the conservative poets in preferring a (dull) poem in the voice of Darwin to a more dramatic or emotional poem if they perceive it as just "another tedious poem about childhood or your marriage." The conservative poets are looking for an impersonal voice, or, if it is personal, a voice that is masked by the persona of a real figure, preferably distanced by history or time. But the experimental poets are trying to escape the personalness of voice entirely. Both the Left and the Right, for different reasons, want to find an objective or distant or bigger voice, a way of speaking that transcends autobiography. The poets in the middle are the ones who speak in the present, out of their own lives and in their identifiable voices.

Yet, in emotional effect, the conservative and the experimental position become one. Otherwise they are 180 degrees apart. But in effect, they present a poem that cannot be received without far more intellectual than emotional response. The poems of both Left and Right are poems that present a surface of pure language. The reader must "know" what to look for. He must read with a pro-

gram, whether it is of patterns of traditional prosody or of an ideology that precedes the words.

If, for amusement's sake, we rearrange the spectrum to show Right and Left as one, on one side of the linear scale, and if we call that side of the fulcrum "form" because both the avant garde and the conservative poets are deeply concerned with the surface form of the language used, then we create a new Left side of the balance. And to be true to traditional definitions, that side has to be called "content."

What is content in poetry, usually? It is, of course, myth or the mythic, the archetypal stories, patterns, commonly held tropes of a civilization, which the formal language manipulates. The poets then who are on the true Left of the fulcrum are the poets of myth; and as contemporary poets use autobiography to some degree in the creation of personal mythology embedded in cultural myth, then the poets move toward the Left of the scale to the degree that they immerse themselves in a kind of autobiography that is meant to be read with mythic interpretations.

At the middle of the line, surely, must be the poets who are the most mimetic, or realistic. They do not concentrate on either traditional or avant garde form, but neither are they focused on how their stories echo the stories of the culture — be it the Garden of Eden myth or the stories of King Arthur's knights' grail quests. If we put formalist writers, such as Nemerov and Merrill and Hollander together on the Right with the so called "avant garde," the poets trying to create new forms, the language poets and other experimentalists, what surely is in the middle, then, will be the poets in the Bottom-Smith anthology who write realistic poems about family life and personal events with little thought for either form or its traditions, but not yet thinking much about the mythic, the archetypal stories of the culture either.

Here is the point at which it is now useful to look at American poets who are attempting to work with the so-called Whitman tradition, and its attendant earth mythol-

ogy. The self that Whitman sings of is the new pure man/woman who democratically is everyone, white or black, slave or free, woman or man. Each man/woman is free to make him/herself into a god/goddess/hero of the American culture. Each one must break new ground to do it. Each one must take risks, as all heroes risk themselves for their enterprise. If the Right wing is conserving the values of the culture, and those values are seen most clearly in the "forms" that a culture creates, then, as we move Left on the scale, we become less and less concerned with the form and more and more concerned with what use the form is put to. At the center of this diagram of poets are the writers who are political and use language neither for its "forms" nor for its myths, and the writers of popular topical poetry who use language neither for its forms nor for its myths, and probably most of all those poets who write poetry as "self-expression" rather than for form or myth. As we move Left on the scale, we encounter poetry like that of Judith Grahn, recreating in her case female myths out of her own personal experience of the myth. We encounter poets like Thomas McGrath who want to combine the myth and language of contemporary America with the greater Orphic story of Western civilization, or David Ignatow whose comic, existential parables of self have little to do with autobiography, though they are autobiographical, or Allen Ginsberg whose autobiography is no longer personal but is the story of American transcendentalism.

It has long been my claim that the central focus of uniquely American poetry is Dionysian and based in earth mythology. In this scheme I am devising here, the poets of the Right, be they experimentalists like Michael Palmer or traditionalists like James Merrill, care most about what they do with language and how they use it. On the far Left, the poets — be they Ginsberg or Bukowski or Grahn or McGrath — are primarily concerned with telling the tale, the story, the myth of the culture, which is far more important than the form of the language with which they tell it. Needless to say, there's

form and content in everything. The crucial point is where the emphasis is placed and therefore what the first criteria are that a poet uses to judge his and others' work.

