

BOOKS IN BRIEF: Scattershot, Tommy Gun, Canon

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What follows: not a review so much as jottings by a war correspondent embedded in the culture wars, striving for journalistic accuracy.

What follows: as noted in *BPJ*, Winter 2011/12, an attempt to evaluate “what David Lehman as [*Best American Poetry*] series editor and his annual volume editors have accomplished, investigate how their work compares to that of other tastemakers in the world of American poetry.”

What follows: follow-up, quarter of a century later, to Marion K. Stocking, “The Art of the Anthology” (*BPJ*, Spring 1987) an examination of thirteen volumes. And to her review of each annual *Best American Poetry* volume as it appeared, beginning in 1988.

What sources: *BAP* volumes from 1988 to 2011; the *Norton Anthology of Poetry*, the *Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*, the *Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry*, four other fat anthologies from the past two decades, one comparatively skinny one from 2010.

Total weight: 72 pounds ± the gravity of the last century.

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Cannon

Start with the big guns. Other ships blown out of the water. “Nothing beside remains. Round the decay of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare. . . .”

That’s not how it once seemed. At least not to those on the man-of-war. For this correspondent’s generation: a ship named the *Norton*, under the command of the Admirable Abrams. The English *Norton* sailed into battle unaware of battle. At least on the surface. But beware the torpedoes. The ship had a gallery, twenty-eight portraits of previous captains, boldly displayed on the foredeck, ranging from Canterbury Chaucer to Dublin Joyce and St. Louis Eliot. Captains and crew all male. The date: 1961. The ship: Ironclad. The canon: Insurmountable. Irresistible.

Given the indestructible ship, no need for cannon. Its presence sufficed: indisputable, intimidating. And the shipyards were bustling. 1970: Admiral Abrams christened the *Norton Poetry*. Even bigger. Even more canon. No justification for armament needed. None offered.

This weaponry called the New Criticism. No fuss, no muss. Title,

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one-page intro, no poet's life. *Dragnet's* Joe Friday: Just the poem, ma'am.

By the time the revised *Norton* set sail in 1975, the self-evident unobtrusive ironclad defenses revealed some cracks. Defense Department? Need to meet budget? Possible mutiny of the bounty? "War is the health of the state"?

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Why, for the past page, this military vocabulary? Culture wars. Let's look at the current cannon, at those "four other fat anthologies," all published in the quarter century since Marion Stocking's essay, all contemporaneous with *BAP*:

From the Other Side of the Century, ed. Douglas Messerli, 1994

Poems for the Millennium, ed. Jerome Rothenberg and Pierre Joris, 1995, 1998, 2009

Anthology of Modern American Poetry, ed. Cary Nelson, 2000

The Wadsworth Anthology of Poetry, ed. Jay Parini, 2006

Douglas Messerli introduces *From the Other Side of the Century* with a comment on the "battles" Ezra Pound and others had with their nineteenth-century predecessors; he moves immediately to "the frustrations of contemporary poets with the academized bastion of the *Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*." Jerome Rothenberg and Pierre Joris, using language first concerned with actual warfare and then only slightly less bellicose when applied to literature, announce that their *Poems for the Millennium* traces poetry "as opposition. . . . to the dogma and conformity that overlays us." "The very origin of the whole system of literature has to be attacked." Both anthologies identify "schools," "movements," "gatherings" (Messerli's term). Both retreat to Donald Allen's *The New American Poetry* (1960), which begins by emphasizing "one common characteristic" of its poets: "a total rejection of all those qualities typical of academic verse."

The language: *rejection attack hostile bastion battle*. An outbreak of hostilities was predictable.

Cary Nelson views this naval warfare from above, identifying combatants, writing their history. He focuses on the collective, the cultural, emphasizing at the same time the significance of the undertaking. Already in his second sentence he announces his "unashamedly grandiose" "special claim": "Modern American poetry

is one of the major achievements of human culture.” He creates and then acknowledges the “conflictual” element of some choices but remains distinctly above the fray, asserting in a final comment that his selection “returns the last 100 years of our poetic heritage to us.” Like a sacred artifact in a foreign museum? Did anyone know it was missing?

