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# **THE NEW AMERICAN POETRY 1945–1960**

**The visionary  
anthology  
that influenced  
two generations  
of poets and readers**

**EDITED BY  
DONALD ALLEN**

*With a new afterword*

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# THE NEW AMERICAN POETRY,

1945-1960

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## PREFACE

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In the years since the war American poetry has entered upon a singularly rich period. It is a period that has seen published many of the finest achievements of the older generation: William Carlos Williams' *Paterson*, *The Desert Music and Other Poems*, and *Journey to Love*; Ezra Pound's *The Pisan Cantos*, *Section: Rock-Drill*, and *Thrones*; H.D.'s later work culminating in her long poem *Helen in Egypt*; and the recent verse of E. E. Cummings, Marianne Moore, and the late Wallace Stevens. A wide variety of poets of the second generation, who emerged in the thirties and forties, have achieved their maturity in this period: Elizabeth Bishop, Edwin Denby, Robert Lowell, Kenneth Rexroth, and Louis Zukofsky, to name only a few very diverse talents. And we can now see that a strong third generation, long awaited but only slowly recognized, has at last emerged.

These new younger poets have written a large body of work, but most of what has been published so far has appeared only in a few little magazines, as broadsheets, pamphlets, and limited editions, or circulated in manuscript; a larger amount of it has reached its growing audience through poetry readings. As it has emerged in Berkeley and San Francisco, Boston, Black Mountain, and New York City, it has shown one common characteristic: a total rejection of all those qualities typical of academic verse. Following the practice and precepts of Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams, it has built on their achievements and gone on to evolve new conceptions of the poem. These poets have already created their own tradition, their own press, and their public. They are our avant-garde, the true continuers of the modern movement in American poetry. Through their work many are closely allied to modern jazz and abstract expressionist painting, today recognized throughout the world to be America's greatest achievements in contemporary culture. This anthology makes the

same claim for the new American poetry, now becoming the dominant movement in the second phase of our twentieth-century literature and already exerting strong influence abroad.

In order to give the reader some sense of the history of the period and the primary alignment of the writers, I have adopted the unusual device of dividing the poets into five large groups, though these divisions are somewhat arbitrary and cannot be taken as rigid categories. Within each of the five sections the poets are ranked by year of birth, and their poems by year of composition as a means of showing the range and variety and sequence of development in an individual writer's work.

The first group includes those poets who were originally closely identified with the two important magazines of the period, *Origin* and *Black Mountain Review*, which first published their mature work. Charles Olson, Robert Duncan, and Robert Creeley were on the staff of Black Mountain College in the early fifties, and Edward Dorn, Joel Oppenheimer, and Jonathan Williams studied there. Paul Blackburn, Paul Carroll, Larry Eigner, and Denise Levertov published work in both magazines but had no connection with the college.

While both publication and instruction at Black Mountain College align Robert Duncan with the first group, he actually emerged in 1947-1949 as a leading poet of the second group, the San Francisco Renaissance, where he was originally associated with Brother Antoninus, Robin Blaser, Jack Spicer and others in Berkeley, and with James Broughton and Madeline Gleason in San Francisco. Helen Adam, chiefly through her superb readings, has helped establish the ballad made new as an important trend in the poetry of the Bay Area; and Lawrence Ferlinghetti, through his readings with jazz bands and his recordings, has recreated a popular oral poetry we have not had since Vachel Lindsay. Bruce Boyd, Kirby Doyle, Richard Duerden, and Philip Lamantia are all natives of the San Francisco area, while Ebbe Borregaard came from Long Island and Lew Welch from the Northwest.

The Beat Generation, the third group, was originally associated with New York, but they first attracted national attention in San Francisco in 1956 when Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, and Gregory Corso joined Gary Snyder, Philip Whalen, and others in public readings. Three significant publications of 1956-1957 aligned their work with that of many writers of the first, second and fifth groups: *Ark II / Moby I*, *Black Mountain Review* No. 7, and the "San Francisco Scene" issue of *Evergreen Review*.

John Ashbery, Kenneth Koch, and Frank O'Hara, of the fourth group, the New York Poets, first met at Harvard where they were associated with the Poets' Theatre. They migrated to New York in the early fifties where they met Edward Field, Barbara Guest, and James Schuyler, and worked with the Living Theatre and the Artists' Theatre.

The fifth group has no geographical definition; it includes younger poets who have been associated with and in some cases influenced by the leading writers of the preceding groups, but who have evolved their own original styles and new conceptions of poetry. Philip Whalen and Gary Snyder grew up in the Northwest and became close friends at Reed College, before moving to San Francisco. Both Stuart Perkoff and Michael McClure came to the West Coast from the Midwest, Perkoff to settle in Venice West and McClure in San Francisco, where Ron Loewinsohn and David Meltzer have also moved in recent years. John Wieners studied at Black Mountain College and founded *Measure* in his home town of Boston. Edward Marshall, another New England poet, was first published in *Black Mountain Review*; he makes his home in New York. Gilbert Sorrentino lives in Brooklyn where he edits *Neon*, and LeRoi Jones in New York where he edits *Yügen*.

Occasionally arbitrary and for the most part more historical than actual, these groups can be justified finally only as a means to give the reader some sense of milieu and to make the anthology more a readable book and less still another collection of "anthology pieces." The statements on poetics, the biographical notes and the bibliography are aids to a more exact understanding of literary history.

Charles Olson's "Projective Verse" essay and his letter to Elaine Feinstein present the dominant new double concept: "composition by field" and the poet's "stance toward reality"; and Robert Creeley's two essays give further definition in this area. Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov define positions which differ sharply from Lawrence Ferlinghetti's or Allen Ginsberg's. James Schuyler describes the ambience of the New York poets, and Philip Whalen, Gary Snyder, Michael McClure, John Wieners, and LeRoi Jones send back reports from the fronts on which they are engaged. These statements are interim reports by the poets; they lead directly back to the poems, to the actual work of the period, waiting to be read and studied for what it alone can reveal.

The preparation of this anthology presented a series of formidable problems. As I have said, only a fraction of the work has been published, and that for the most part in fugitive pamphlets and little magazines. The field is almost completely uncharted; there is, not very surprisingly, very little first-rate criticism of any of the new poetry, and that little has been written by the poets themselves. Consequently, I have had to go directly to the poets for manuscripts and counsel, and I am heavily indebted to each of them for invaluable aid. Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, Frank O'Hara, and Allen Ginsberg have given me throughout the solid support and encouragement without which I should not have been able to complete this project. I owe almost as large a debt to Robin Blaser, LeRoi Jones and James Schuyler for much needed and deeply appreciated advice and assistance.

D. M. A.

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