Let us digress for a moment to think about Modernism and the creation of what has been our canon of good poetry. The new canon, if there is one emerging, is one that pays lip service to poetry in the Whitman tradition, but as testified by the Smith-Bottom anthology of younger poets already mentioned and the new, 1988, second edition of *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*, that new canon might be a thinly disguised version of the new conservatism and represent a far less democratic expansion than we might think. The Modernist canon enshrines four American poets: Eliot, Pound, Stevens and Williams. Four white males. None first-generation American. All from the East. Two who became ex-patriot Americans, none from the lower classes, all with extensive formal education and only one — William Carlos Williams — with an explicitly democratic interest in the people of the American culture or its language. If what we mean by a "canon" in literature is what we teach, then we have to agree that not only do anthologies represent the canon at any given time, but also that such selections help to form a new canon or establish new writers as canonical. For many years in American colleges and universities, *The Norton Anthology* has been a bible.

I am curious to see if the new *Norton* will continue to carry the standard-bearing weight that it has had in the past, for there are a whole generation of poets and critics like myself, teaching in universities now, who often don't believe in using anthologies. However, we are the rebels who were educated in the late 1960s and early 1970s and are the ones responsible for identifying more with maverick William Carlos Williams than with the canon elite, Eliot, Stevens and Pound. We are the ones who more or less made it possible to talk about a Whitman "tradition" and to see the mainstream of American poetry being bound up in its diverse and democratic population, "the barbaric yawp" coming from its diverse ethnic and lin-

guistic sources — the Black, the Hispanic, the Native American.

In a way, we are responsible for some of the hypocrisy that is observable in the literary and intellectual communities today. Because we made it unfashionable to be called a "conservative," and we made it *de rigueur* for poets to think they were "taking risks" or "breaking new ground." In writing an earlier article, I quote the plaintive cry of a literary magazine editor writing to me in sympathy but disagreement with my declarations concerning the new conservatism in American poetry. Sue Walker of *Negative Capability* wrote to me saying, "surely an investment in the past need not be conservatism," but of course it almost certainly is, unless you see the past as avant-garde writers like Jerome Rothenberg do (the past is all the history from all the cultures, starting with the most primitive). This field of ethnopoetics is a real change that diminishes the importance of the white male Christian, European tradition. And here's where we come back to the new *Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*. I myself have a vested interest in this new edition, as the editors have doubled the amount of my poems in it, and have added poets whom I want to teach, such as Gertrude Stein. But they have also deleted a poet whom I regard as important, Ed Dorn (white male), and not included many others (mostly white males such as Jerome Rothenberg and David Ignatow) who seem far more significant than some of the poets added. All anthologies are flawed, I suppose, so it is really not the new *Norton* that troubles me but the attitudes toward expanding the canon of received poetry that this edition represents. The editors are only following the intellectual dictates of our times, and it is my continuing purpose to examine those propositions. Gloria G. Fromm, in an essay "The Forging of H.D.," describes contemporary revisionist literary criticism as "pointing toward what I would call a new end-of-century decadence that mixes politics and aesthetics, that practices politics as aesthetics because that's where the effect is" (*Poetry*, December 1988).

This is quoted from the back cover of *The Norton*:

This new edition is a thorough and sensitive revision of the unique, justly acclaimed, and much used anthology of modern poetry in English. . . .

**Among the noteworthy changes are these:**

- Of 180 poets, 61 are new. They range from Lewis Carroll and Gertrude Stein to Rita Dove and Cathy Song. A number of these — among them Louise Glück, Galway Kinnell, and William Stafford — were requested by teachers. 60 poets, who have been publishing new work since 1973, have been thoroughly updated — from Robert Penn Warren to Seamus Heaney.
- Of the 1,580 poems, 748 are new.
- The book includes many poems by 39 women, of whom 24 are new.
- Proper attention is paid to other American traditions: Afro-American, Native American, Chicano, and Asian-American, with 22 poets, of whom 16 are new.
- Besides the work of 112 American poets and 46 British poets, there are ample selections of work by 9 Canadian, 7 Irish, and 5 Australian poets.
- Special attention to the long poem: generous self-contained excerpts from book-length poems such as H.D.'s *The Walls Do Not Fall* and James Merrill's *The Changing Light at Sandover*. In full, many extended poems, from Earle Birney's "The Grey Woods Exploding" to Michael Harper's "Debridement."

Since Norton has been *the* important publisher of college-used anthologies, this change is a major reflection of

what its research has told the editors is needed and wanted out there. The evolution away from Modernist choices of the canon to contemporary trends is interesting in its vision of the spectrum. It sounds from the description as if 180 degrees of the poetry world would be represented, doesn't it? And certainly there is enough there — my god, 1,580 poems! — to make it extend the range from Right to Left.

