Chapter 1

The Raw and the Cooked

The New Criticism versus the New American Poetry

The first section of this book explores the evolution of American poetry in the years just following the end of World War II through the 1960s, a fascinating chapter in American history dominated by the political and cultural formation often referred to as "Cold War culture." The United States' defeat of Hitler and Nazi Germany and the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 seemed to bring to a triumphant close a long, difficult period of strife, calamity, and violence that stretched from the Great Depression through the carnage of the war years. Almost immediately, however, America plunged into the Cold War with the Soviet Union, a prolonged, tense standoff between rival superpowers that led to an era in which economic prosperity and a sense of postwar triumph and relief mingled with anxiety, paranoia, and fears of nuclear annihilation.

The virulent, even hysterical anti-communism of the Cold War reached its apotheosis in the rise of McCarthyism, with its persecution of leftists, radicals, former communists, and a whole array of others deemed "un-American," to use the parlance of the day. The widespread hunger for a return to normalcy following the challenges of the Depression and war, coupled with the economic boom of the postwar years, created a culture marked by conspicuous affluence, the rapid growth of suburbia, the baby boom, exaggerated domesticity, materialism, and rampant consumerism. This is the period Robert Lowell would later refer to as "the tranquillized *Fifties*," a time of quietism, the repression of difference and dissent, and pervasive hyper-conformity (*Selected* 91).

However, the decade's apparent prosperity, calm, and unity barely masked the tremendous social tension, political turmoil, and discontent roiling beneath the surface. The period saw fierce struggles over civil rights for African Americans, with marches, protests, and brave acts of civil disobedience met with resistance and racist backlash; the unchecked expansion of the military industrial complex and the pervasive dread of nuclear war; and deep paranoia about American government and society being infiltrated by communist spies, homosexuals, Jews, and other so-called "deviants." Although the media promoted images of suburban domestic bliss and traditional

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"family values" as the epitome of the American ideal, that vision relied on a retrenchment of rigid gender roles for both women and men, kindling a growing dissatisfaction that would culminate in the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, a groundbreaking 1963 book that exposed the malaise and misery of American middle-class women. In other words, profound changes were already stirring: The seeds of the counterculture that would soon blossom in the dramatic social unrest, revolutionary political activity, and cultural changes of the 1960s were planted in the 1950s – in the energy and radical energies of bebop jazz, Abstract Expressionism, early rock 'n' roll, the Civil Rights Movement, and, not least, as we will see, in the realm of poetry.

If you had wandered over to a bookstore's display table in 1960 and picked up two anthologies of poetry bearing very similar titles – *The New Poets of England and America* and *The New American Poetry* – you might have been quite surprised and confused about the sharp differences you found inside the two books. In the first anthology, you would have come across dozens of well-crafted poems written in rhyme and meter, filled with symbolism and allusions to mythology and literary tradition – poems that feel almost as if they could have been written in 1820, or perhaps even in 1620, with few, if any concessions, to modernity in subject matter, form, or diction. In the second book – *The New American Poetry* – you would have been unable to find a single poem that resembled those in the first. Instead, page after page would have been filled with poems in loose, chaotic free verse, sprawling across the page – driven by slangy colloquial language, surreal imagery, references to contemporary comic books, movies, and jazz, and shockingly personal subject matter.

How could such different types of poems be written at the same moment, and how could editors deem each suitably representative of the "new" poetry of the postwar period? Why was there such a gulf between these two modes? These two books, *The New Poets of England and America* and *The New American Poetry* – which, despite their very similar titles, do not share a single poet – would become antagonists in a famous face-off that became known as "the battle of the anthologies." In his acceptance speech for the 1960 National Book Award, Robert Lowell, one of the leading poets of the period, used a memorable analogy to explain the era's starkly different styles and approaches to poetry: "Two poetries are now competing, a cooked and a raw," Lowell observed. "The cooked, marvelously expert, often seems laboriously concocted to be tasted and digested by a graduate seminar. The raw, huge blood-dripping gobbets of unseasoned experience are dished up for midnight listeners. There is a poetry that can only be studied, and a poetry that can only

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be declaimed, a poetry of pedantry, and a poetry of scandal" (Lowell, "Robert Lowell Accepts …"). Although the binary Lowell presents is schematic and oversimplified, it crisply summarizes the rival poetic modes that had emerged by the later 1950s, in which a stuffy, more academic style was pitted against a scandalous, rough, underground poetry. For better or worse, the schism he outlined, between an "experimental" and a "mainstream," became deeply ingrained in conceptions of American poetry and remains with us in many ways today.

