

SOUNDING THE CHARGE

The general readers of literature can now walk most of the poetic battlefields of the last hundred years with little more emotion than the tourist's usual wonder that so much blood was spilled to gain so little ground. There—over there, along that low wall—the Georgians made their last, doomed stand. The ridge across the valley, that's where contemporary modernism was decided, the high mandarins of T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound easily crushing the populist, lowbrow rebellion from the likes of Vachel Lindsay and Robinson Jeffers. And across the valley floor, so green now but red once with blood, the Beat berserkers howled their way close to victory before their charge was finally turned back.

Perhaps as a result, recent anthologies have finally begun to agree on something like a canon of twentieth-century American poetry. William Carlos Williams has won, and Stephen Vincent Benét has lost. Hart Crane has surprisingly faded, and Wallace Stevens has unsurprisingly shone. Delmore Schwartz has been washed under by the great wave of the world, while Sylvia Plath has made it safe to shore. Karl Shapiro is being forgotten, and J.V. Cunningham is being remembered. Amy Lowell is out, and Robert Lowell is in.

Time will revisit some of these judgments. Time *ought* to revisit some of these judgments. But the fading of the general reader's concern is not just the normal effect of passing time—the sort of thing that lets us put both Milton and Keats in an anthology of English literature, even though Keats once moaned that “life to Milton is death to me.”

Not just the poets but poetry itself seems to have faded over the last fifty years. A new poem from Auden or Lowell was once an event—a *public* event, an entry in the great dialogue we have about ourselves. Poetry was a player in the public conversation, and if you were going to be a public intellectual, you had to read contemporary poetry.

That was then. This is now. Even fiction—the fundamental art form of the West for the last three hundred years; the primary device by which we tried to explain ourselves to ourselves—has taken a beating. You don't have to read either poetry or fiction to participate in the high public discourse of America these days. You're welcome to have them as hobbies, of course, the way all real readers have hobby reading they do: Napoleonic naval stories, or hard science fiction, or police-procedural mysteries. But along the way, you can't expect anyone else to have to read that stuff. It's been a long time since anyone was embarrassed at a dinner party by not having read something in the latest issue of *Poetry*.

When *FIRST THINGS* began, the decision was made that poems should be included, even while many other journals were trimming or even eliminating verse. The founding editors, Richard John Neuhaus and James Nuechterlein, decided that general readers ought to consume poetry if they were going to be concerned about American public life.

The magazine's first poetry editor was the great literary scholar and Episcopal priest Nathan A. Scott Jr., who had led the fight against the New Critics by insisting that readers examine the beliefs and the circumstances of the authors. He was followed, for many years, by the poet and scholar Jill Peláez Baumgaertner, professor of English and dean of humanities and theological studies at Wheaton College. I took on the role of part-time po-

etry editor for a few years, while working full-time as the literary editor of the *Weekly Standard*. Then the fine Southern poet Anthony Lombardy came on board for an interval before handing the task on to the current poetry editor, the poet and novelist Paul Lake, who teaches at Arkansas Tech University.

Along the way—twenty years and two hundred issues—the magazine has published original work from the likes of the Europeans Czesław Miłosz and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, the Americans Richard Wilbur and Dana Gioia, and the Australian Les Murray. Under the long tenure of Jill Baumgaertner, *FIRST THINGS* tended toward modern free verse in the burgeoning Christianity and the Arts movement. Under more recent editors, it has tended toward plucking the best of the victors from the bloody old fights of the New Formalist movement.

But those are only the broadest trends, and in any particular issue, the reader would encounter a variety of schools and styles. We published comic verse such as Julie Stoner’s “Terra Firma,” which achieved the nearly impossible goal of playing the sad and sonorous sapphic stanza for comedy. We published serious and profoundly affecting verse, as in A.E. Stallings’ “Aegean Story.”

We’ve indulged some old friends—the ones brought up on the old literary tradition of poetry—when they turned to poetry, as when we printed Joseph Epstein’s moving poem on the death of his friend Edward Shills. Or when we hosted Avery Cardinal Dulles writing on “John Keats for Today’s Reader,” after he had watched the Green Bay Packers play a snowy game of football.

We’ve printed a great deal of translation, as well, including the extraordinary renditions of John of the Cross by Rhina P. Espaillat.

Dick Davis, Tom Disch, David Mason, Ralph McInerney, Samuel Menashe, Natasha Trethewey, Deborah Warren,

Christian Wiman—on and on, poet after poet, many of them gathered here in *Grace Notes*, the new anthology of FIRST THINGS' poetry, edited by Paul Lake and Losana Boyd and published to mark the magazine's twentieth anniversary.

Has FIRST THINGS succeeded at its great strategic plan to restore the place of new poetry in the public discourse of America? There's no doubt that our charge across those poetic fields, led by the poetry editors from Nathan Scott to Paul Lake, has not yet gained the high ridge at which it aims. But the battle is not yet over, and this new anthology of poetry from the first twenty years of FIRST THINGS reveals just how hard we've been fighting.

—Joseph Bottum
Editor, FIRST THINGS