

Appendix I: Letter from Donald Hall, Email, February 11, 2014

Dear Mr. Delbos,

It is strange to be asked about “the anthology wars in 2014!

I had forgotten the distinction between “raw and cooked.” I think that the two-Business is silly. Actually, nobody talks about it any more.

I knew Tom McGrath pretty well. His poetry had nothing to do with either so-called camp. I knew that he was, or had been, a communist. I knew that the subject was congressionally worrisome. When we talked, we never talked about his politics – simply because it was a boring subject. Back in the late 1940s the left-wing, and even communist, notions were common at Harvard. Myself, I was asked to join the Party because of my politics. Before I graduated in 1951, the un-American Activities Committee quieted things down! It was not a great big deal.

Robert Pack knew a publisher and arranged for the anthology. Then he realized that he did not know enough about poetry at the moment. He asked Louis to join with him. Louis was a friend of mine and knew I knew much more than he did. I had been editing the *Paris Review* for quite a while, which extended my acquaintance. Also I had spent a couple of years at Oxford and had a good idea of what was happening in England. I don't remember Pack's introduction but he had least to do with the choices, of the three of us. I remember: I found Snodgrass, who had no book. We had a meeting at Pack's New York apartment. Pack was enthusiastically against Snodgrass. He went off to the bathroom and Louis and I agreed that Snodgrass was *in*. We told Pack when he came back.

The definite article was criticized! When there was a second edition, Louis dropped out – largely because he didn't want to work with Pack. For the same reason, I did the English part alone, and Pack the American. I did not want to work with him. The division among the three of us was not hateful. I suppose each of us knew he was right.

Pack and Simpson and I did not edit with any notion of a conflict with another school of poets. Pack and I had never heard the name Allen Ginsberg. Louis had known him at Columbia,

where he was writing little Elizabethan ballads – nothing like “Howl.” None of us knew anything of Snyder or Robert Duncan. If we had known the work of many of them, probably we would not have put it in anyway. We were more conventional – but we didn't know about them, so he never had a chance to judge.

Let me give you a funny example. When we first finished the choices, one of our poets was John Ashbery. Then the anthology was too long, the publisher told us, and we cut it down – alas omitting Ashbery. It was two to one, and I was the one. Therefore John Ashbery got picked for the Donald Allen book, and thus (as it were) became a Beat poet. Don Allen's book printed all sorts of different poets, many totally un-Beat. Pretty much our bunch was called “academic” and a lot of them, including more conventional, “Beat.” Remember that “academic” had nothing to do with teaching at colleges. It was like the Royal Academy of Art in England, and that meant academic in a kind of conventional source of belonging to an established group.

Really there was not a winner in the anthology wars. People who were not poets tried to keep the “battle” alive. I suppose it was amusing to take sides. The poets were ecumenical. Denise Levertov was supposed to be Beat. Once Robert Bly took me around to meet her in the Village, and her husband hid himself away, and would not talk with me. Denise and I were friendly. Later, when she was poetry editor of the *Nation*, she asked me to do a review of Charles Olson. There was the ecumenism. Snyder and Creeley and I became close friends. And I met other of these Allen anthologies, we got along fine.

When I was teaching at Michigan I invited Allen to come and read, and we enjoyed it. On the platform, after I had introduced him, Allen said that “Once we were the greatest enemies in the poetry world” and now we kiss each other! (I don't remember that we kissed!) Once I was asleep and Allen was in town with Gary Snyder and they wrote lines of poetry for me, each side of one piece of paper, and shoved it under my door.

A few years after the “wars” I was able to edit an anthology for Penguin. What did I call it, Poetry Since the War? I can’t remember. I was able to include a fair sampling of very different poets. I think that Allen was not in it until the second edition or printing. I was really pleased, because Penguin was still mostly English but international – throughout Australia and New Zealand and India – which made the newer American poetry known all over the world.

I don’t know anyone who has spoken to me, or written in print, anything about the so-called anthology wars for several decades.

I hope to be helpful,

Don Hall

Appendix II: Interview with Robert Pack, Telephone, March 23, 2014

Can you provide some background information on the creation and publication of The New Poets of England and America? Was it your intention to feature only poets writing in received forms?

I look back on that youthful exuberant period in which I joined with friends, they were friends at that time, Donald Hall and Louis Simpson. I can’t remember the exact occasion in which the three of us were talking and just decided it would be fun to put together an anthology. The basic sense was that there was a lot of good poetry being written. It was an anthology to toot our own horn. And we had the enthusiasm and the presumption of being young poets ourselves. I went to

Dartmouth, and I'd gotten to know Robert Frost somewhat. I was an immense admirer of him then and I still am. At that time, my sense of the tradition, the great tradition of English writing, was poets who wrote in recognizable forms, so that has remained my preference. I have always found the challenge of form to be stimulating to the imagination.

At the time did you perceive of two opposing camps of American poetry?

I never did and still don't really think of them as opposing camps. That was I think a publicity response that kind of stuck when the Allen anthology came out. It was fun to get into debates about poetry and modernism, depending on one's attitude toward meter and rhyme and stanza form and all that. But anyone who would take a position in which poetry has got to be exclusively this or that, it would be too narrow. My own point of view has mainly been that writing in forms is a stimulus to the imagination. You're pressing against something that makes it harder to write and for me the primary paradox is that anything that makes it harder to write might make it easier to write well. Attention to perceived forms only wasn't a conscious intention with the anthology.

Was American poetry distinct from British poetry in the 1950s?