We must be cautious not to reinscribe rigid binaries that can distort the reality of the poetry produced during this period, and I will treat these categories with a degree of skepticism in what follows. However, the gulf Lowell defined was very real to poets at the time, and there is no question that, for better or worse, it has shaped and structured much of the period this book covers, even up to the contemporary moment. To understand the development of poetry since 1945, it is crucial to have a good sense of where this opposition came from, the kind of poetry it produced, and the influence it exerts on the poetry to come. At the same time, we must recognize that the dividing lines were and are blurry, that poetry resists being easily categorized, and neither movement must be seen as a villain or a hero.

If the first kind of poem – "cooked" and elegant and formal – had become the accepted and dominant form of writing by 1950, why did it look so different from, and so much more traditional than, the outlandish modernist experiments that came to the fore in the first half of the twentieth century, in works like T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land," Ezra Pound's *The Cantos*, William Carlos Williams's *Spring and All*, and Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons*? In other words, what ever happened to modernism – to the avant-garde revolution in poetry that I discussed in my Introduction? How had it come to be tamed, domesticated, and institutionalized by mid-century?

This is one of the most distinctive and strangest elements of the story of twentieth-century American poetry – and it is an especially important key to understanding the evolution of poetry after 1945. Literary history often operates on a kind of pendulum model – rather than moving in a straight line, it tends to swing back and forth. By 1950, modernism, the daring and iconoclastic movement that had upended arts and letters in the early decades of the twentieth century, seemed in many ways exhausted. One particular strain of modernism (sometimes called "high modernism") had not only become

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dominant, drowning out some of the more radical, alternative modes, but it had also retreated and grown more conservative.[1]

The central player in this story is T. S. Eliot, who had come to loom over the landscape of twentieth-century poetry. After the success of "The Waste Land" (1922), which was by far his most radical and avant-garde poem, Eliot solidified his position as a leader of the modernist generation. His sweeping and brilliant critical pronouncements about poetry, laid out in essays like "Tradition and the Individual Talent," "The Metaphysical Poets," and "*Ulysses*, Order, and Myth," began to take on the air of gospel. But Eliot's provocations soon hardened into dogma, as Eliot himself "shifted to grounds of a rather severe orthodoxy" (Breslin 13). By 1949, the young poet Delmore Schwartz would grumble that Eliot lorded over the world of letters like a "literary dictator."

As Eliot reached his apotheosis, the rougher edges and more experimental qualities of his earlier work, found in poems like "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," "Preludes," "Gerontion," and "The Waste Land," began to give way to the more traditional forms and the religious piety one finds in "Ash-Wednesday" and "Four Quartets." At the same time, Eliot, like his friend and collaborator Ezra Pound, had drifted ever further to the right politically: Eliot increasingly embraced conservative politics and cultural attitudes, famously proclaiming in 1928 that he was now a "classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and anglo-catholic in religion" (Ramazani, Vol. 1, 461). Meanwhile Pound, notoriously, went even further. During World War II, he pledged allegiance to the fascist Italian dictator Benito Mussolini and espoused virulent anti-Semitism and far right-wing views on culture and the economy. Eventually, Pound's beliefs and actions would land him in prison after the war ended, charged with treason for the profascist radio broadcasts he recorded while living in Italy during the war.