If Nelson emphasizes the collective, Parini stresses the personal. Looking back to MacLeish (“a poem should not mean but be”), he philosophizes, “One does not experience a poem as an example of a movement or school. The text itself should be an experience. . . . All that really matters is what you, the reader, think and feel when you read a poem. You must test its inherent value on your pulse.” He offers no rationale for inclusion other than his opening claim: “Poetry is a language adequate to one’s experience.”

Twelve years separate the Messerli and Parini volumes. Reading the four introductions one might suspect culture wars had raged, but ended.



Differing strategies regarding American poetry in the twentieth century are not new. When Marion Stocking commented on the art of the anthology she looked back to what she herself called “poetry wars” between “the academics and the wild men, the ‘raw’ and the ‘cooked,’” contrasting *The New American Poetry* to *New Poets of England and America*, edited by Donald Hall, Robert Pack, and Louis Simpson (1957). An academic, but one as attracted to the wild as to the raw, Marion recognized the continuing division between the “primal energies of a tribal or communal spirit” claimed by the Allen set and the “formal and thematic tendencies” characteristic of the “academic” strand. She might observe or even bemoan the “conspicuous” or “astonishing” or “extraordinary omission” of one poet or another from a particular anthology, but she did not raise the rhetoric to the level of war. She commented on the quality of individual poems and on the content of volumes as a whole but never inserted into her discussion issues that would come to dominate the culture wars: questions of race or gender or sexual preference or age or ethnic background.

Attacks on the *Norton* as “academized” would suggest that *Norton* editors followed Hall/Pack/Simpson more than Allen. Yet the first *Norton* selection included nine American poets from Hall’s anthology,

six from Allen's. The first *Norton Modern*, published in 1973, had more from Allen than from Hall. When it appeared in 1975, the revised *Norton Anthology* had the same number from each.

If one front early in the culture wars concerned "schools"—"academics" and "experimentalists"—race, gender, and other locuses of identity politics soon became another. Definitions of "black" and "woman" remain complex, but neither the Allen anthology nor the Hall/Pack/Simpson volume reflected much commitment to diversity: *The New American Poetry* included one black poet; *New Poets of England and America*, none. Of forty-four poets in the Allen anthology, four were women; in the first Hall volume, six of thirty-three.

The history of *The Norton Anthology of Poetry* reveals a clear pattern of continuing response to the cultural shifts that have occupied the United States for at least the past half century. From a one-page introduction that asked no political questions, the narrative commentary expanded with each new edition: apologizing first for the absence of Canadian poets, "amplifying" the number of black poets and women, presenting "a significant increase in poems written in English in other countries." The tactic became "diversify!" To which my wife always cries, "Where are the Lithuanians?" The title page over the past third of a century reveals a shift from six white male editors, each wearing his North American university name tag, to two women and one man, still white and still wearing university badges. By 2006 the editors joyously proclaim the included poems come "from 'the round earth's imagined corners'" and have extended the concept of poetry to "light verse" and "ballads." "World poetry" and "rich diversity" have become characteristic phrases for their announced vision, the "entire range of poetic genres in English."

One case study for measuring the limits of vision involves race. The first *Norton* contained five living black poets: three men, two women. The second expanded to eight; the third fell back to six; the fourth moved up to eleven, of whom eight might be clearly identified as poets of the United States. The fifth edition remains the same, including the first five, with no new black poet added from the United States since 1996, and only four since 1983.

A second study involves recognition of women. The first *Norton* (1970) includes eight, none earlier than Emily Dickinson and Christina Rossetti. For the revised second edition, the number nearly doubles,

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nearly doubles again for the third. By the fourth, with two women out of three as the primary editors, the number has increased by almost a factor of ten over the first volume. By the fifth edition, having expanded the proportion of women to one in five, the editors seem comfortable enough with their continuing progress to make no mention of the matter.