Notice that Merrill is there, but touted for something "new," his long poem. It is part of our canon that poets must be doing something "new" or "breaking new ground." But Merrill's actual poetics are far to the Right. He is a long-time writer of traditional prosody and old-fashioned verse. He is rich, Anglo-Saxon, white, protestant; and he is given even more space than he has previously had in the anthology, with an excerpt from a book-length poem. And other conservative writers, such as Howard Nemerov, Richard Wilbur, Louise Bogan, Robert Penn Warren, Elizabeth Bishop and Richard Eberhart, who have long been well represented in the anthology continue to occupy much of its space. In a strange gesture of double-speak, the anthologists point to Merrill as something "new" in the collection.

Having noticed this lip service the editors pay to expanding the canon, let us examine those expansions. The claim seems to be that a wider range of poetics is going to be represented. More women, more ethnic minorities, more experimental poets, more kinds of poetry. That's the claim. However, it seems to me that as we move, supposedly, Left and look at all these new additions, we stop looking at verse practices, or aesthetics, and start looking at race, gender, politics, population distribution and everything but poetics. Though the editors have not included one of its greatest spokesmen, Jerome Rothenberg, they have affirmed ethnopoetics as their new goal.

If we look at the poetics of say, Cathy Song (Oriental-American) or Rita Dove (Black-American), two women named in the blurb, we will find in the case of Dove that

the poems are almost academic in their literariness. The poetics are not traditional prosody, but the verse is often accentual with obvious concern for stanza patterns and formal diction. If we locate her on the scale I contrived earlier, she would probably be Right of the middle, and certainly she would be one of the poets who fit precisely into the Bottom-Smith anthology. No eccentricities, etc. Like Jeffrey Harrison's poetry in one aspect, Rita Dove's poems are neo-Romantic lyrics. They also share Harrison's willingness to talk about childhood and family, to dwell in nostalgia, to talk about the personal present and not to concern themselves, particularly, with the bigger myths of the culture. They are not political either, not even a disguised politics like the poems of Gene Toomer.

Harrison's poems, I found, when actually reading his strangely touted book out of curiosity, are largely nature poems, filled with a kind of haunting wish that people and life could be as innocent and simple and beautiful as the non-human world. They are like 19th-century British Romantic poems in theme and often in language. This is also true of Rita Dove's poems. Here's a typical Rita Dove poem:

### **Adolescence — I**

In water-heavy nights behind grandmother's  
porch  
We knelt in the tickling grasses and whispered:  
Linda's face hung before us, pale as a pecan.  
And it grew wise as she said:  
    "A boy's lips are soft,  
        As soft as baby's skin."  
The air closed over her words.  
A firefly whirred near my ear, and in the  
    distance  
I could hear streetlamps ping  
Into miniature suns  
Against a feathery sky.

Like Harrison's poem, this short lyric makes light the image of revelation at the end of the poem; and like Harrison, she implies some kind of mystical at-oneness with the world that should make us understand better the connection between spirit and body. In Dove's poem, which I think is better than Harrison's because she completes her idea and lets the reader in on her secret, there is an implication that the human condition is complete and all we can know. In a way, Harrison's poem is more ambitious, because it seems to imply that if we could include the scientific knowledge of the 20th century into the poem, we really could have a fuller grasp of the meaning of "light," i.e. life or DNA. Dove makes the better poem simply by backing down into Romantic mysticism. What this comparison does is make me wonder about something that I found troubling at the time I read Merrill's blurb about Harrison and stuck it on my wall. Is Merrill really doing Harrison a service by seeing his poems as non-risk taking? They certainly are neo-Romantic, which is what Merrill found so familiar about them. But maybe there is more risk taking in the Harrison poem than Merrill is capable of seeing? Or maybe it is simply a badly written poem and thus only seems like it is incomplete and, thus, risky? (Because I, the reader, want it to be more?)

At any rate, the Rita Dove material does not stretch or extend one little bit the canon of good poetry. Putting these poems in the anthology probably has more to do with Dove's race than with her writing. The choice seems far more political than literary. Her poetics do not expand our canon (even if her poems are excellent and should be added to our anthologies).