Many younger poets and critics who had emerged in the 1930s and 1940s were enthusiastic followers of Eliot's precepts, especially those who formed the core of the movement known as the New Criticism: John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, Cleanth Brooks, along with the British writers I. A. Richards and William Empson. Turning away from both the chaos of modern life and the experiments of the modernist avant-garde, these poet-critics embraced literary tradition and longed to resuscitate the vanishing values of the cultural past. In the 1920s, Ransom, Tate, and Warren founded a literary magazine called *The Fugitive* at Vanderbilt University in Tennessee

[1] Some particularly useful and influential versions of this familiar narrative can be found in Perkins, Breslin, Altieri, Keller (*Remaking*), von Hallberg (*American Poetry*), Rasula, Golding (*From Outlaw*), Longenbach, and Ashton (*From*).

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and soon began to call themselves the "Southern Agrarians," a name that indicates the group's desire to return to the values of the rural, agricultural Old South as a refuge from the ravages and cultural decline they feel urban, industrial modernity has caused.

At the same time, the group collectively endorsed a powerful new mode of reading literature, which they dubbed the New Criticism (after the title of a 1941 book by Ransom). This critical method seemed to put into practice, or even institutionalize, Eliot's beliefs about poetry and culture, especially his ideas about tradition, myth, allusion, and symbolism, and his doctrine of impersonality. The New Criticism called for the close, careful interpretation of literary works, in which the critic must treat a poem or story as a self-contained object, divorced from considerations of the author's biography or intention, or the work's historical, political, or cultural contexts. New Critics argued that a successful poem could be viewed as a symmetrical, unified, self-contained object – much like a "well-wrought urn," to use the phrase Brooks borrowed from John Donne for the title of his influential 1947 study of poetry. In other words, a poem could be treated as a cohesive system of complex, interrelated effects and devices that could be dissected and analyzed by a skilled practitioner with almost scientific precision. This form of "close reading" became the dominant mode of teaching literature for the next several decades and continues to be a central pedagogical tool in literary studies today, thanks to influential books like *Understanding Poetry*, a textbook by Brooks and Robert Penn Warren published in 1938. In turn, the New Criticism became the predominant form of literary scholarship in the United States from the 1940s through the 1960s and 1970s. Because the New Critics were also, for the most part, professors of English, deeply versed in classical literature and the long poetic tradition, their program of well-crafted, allusive, and learned poetry came to be associated with the somewhat confusing label "academic poetry." This development – the rise of the professor-poet as a key figure in American poetry – is an important chapter in the long history of poetry's relationship to academia, which is an important element of the story this book seeks to tell. With the New Critics, for the first time, an important group of poets were ensconced in the academy, making their living as professors, and teaching methods of understanding poetry to students.[2]

At the same time, many of the leading New Critics, like Ransom, Tate, and Warren, were poets as well as literary scholars. Not surprisingly, the poetry they wrote reflects the values they promoted in their criticism: their poems

[2] On the New Criticism and institutions of poetry, see Golding (*From Outlaw*), Filreis, and Breslin.

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flaunt virtuosic skill and the mastery of traditional forms, erudition, subtle wit, and cleverness, discovering a haven from the storms of contemporary life in aesthetic order, literary tradition, and notions of unity and timeless perfection. Although they did perpetuate, and institutionalized, some aspects of high modernism, the New Critics simultaneously deplored what they viewed as the excesses of the modernist avant-garde: for example, free verse (which they disdained as too "easy," too much like "playing tennis with the net down," in the famous words of Robert Frost), fragmented form, collage, the radical use of quotation and found language, extreme compression and elision, surreal or irrational imagery and language, colloquial language, attention to the gritty, and unaesthetic particulars of modern life. In other words, the New Critical establishment picked out one strand of modernism but ignored or repressed other strands, such as the more radical formal experimentation of Pound and Williams, the linguistic play and queer subversiveness of Stein, and the African American vernacular modernism of Langston Hughes. As James Breslin puts it, "they deradicalized the modernist grandfathers" (17).