Inclusion of poets other than white men provides one measure of shifting canon. Another is continuity. If the *Norton* has presented the big guns, what cannon do other ships carry? Four contemporary non-*Norton* anthologies remain under consideration here; only six poets alive in 1988 appear in all four: John Ashbery, Amiri Baraka, Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan, Allen Ginsberg, Michael Palmer. Except for Palmer, who is one or two decades younger than the others, all appeared early in their careers in the Donald Allen anthology. All except Palmer and Duncan have appeared in every *Norton* since at least the revised edition of 1975. All are male; five are white. Another seven poets alive in 1988 appear in three of these four anthologies: Charles Bernstein, Gregory Corso, Denise Levertov, George Oppen, Carl Rakosi, Adrienne Rich, and Gary Snyder. Rakosi and Oppen are of an earlier generation, Bernstein (b. 1950) of a later one. Corso, Levertov, and Snyder appeared in the Allen anthology, Rich in the Hall/Pack/Simpson volume. Of these seven, Corso, Levertov, Rich, and Snyder have appeared in every *Norton* since at least 1975.

A list of *Norton* poets highly visible within their generation might include these nine: John Ashbery, Amiri Baraka, Gregory Corso, Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan, Allen Ginsberg, Denise Levertov, Adrienne Rich, Gary Snyder. Michael Palmer entered the *Norton* in the fourth edition; Charles Bernstein, in its most recent iteration. Add to this group three poets who had died before the first appearance of the *BAP*: Frank O'Hara, Charles Olson, Anne Sexton, all of whom also appear in at least three of these four hefty anthologies and at least three versions of the *Norton*. Call them the Fat Fourteen. Does this cluster establish a new canon for poetry in the United States at the end of the last century? Does the *Norton*, hauling them on board and firing its heavy cannon, remove them from the list of poets in opposition to the academy? Has the enemy infiltrated the academy? Who is the enemy? What is the academy? What war?

If there's a war, the battlefield has shifted. Messerli may consider the

Norton the “bastion” of the ruling powers, yet the “schools” or “gatherings” associated with rebellion and experimentation have received at least as much attention from the “academized” *Norton* as the supposed academics. The *Norton* has responded perhaps more vigorously to accusations of discrimination and exclusion than Messerli. But these criteria almost don’t apply to Rothenberg and Joris, who have expanded the concept of anthology by moving toward a world poetry encompassing languages and visions beyond the English-language “world poetry” conceptualized by Margaret Ferguson and her colleagues.

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Tommy Gun

If the canon according to *Norton* is cannon, *BAP* is tommy gun, firing its burst each year, retaining the language of “best” in at least an implicit attempt to establish, with its yearly barrage, what David Lehman calls “poetry standards.” Does the series, do Lehman as general editor and his yearly editors, corroborate the vision of poetry presented in those massive volumes?

How to explore? First, simply, count. Make a chart of all *BAP* volumes, listing all poets and the frequency of their appearances. Such a chart reveals that over the past quarter century, if the count is right, *BAP* has published 892 poets. Of these, roughly 79 % appear only once or twice; 63% only once. Though reasons vary and include diminished production, old age, and death, the list of those who appear only once is curious, including Baraka, Wendell Berry, Martín Espada, Ted Kooser, Sonia Sanchez, Patricia Smith. Among many who have never appeared in *BAP* are Gwendolyn Brooks, Sandra Cisneros, Audre Lorde, N. Scott Momaday, and William Meredith.

Eight have appeared ten or more times: Charles Wright (10), W. S. Merwin (10), Richard Wilbur (11), Billy Collins (13), Donald Hall (13), James Tate (13), Charles Simic (15), John Ashbery (18). They constitute less than 1% of the poets published. Call these the *BAP* Eight. Once again, all male; this time all white. The five most frequent have served as annual editors in the series. In fact, the first eleven annual editors are among the top 6% in frequency of appearance. This might reflect their preeminence among American poets since the first *BAP* appeared in 1988, or it might reflect inbreeding. Other than Ashbery, no overlap exists with the Fat Fourteen. The dominance by white men does not correspond to the identities of annual editors; Lehman

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has chosen one woman almost every three years and an African American almost every five. Principles of identity politics missing from any written rationale for the first *Norton*, identified in the second, and emphatically reiterated ever since, had by 1988 transformed the literary landscape.