I've always felt that British and American poetry was a single tradition. The Wordsworth tradition in response to nature and the English tradition of writing poetry in celebration of God, or in doubt about divinity, those issues crossed the ocean and I'd draw a line from Wordsworth to Frost and Wordsworth to Stevens, and to Emerson of course.

All in all, it's a healthy dialogue between honoring tradition and understanding that tradition includes variants of what has been done. If you try too hard for newness, I think what you get is eccentricity. One needs to write with one's feelings, not in an embattled state with one's forebears. I think Bloom assumes that no writer can recover from his literary Oedipus complex. I don't think that's true. I think poets can love their sources and models. One of my favorite comments was when Frost was reviewing E. A. Robinson, a formalist: "He has an old-fashioned way of making things

new.” In my many years of teaching, if I have a complaint, it’s that too often students are not sufficiently schooled in what poetry has been in the past. I’m not sympathetic to the doctrinaire approach of creating a dichotomy, and I remember not liking it at the time.

What’s your opinion on the so-called anthology wars?

The war of the anthologies was more part of the history of publicity than a real phenomenon. It was unfortunate that there should be a war or cultural divide, with people saying I’m part of this group or that group. I think most good poets discover over the course of a lifetime what technique they can employ and what works for them and what doesn’t. I don’t think your practice follows your philosophy.

Was there a sense, in the late 1950s, that American poetry needed to be redefined, or was redefining itself, after World War II, and hence the “new” in both the title of your anthology and in The New American Poetry?

There probably was, but that was not my motivating attitude. I just was enthusiastic about what I considered to be variety in American writing. I haven’t gone back recently to look at the collection, but I’ll bet you that my batting average of including poets is not too bad, and that there were a lot of poets in that anthology who have gone on to have substantial careers.

Stevens for example is both traditional and innovative. It doesn’t have to be one or the other. Sometimes you want an open effect and sometimes you want it tighter. But for me the blank verse line is very compatible with colloquial diction. I don’t think there’s a war between high and low diction. They can merge and they can be appropriate under different circumstance.

Your introduction to the Second Selection is quite eloquent and outspoken about how you saw the landscape of American verse. In it, you protest the division of American poetry into camps. You also insist that the poets included in your anthology utilize various modes of “experimentation with form.” Generally, you seem to imply that the perceived divisions in post-war American poetry are

less than accurate. Do you still believe this to be the case? Why do you think these divisions, or the perception of them, have endured?

When I look back at my own work, there is war poetry and poems in response to the Civil Rights movement, but I wouldn't think of myself primarily as a social poet. There was one year where my poetry reading itinerary by chance took me to college campuses shortly after Allen Ginsberg had appeared on campus. What seemed to have stayed in the mind of the poets at these schools was Allen telling them "first thought, best thought." That was the formula, and it was one with which I heartily disagreed. The first idea is that the sun revolved around the earth. Not the best idea. Revision is a key aspect of composition. The revisionary imagination is part of the conceptual imagination. The idea there focuses on the definition of inspiration and spontaneity. My basic concept of spontaneity is expressed well in the Yeats poem called "Adam's Curse." That's my central belief: Spontaneity is an effect that comes last. You work to achieve the illusion of spontaneity.

Who won the anthology wars?

Today we have poets who are writing in open form and what we call traditional forms. In that sense both sides won. Nobody knocked out the other, nor would it have made any sense to try to come to a reductive exclusionary point of view.

What were the circumstances that led you to publish the Second Selection of the anthology?

I think we did a second because the first edition did so well that the publisher was eager to follow up on its success. Maybe at that point I was responding to what had become the public controversy, the views about poetry being complex and coming out of the tradition and employing many of the formal elements that characterize the history of English and American poetry. That belief has been part of my life from the beginning I guess. And what I'm remembering is that I used to get asked by people whether teaching took away time and incentive and effort from writing. I would answer that question by saying no, that teaching and writing for me went very well together

because the kind of attention that I would give to a poem when teaching it in class provided me with a sense of audience, which was the audience I wanted to address myself. An audience that would appreciate the technical aspects of the poem and the complexity and formal aspects that also conveyed certain ideas. A poem is not just an expression of an opinion but the expression of an opinion or idea held with feeling. That feeling derives greatly from the sound and music of the poem. That's been an attitude I've carried with me through the years.

I didn't feel the academic poet thing was a stigma but I do feel there was a turning or an opening toward embracing poetry that was in looser forms. And I think sometimes that works but I think that when poets lose the techniques of tradition, there is a loss. There's a loss when poets don't use rhyme and meter and alliteration and all the musical aspects and those that are part of the great tradition of English and American poetry.

The generation right before mine was not the generation of Frost, but Berryman and Roethke and Lowell and Richard Wilbur and Howard Nemerov. They are all traditionalists. In Roethke there is some opening of the form, but it's grounded in the tradition of a psychoanalytic understanding of the unconscious mind. Those were my immediate predecessors and among the contemporaries of mine, the poets that I most admire are Wilbur and Mark Strand. I don't know what category you'd put Strand in, but I would find in his writing many if not all of the virtues of traditional form with some modifications. I just had the unpleasant experience of receiving a manuscript from a previous student of mine who wanted me to write a blurb. My personal inclination was yes I'd love to do that, but when I read it, it seemed so fragmented, so unsatisfying as a narrative that I couldn't do it. There wasn't enough pleasure or coherence or meaning behind it.

It's possible that there's something that I'm missing, that there are some values that I'm not temperamentally tuned into appreciating. And you're right to raise the question of there being a lasting difference in taste and concepts of poetry that might very well go back to the value of the anthologies that might make your writing about it worthwhile.