Another way to understand the triumph of the New Criticism in the late 1940s and early 1950s is to view it as an outgrowth of the conservative and anxious atmosphere characteristic of Cold War culture. Breslin, for example, argues that the New Criticism is "a unique product of the postwar era and its literary and social conservativism." Scholars have persuasively argued that New Criticism (like the Agrarianism it was tied to and grew out of) was driven by conservative cultural politics, rejecting progressive attitudes about race, gender, and sexuality, expressing unease about difference of all kinds, and upholding "traditional" values. Furthermore, with its conviction that poems must be viewed as self-contained art objects that stand apart from politics and history, the entire New Critical project, both in terms of its critical precepts about poetry and the poems it produced, rests on an attempt to ignore or repress contemporary ideological and political conflicts.[3] In other words, the New Criticism seemed particularly well suited for an era of "nerves, blandness, and retreat" (as Thomas Pynchon memorably described the 1950s in *The Crying of Lot 49*) (83).

It is not hard to see Robert Lowell's early work as one of the pinnacles of New Criticism–inspired poetry. After studying with Ransom and Tate, Lowell, in many ways, came to embody their program, putting it into practice with aplomb. Lowell's second book, *Lord Weary's Castle*, was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1947, and although barely 30, he was quickly anointed the darling of

[3] See, for example, Jancovich, and Breslin's discussion of "The New Rear Guard" (23–52).

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the New Critical poetry establishment. One can see the dominant mode – impersonal, formal, erudite – at work in one of his best-known early poems, "The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket" (a memorial for Lowell's cousin who had drowned at sea), which ably fulfills the requirements of the New Critical ideal. Here are its closing lines, replete with iambic pentameter and rhyme scheme, all imbued with symbolism and allusion to myth and religion, and clanging shut with a final rhyming couplet: "You could cut the brackish winds with a knife / Here in Nantucket, and cast up the time / When the Lord God formed man from the sea's slime / And breathed into his face the breath of life, / And blue-lung'd combers lumbered to the kill. / The Lord survives the rainbow of His will" (*Selected* 10).

Howard Nemerov's poem "The Goose Fish" can stand as another particularly good example of mid-century formalist verse written according to New Critical precepts. In five, stately, rhyming nine-line stanzas, the poem relates the story of a couple who embrace and kiss on a moonlit beach. Through carefully constructed allusions, Nemerov makes clear that this archetypal union of man and woman is a modern version of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden: "The ordinary night was graced / For them by the swift tide of blood / That silently they took at flood, / And for a little time they prized / Themselves emparadised" (Hall 247). The couple's moment of joyful connection is suddenly interrupted by an unwelcome visitor, an intruder from the natural world who catches them in the act: "Then, as if shaken by stage-fright … they saw, there underfoot, / As though the world had found them out, / The goose fish turning up, though dead, / His hugely grinning head" (Hall 248). The gaze of this strange and terrifying goose fish seems to cause the couple's fall from blissful innocence to experience and shame.

Safely dead but maniacally grinning at the same time, the goose fish is a complex, contradictory figure of the sort the New Criticism was born to dissect and analyze. It seems to be an emblem of mortality, mocking the lovers' attempt "to make a world their own." At the same time, it feels like a dispenser of divine, Biblical judgment, as it casts a cold, scornful eye on their human love, which the couple had wrongly deemed innocent and pure, making them now feel ashamed and guilty for their transgression. But the fish also stands for "the world" that "had found them out": a representative of society, but also a voyeur, spying on this illicit activity taking place on the dark beach. Thus, the poem reflects the deep anxieties about surveillance and enforced conformity that are so characteristic of the 1950s Cold War culture; the animal seems to stand in as a figure of "ancient," "gray" authority. He judges these young people, censuring them for being deviant or "wrong" or even "un-American," and causes them to cower in fear, shame, and confusion.