Do identity politics influence the selection process? Despite aesthetic differences as large as any between Donald Allen and Donald Hall, despite sometimes having almost no overlap in their choice of poets, the seven female annual editors have selected a fairly consistent percentage of women. Five remain within eight percentage points of each other (from 31% to 39%), the exceptions being Rita Dove (45%) and Adrienne Rich (exactly 50%). The equity between male and female poets in Rich's 1996 volume seems part of the provocation that led Harold Bloom churlishly to choose no poem from Rich's selection when preparing *The Best of the Best American Poetry* (1998). Not every landscape shifted.

And if the *BAP* volumes, like the *Nortons*, have come some distance in their inclusiveness, they still have a distance to travel: Where are Momaday, Erdrich, Harjo, Silko, Ortiz, Cisneros, Santiago Baca? And where are the Lithuanians!

Over a quarter century, in the context of the increased growth of the publishing industry as reflected by the gravity of the monster anthologies, it is not surprising that older figures dominate historically and that white men dominate even within that context. What happens with a narrower glance, at poets who have appeared frequently over periods of, say, six years? In other words, a study of the shift in canon from 1988 to 2011 as reflected in the *BAP* series.

Between 1999 and 2005 thirty poets appeared in at least half the volumes, including all the *BAP* Eight. One third are women; two, both male, are African American. One Latino, no Native American. In the most recent six-year stretch, 2006 to 2011, only twenty poets appeared in as many as half. Four of those are among the *BAP* Eight: Collins, Simic, Tate, and Ashbery. Five, or 25%, are women: Rae Armantrout, Denise Duhamel, Louise Glück, Allyn Rosser, and Natasha Tretheway. Three, or 15%, are African American: Tretheway, Terrance Hayes, and Kevin Young. No Latino/a, again no Native American. Of the twenty, seven appear also in *Norton*, fifth edition: Ashbery, Collins, Glück, Robert Hass, Paul Muldoon, Simic, and

C. K. Williams. Only Armantrout, Ashbery, Collins, Glück, Simic, and Tate appear in at least half the volumes in both five-year periods. Ashbery seems present wherever one looks, but other than him, this view suggests that quite different clusters of poets began to attract frequent attention during the past decade.



Scattershot

Between Water and Song: New Poets for the Twenty-First Century, ed. Norman Minnick, 2010

One more anthology. Kind of a skinny one. Here because unlike the others it does not purport to present the “best,” though three of its poets have appeared in *BAP*. Because (full disclosure) the editor is an acquaintance. Because the range among poets is extraordinary: Albanian, Native American, African American, Montanan, Ukrainian, Veteran, Nigerian, Belarusan, White Breadian (but good crusty loaves), though to identify by only one adjective is to oversimplify. Norman Minnick has picked poets he likes and respects, but he offers no hyperbole about them or their accomplishments. Only near the end of his introduction does he slide slightly in that direction, claiming the poets are “simply the most intriguing writing today.” Not best. Not most honored or famous. “Most intriguing.” A good word, intriguing. Equally appealing: the warning Darwin sent himself in a letter: “Never say ‘higher’ or ‘lower.’” *Scattershot* pelting an audience with verbal nourishment from many corners of the United States.

An anthology such as Minnick’s, with its broad taste, provides a rich sampling of current poetry. Yes, the *Nortons* still sit on the *BPJ* bookshelf. And annual versions of the *BAP* deserve the attention of this magazine because one can avoid the tommy gun barrage, can find in the volumes something beyond rejection and opposition, between the purely personal and the grandiose. David Lehman and his yearly editors, despite the hype, try to do each year just what Norman Minnick has done in his volume, what the *BPJ* editorial staff does each day—choose from among many poems a cluster rich enough to engage their readers.

Time to move beyond military metaphors. The young boy arranging toy soldiers for epic battles on the living room carpet can outgrow such games. Can leave this language behind. Particularly in poetry it is not needed. No more mosts.