I remember in the 1960s a poet of conservative aesthetics (not included in *The Norton*, Jack Marshall) saying angrily to a roomful of us with big poetic egos, that he wished all poetry had to be published anonymously because then we would have to look at the craft of the poem and not the person behind the poem. I thought he was crazy, since the whole point of poetry (to me) is the vision of the poet, which is inextricably tied into the per-

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son who writes the poem. But as I have aged, and perhaps gotten much more conservative myself, I have often thought of Marshall's words; and reading through *The Norton*, I wondered that if the poems themselves had to represent the new canon, if we wouldn't have quite a different spectrum of poets. There would have to be more poems coming from the Left side of the scale than are now represented. The Doves and the Songs are in the middle or even to the Right. Where are the Ignatows, the Eversons, the Bukowskis? There are lots of new names and new races and even new politics represented, but is there actually an expanded aesthetic canon, or just a different version of the old, comfortable one?

I think it is noteworthy that three of the most popular poets in America today were of course included in the anthology but had to be apologized for. The disclaimer in the blurb that reads "Louise Glück, Galway Kinnell and William Stafford were requested by teachers" I interpret to mean these poets are so popular that we only included them because they were specifically requested (i.e. we need them to sell the anthology). Double-speak again? Why must these poets be apologized for? Well, two white males who couldn't be excused, as Merrill is, for writing book-length poems (though Kinnell's *Book of Nightmares* might be seen that way). Why apologize for a woman? Well, she, too, is white, and no other claims can be made about her doing anything experimental or new or expanding the canon. She fits neatly, like Rita Dove, in the middle of the spectrum, leaning, of course, to the Right. But Dove is black; Glück is white.

Actually, Glück is a poet whose work I have long disliked. It is representative of what I think is wrong with Jeffrey Harrison's poem "The Singing Underneath." This neo-Romantic poetry is actually Gothic romance, and there are always allusions to the mysterious (not "unknown" but the) *unknowable*. But there never seems to be a theology or philosophy to go with this stance. It is almost purely stance. In Glück's poems, life is filled with mysteriously punishing difficulties, usually related to

feminine sensitiveness. A nostalgic wish for something *other* than this haunting darkness. To me, her vision is from the depths of 19th-century European poets, dark with refusal to see beyond the backward-looking desire for an innocent and perfectly natural world. Here is an example of a Glück poem from *The Norton*.

Elms

All day I tried to distinguish  
need from desire. Now, in the dark,  
I feel only bitter sadness for us,  
the builders, the planers of wood,  
because I have been looking  
steadily at these elms  
and seen the process that creates  
the writhing, stationary tree  
is torment, and have understood  
it will make no forms but twisted forms.

I make a distinction between Glück's Gothic easy, dark vision and a vision of the dark and difficult realities of the nuclear age. But perhaps what has attracted so many readers, teachers at least, who requested her presence in *The Norton*, is exactly that old-fashioned dark vision, one that we are familiar with, one that does not move ahead and try to know the world as the 20th century demands.

What about the other poets "apologized for" on the cover of the anthology, Stafford and Kinnell? According to a poll taken by *Writer's Digest* columnist Judson Jerome, William Stafford is the most popular poet in America among serious readers. What puts Stafford right at the center of our line of poets, neither Right wing conservative nor Left wing experimental? If I had to make a guess, it would have something to do with what made Robert Frost such a popular American poet, and perhaps has something to do with what Merrill saw in Jeffrey Harrison's first book of poems, which led him to that enigmatic and troubling statement, "What a relief! Here are poems that do not 'take risks.'" At its best, this quality that Frost,

Stafford and a beginning Harrison seem to share could be described as the use of a meditative persona that tries, in common language, to explore a simple interpretation of the relationship between the natural and the human worlds. This may be too general a description. But I emphasize the phrase "common language" here.

Let me quote Frost's lines:

When I see birches bend to left and right  
Across the lines of straighter darker trees,  
I like to think some boy's been swinging them.

and Harrison's

The sun comes out, steam rises from the field, and the ice-glazed trees begin to drip.

and Stafford's

Travelling through the dark I found a deer dead on the edge of the Wilson River road. . .

In all three poems, the language is prosy, narrative, not densely impacted. Its rhythms are prose prosody and simple. There is no syntactic confusion or fragmentation. It is Whitman's language, without the sweep or the sound of the King James' version of the Bible or oratorical rhetoric. It is an ordinary voice reflecting on personal experience and what it means. All three poets use the natural world as the focus for their meditations. They are not "nature poets," glorifying the wilderness or the woods, though part of Frost's vision includes his dislike of people; but in fact all three poets are interested in themselves as human, and interested in how humans interact with the natural world and learn from it. To contrast Stafford with Glück, we might read a poem from *The Norton*. This is a poem Stafford actually wrote to argue with poets who claim that art is created out of trouble or discontent. The

poem might have been written directly (it wasn't) against Glück's thesis in "Elms."