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But the poem presents the fish as more deeply ambiguous than that sounds, as Nemerov deliberately piles on the clashing qualities: The fish's grin is *both* "peaceful *and* obscene," "wide and moony"; he is, all at once, "ancient" and "corrupt," a "comedian," "a rigid optimist," and "their patriarch, / dreadfully mild." This open-endedness about what the grinning fish *means* is underscored – in fact, dramatized – by the poem itself. In this manner, the poem becomes an allegory for the New Critical process of critical reading itself: Nemerov depicts the couple struggling to read the fish as a symbol, unable to interpret and understand what it means, just as the critic (and student) must endeavor to decipher "the seven types of ambiguity" and possible meanings of a literary work: "They hesitated at his smile, / Wondering what it seemed to say …. They knew not what he would express, / So finished a comedian / He might mean failure or success" (Hall 248). Nemerov delights in leaving these contraries suspended, which means that the poem is both susceptible to New Critical reading practices and is, in clever, New Critical fashion, *about* them at the same time. In the end, the lovers fail to arrive at a final understanding of what the fish's grin means. "The Goose Fish," then, is a deeply symbolist poem that is ultimately *about* symbolism itself.

The New Criticism's general approach to poetry was enormously influential, and it shaped the early careers of a wide range of postwar poets, including James Merrill, John Berryman, Theodore Roethke, James Wright, Gwendolyn Brooks, Robert Hayden, Adrienne Rich, Donald Justice, and W. S. Merwin. Despite all the upheavals to come, which the rest of this book will trace, it is important to note that some poets – like Richard Wilbur, Anthony Hecht, and John Hollander – continued to write in this vein over the ensuing decades, rarely if ever shifting away from the formal, genteel, and learned style they began writing in in the 1940s and 1950s.

Wilbur is generally considered one of the best and most important of these poets of refinement, traditional style, and formal mastery, although his decision to retain the strict meter, rhyme, and stanzaic form of his earliest work for the rest of his career earned him both praise and criticism. While his poetry remains rooted in concrete, everyday experience (as can be seen in the title of one of his best-known poems, "Love Calls Us to the Things of This World"), it frequently reaches after visionary truths that lie beyond the physical realm. For example, in the elaborately patterned, impersonal poem "The Death of a Toad," Wilbur writes a lament for a poor creature "chewed and clipped of a leg" by modern technology, in the form of a "power mower" (Ramazani, Vol. 2, 196–97). The toad does not just expire right there on the lawn, but Wilbur suggests that it "dies / Toward some deep monotone // Toward misted and ebullient seas / And cooling shores,

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toward lost Amphibia's emperies" – in other words, it seems to shuffle off this mortal coil and venture forth to some kind of toad heaven (197). This poem's carefully crafted, symmetrical stanzas, its detachment (there is no "I" or any other human actor pushing the lawn mower), and its use of the animal as symbol (Wilbur himself explained he was "turning him into the primal energies of the world in the course of this poem") all mark it as a quintessential poem of the dominant mode of American poetry following World War II (qtd Edgecombe 57).

James Merrill, another major figure who started out closely aligned with the New Critical formalists, would go on to enjoy a lengthy career as one of America's most-celebrated poets, winning a long list of awards like the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award, and the Bollingen Prize. Born in 1926 in New York to an extremely well-to-do and powerful family (his father was co-founder of the investment firm Merrill Lynch), Merrill grew up ensconced in extreme privilege and wealth. Deeply influenced by W. H. Auden, Merrill's elegant, learned, wry poems display his restraint, wit, and his virtuosic handling of form. His earliest poems are carefully patterned, decorous, and written in a heightened register, as one can see in "The Bed," which appeared in *The New Poets of England and America*: "Where do we go, my love, who have been led / Afire and naked to our firelit bed? / For look! someone is sleeping there, his head / Pinned to the pillows by his own left arm" (Hall 208).

As his career went on, Merrill's style and voice grew more relaxed and colloquial but he never gave up his initial devotion to craft and traditional formal devices.[4] He increasingly came to fashion his poems "out of the life lived, out of the love spent," as he puts it in the poem "An Urban Convalescence" (*Selected* 59). Some of his best-known poems, like "The Broken Home" or "Lost in Translation," probe the complexities of childhood and personal memories – especially the lingering effects of his parents' shattering divorce – but usually with an arch tone, careful and ironic rhymes, and a reserved distance that sets him apart from the confessional poets (who I will discuss in Chapter 5). As we will see in Chapter 11, Merrill's later work was shaped and altered by the social changes of the 1960s and 1970s, becoming looser in form, and more open about the poet's sexuality, which had been either masked or treated only obliquely in his early work, if at all. In his books of the 1950s and 1960s, however, like *The Country of a Thousand Years of Peace* and *Water Street*, Merrill epitomized, and mastered, the formal concerns and stylistic qualities of mid-century formalism.