### After Arguing Against The Contention That Art Must Come From Discontent

Whispering to each handhold, "I'll be back,"  
I go up the cliff in the dark. One place  
I loosen a rock and listen a long time  
till it hits, faint in the gulf, but the rush  
of the torrent almost drowns it out, and the  
wind —  
I almost forgot the wind: it tears at your side  
or it waits and then buffets; you sag  
outward . . .

I remember they said it would be hard. I  
scramble  
by luck into a little pocket out of the wind  
and begin to beat on the stones  
with my scratched numb hands, rocking back  
and forth,  
in silent laughter there in the dark —  
"Made it again!" Oh how I love this climb!  
— the whispering to stones, the drag, the weight  
as your muscles crack and ease on, working  
right. They are back there, discontent,  
waiting to be driven forth. I pound  
on the earth, riding the earth past the stars:  
"Made it again! Made it again!"

This is the voice of Whitman, even to the number of exclamation points. It is the American voice denying, at least, the defeat of the spirit. The rejoicing voice, the one that embraces openness, possibility, even sees an opening, a beauty, in death. When Whitman says, in "Song of Myself,"

and to die is different from what anyone  
supposed, and luckier

he offers American transcendentalism, different from that darker, more Keatsean vision. What Stafford embellishes on is Whitman. Glück, on Keats.

If Glück is popular for her revision of the English Romanticism of Keats, and Stafford for his updating of Whitman, then Galway Kinnell attracts the attention of serious readers because of his overt use of myth and archetype, especially exploring male and female roles in Western culture. Kinnell's most famous poem, not included in *The Norton*, is a poem using Eskimo myth and hunting lore, "The Bear." Most people read it as the use of archetypal role — the hunter's role — to describe modern civilization, modern man, the hero. Probably his second most famous poem is included in the anthology, "After Making Love We Hear Footsteps." Again, Kinnell presents archetypal images of the holy family to praise the human condition. Perhaps Kinnell's poems seem big because they use the mythic and archetypal so obviously. They refer neither to an American or European tradition as directly as do the poems of Glück and Stafford. If I had to arrange the three poets on my own scale, Glück would be just to the Right of the middle. Stafford would be just to the Left of the middle, and Kinnell would be moving farther toward the Left. But they are all in the middle, or they couldn't be in such demand. They don't represent minority points of view, either intellectually or politically. None of them experiments with language and though Glück is obviously drawn to traditional language, she does not practice traditional prosody as such. Neither do they represent ethnic minorities, minority sexual preferences or deviant life styles, ideologies, religions or creeds. They more or less had to be apologized for on the cover by the editors because of this.

So, what does this brief examination of the goals of the editors of two major anthologies of poetry reveal? Like most American phenomena, the values seem more sociocultural than either aesthetic or political. While moving toward the conservative Right, openly welcoming a more traditional version of formal prosody and championing more Romantic values ("no risk taking"), the editors

are actively seeking more women, Black, Hispanic, Asian and Native American poets and choosing conservative versions of each group. The Cathy Songs and Rita Doves look like the Louise Glucks and William Staffords who have to be apologized for because they are not new names or of some minority group. For my purposes, this examination has revealed what I have previously written about on the subject of "The New Conservatism in American Poetry": the doublespeak of editors who must pretend to be expanding the canon when they are only responding to politics, who must see "conservative" as a bad word rather than simple description, who must pretend there is something "new" about an author who himself in print abhors the idea of taking risks or "breaking new ground." It is not so much hypocrisy as it is what Gloria Fromm describes, "end-of-century decadence that mixes politics and aesthetics, that practices politics as aesthetics because *that's* where the effect is."

For me, the revolution in poetry in the 1960s was about language, as much as anything. It was about the continuing search that William Carlos Williams started for "the new measure," and it was about the possibility of creating a personal mythology and the voice that goes with it, a personal voice that Whitman willed to us; it was about the "barbaric yawp" and its many vulgar and beautiful voices within our culture, invading the lyric poem and making the poem oral, spoken and dramatically personal. It was about openings, not closings.