[4] For more details on Merrill, see Hammer and Yenser.

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The poets represented in the era's rival anthology, Donald Allen's *The New American Poetry*, seemed hell-bent on doing just about the opposite of everything I have been discussing. Starting in the late 1940s and early 1950s, a number of small collectives of friends had emerged who found common cause and became allies in a finding new ways of writing poetry, and of living more generally. These young poets viewed poems like "The Death of a Toad" as overly safe, quaint, artificial, and dull; in their view, such poems were hopelessly "closed" and "academic," to use two of their favorite dismissive epithets. In the broadest sense, these poets saw themselves as avant-garde and radical, oppositional and marginal, embattled writers at the forefront of literature and cultural change, who felt alienated from the seemingly conservative, repressive atmosphere of the 1950s.

Donald Allen, a young editor with a taste for "out there" avant-garde art, sensed that something new was brewing on the margins of the poetry world. Convinced that *The New Poets of England and America* had utterly ignored the most exciting currents in contemporary poetry, Allen decided to edit his own anthology of new poetry, which he hoped would be a sharp retort to the earlier collection. Published in 1960 by the small alternative publisher Grove Press, Allen's anthology was a smashing success, dramatically shaking up the course of postwar American poetry and influencing generations of poets to come. As Alan Golding notes, the book "is generally considered the single most influential poetry anthology of the post-World War II period" ("*The New American Poetry* Revisited" 180).

Allen made some important editorial choices that greatly influenced the reception and history of this body of work. Most importantly, he decided to separate the disparate poets into groupings that, for better or worse, have stuck with us ever since: the Beats (Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, and Gregory Corso), the Black Mountain College poets (Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan, and Denise Levertov), the San Francisco Renaissance (Jack Spicer and Lawrence Ferlinghetti), the New York poets (Frank O'Hara, Kenneth Koch, John Ashbery, James Schuyler and Barbara Guest), and a last category reserved for poets who did not fit easily into any one category (Gary Snyder, Philip Whalen, and LeRoi Jones). Although Allen noted the limitations of his own categories – calling them "occasionally arbitrary and for the most part more historical than actual" – the anthology's groupings have enjoyed what Golding calls a "central place in most readings or structurings of postwar literary history" (Allen xiii, Golding "*The New American Poetry*" 180).

Chapters 2–4 will look more closely at individual "New American" poets and the larger groupings they belonged to. Although there are abundant

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differences between these poets and these groups, there are important commonalities I would like to stress here before turning to specific poets and movements. Both aesthetically and socially, the poets in Allen's *The New American Poetry* viewed themselves as outsiders, deviants, and rebels in an age of hyper-conformity and consensus – daring iconoclasts defiantly resisting convention. Many of these poets were gay (including Ginsberg, O'Hara, Spicer, Duncan, Ashbery, Schuyler, and Wieners), and in some cases quite vocal about it in their work despite the era's rampant homophobia and repression, which meant they were almost automatically marginalized from postwar consensus culture and its policing of "normalcy."

In terms of content, many of the New American poets were intent on breaking taboos about what subject matter was appropriate or acceptable in poetry. Flying in the face of prohibitions, they write frankly about sexuality (including gay sex), the messy realities and pleasures of the body, alcohol and drug use, and mental illness. Fiercely opposed to "the Impersonal theory of poetry" promulgated by Eliot, these poets turn to the self and its raw personal experiences, leading to poems of shocking, painful self-exposure and self-examination (Ramazani, Vol. 1, 944). Thus, we find Ginsberg writing nakedly about his mother's severe mental illness, Wieners bluntly referring to drug use and homosexuality, and Creeley writing about his own insecurities and anxieties.

In contrast to the typical subject matter of mid-century formalism, the New American poets turn away from the grand, the mythic, and the self-consciously "literary," and toward the mundane and ordinary, developing an influential poetics of everyday life in the process. At the same time, adapting the lessons of surrealism, they frequently deploy irrational, wild, absurdist imagery and language, often blurring the lines between everyday experience and the realm of dream. Another defining feature of this body of work is its openness to "low" as opposed to "high" art – to pop culture, mass media, film, comic books, and television, which means one finds poems brimming over with references to comic book figures like Batman and Green Lantern, radio programs, movie stars like James Dean and Ingrid Bergman, television shows, jazz musicians like Billie Holiday or Charlie Parker, and supposedly "low" pleasures of daily life, like hamburgers or chocolate milk.

This insistence on the daily and ordinary also shapes their style, diction, and tone, as they turn to shockingly colloquial language and American vernacular, slang, and vulgar or non-"poetic" language. Rejecting fixed, traditional forms, they espouse a radically open, organic model of poetry, which they feel is better suited for capturing the flux and flow of daily life, immediate

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experience, and consciousness. Underlying this is a shared belief in the value of spontaneity, improvisation, chance, and speed as crucial ingredients for the creation of art (a predilection they share with both bop jazz and Abstract Expressionism): For them, poets should not conceive of the form or subject of a poem before one sits down to write, but rather engage in an exploratory, unpredictable, and spontaneous process. In Frank O'Hara's words, "you just go on your nerve" (*Collected Poems* 498).

Although the New American Poetry seems in many ways to be a quintessentially progressive movement, opposed to conventionality and repression of all sorts, it also had significant blind spots and shortcomings, especially in terms of its attitudes about race and gender. For all its vaunted rejection of conservative values, many of the male poets at its heart continued to exhibit sexist attitudes and racial insensitivity, as critics in recent years have shown. This is also reflected in the contents of the anthology itself, as well as in the demographics of the movements the book features. Of the forty-four poets Allen chose to put in the collection, he included only four women, even omitting a number of poets who were actively involved in the scenes the book represents, like Joanne Kyger and Diane di Prima, and a single writer of color, the young LeRoi Jones (later Amiri Baraka).

Because of these predilections, *The New American Poetry* actually gives us a skewed picture of the important role played by women and writers of color as participants and influences, and we should not lose sight of the exclusions underlying the book's renowned groupings of poets. In what follows I will try to recover some of that lost history, pointing out omissions and drawing attention to poets who were forced to the margins of these movements. I will also discuss how the poets who were included treat gender roles and questions of race in their poetry in complex and at times problematic ways.

The reaction by many within the literary establishment to *The New American Poetry* was fast and furious. One of the founders of the New Criticism, the poet-critic Allen Tate, was so disgusted that he threw a copy of the anthology overboard on a trip across the Atlantic (James Breslin 12). However, despite such rear-guard antagonism, *The New American Poetry* in many ways "won" the battle of the anthologies, as well as the broader war between different poetic styles. The new modes of writing it ushered in even compelled many of the best-known mid-century formalists, including Robert Lowell, James Wright, and Adrienne Rich, to dramatically change and loosen up their styles. Lowell famously declared that the highly crafted, formalist poetry he had been trained by the New Criticism to write had led to a frustrating dead end: "The writing seems divorced from culture somehow," he complained. "It's become a craft, purely a craft, and there must be some breakthrough back into life" ("Art of Poetry").

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By the late 1950s, Lowell himself would throw off the shackles of the New Critical mode and begin writing shockingly personal, looser, more conversational poems about his own private turmoil and mental illness, which would fill his pivotal book *Life Studies* (1959) (see Chapter 5), and many of his fellow "mainstream" poets would soon follow suit. Thanks to the work of the New American poets and movements that I will discuss in Chapters 2–4, American poetry began to "breakthrough back into life." It would never be the same again.

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