Ironically, I see the new canon not responding to aesthetic concerns at all. Rather, anthologies and publications are opening up to a wide range of new labels, new politics — Native American, Black, etc.; but the authors are expected to write a sort of "risk-free" poem, a comfortable, middle-class, neo-Romantic poem, one that isn't too eccentric, too personal, one that is more lyric than dramatic or narrative, and mostly (here we reflect that this is an age of prose) a poem that is easy to read and perhaps often about either family or nature. It's easy to be confused by this. One afternoon, I was listening to a

heated conversation by young poets about how much more obscure and dull the poetry published in *The New Yorker* has become since Howard Moss died (sic!). The next day, I was listening to the new poetry editor of *The New Yorker* taking quiet pride in the fact that she has been consciously trying to do exactly what the editors of *The Norton* say they have done — open the doors to more women, more minorities; and Ms. Quinn added another category, more translations. Now we have to ask ourselves, is this poem here because it is a good poem or because a Chicano poet wrote it? Surely our aesthetics are changing, and we have some new ideas about what a good poem is? Yet, that question, which should be at the center of the expanding canon, gets obscured almost totally in worrying about the biographical credentials of the poet. Gender, race, surely we have excluded more for aesthetic reasons than political ones? Why was Whitman excluded from Emerson's big anthology, *The Norton* of its time? His big, bad-taste ego? His refusal to follow the rules of received poetry? His different poetics? Surely those are exactly the reasons that Charles Bukowski is left out of the new *Norton*. Both white males, incidentally.

What is one of the major effects of a conservative ideology? If anything?

A desire not to be singled out. Not to be what we might call "eccentric." Being singled out, as Whitman asks to be, as poets of the revolutionary 1960s and 1970s, like Ginsberg and Ferlinghetti asked to be; that's the antithesis of conservatism. So, for all the talk of an expanded canon, I wonder if we aren't simply talking politics? I wonder if the aesthetics of the new, wider, more democratic range of poets read and taught and being published in *The New Yorker* or most anthologies, in fact, isn't narrowing and moving toward the Right? It would be in keeping with the rest of our society.

The only thing that bothers me about this phenomenon, this movement toward the Right, is our hypocrisy in labelling ourselves. It makes us want to think that

because we have added a poet — for instance, June Jordan — who is black and a woman, we have somehow embraced a poet who expands our aesthetic canon, as Modernism expanded from the aesthetics of Romanticism. Jordan, in fact, proclaims that Whitman is her poetic father, but she writes at least equally out of a poet who early influenced her, the very antithesis of Whitman, Percy Bysshe Shelley. She belongs in the center, poetically, with Louise Glück, moving toward the Right. She, like Rita Dove, is singled out for her race or her gender, not her poetics. Of course, they are both good poets. But, tell me, make me believe that if we were not provided with their biographies of race or gender, they would necessarily emerge from the final sorting.

Speaking as a poet, I want people to be honest and thoughtful about what they're doing. No matter how old or conservative I get, I hope that I will never be guilty of writing words like James Merrill's: "What a relief! Here are poems that do not 'take risks' or 'break new ground.'" I pray that I will never be included in an anthology that proclaims "none of these poets is eccentric," and I hope you, all of you, will bite your tongues, too, if you ever find yourselves thinking about poetry in that way. But most of all, I hope that in this time of the expanding canon, all of you who teach or read will try to open your minds to the range of American poetry that has always been out there — wider, bigger and more diverse than any canon or any textbook could contain. And let us remember that the new conservatism of this decade has been shared equally by the formalists and the experimenters, by the poets themselves, as well as the critics, editors, readers and teachers of poetry. Perhaps the next decade will be a time when we can leave the political and once again address the aesthetic? Let us, in the meantime, be honest with ourselves about these issues.

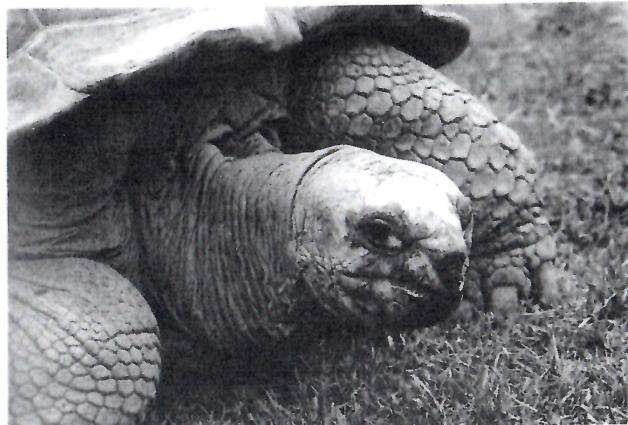


Photo by Roger Pfingston