Books

Whitman Sampler (& Dickinson, Poe, et al.)

The Oxford Book of American Poetry, edited by David Lehman. (Oxford University Press , 1132 Pages, $35)

By
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There is something about an anthology that inspires dread in the world of letters, as if the survival of an art — or of particular poems or poets — depended on it. The fear is half-founded: editors of major anthologies influence what will be respected and, in some cases, remembered. So it takes bravura to tackle a project of this kind, particularly one that encompasses the poetic history of a poetry-rich country. David Lehman ’70CC, ’78GSAS, the editor of the newly updated *Oxford Book of American Poetry*, acknowledges in his introduction that his choices will not please everyone: “There is no court of final appeal beyond your own taste, eclectic or focused, wide or narrow, as the case may be.”

Lehman, the author of several books of poetry and criticism and founder of the Best American Poetry series, is well matched to the book’s mammoth editorial task, and his contents are commendably more varied and broader than previous editors’. Lehman’s book comes 30 years after Richard Ellman’s *New Oxford Book of American Verse* and more than 50 years since F. O. Matthiessen’s *Oxford Book of American Verse*. Lehman extends the anthology, moving the cutoff for poets’ birth dates from 1934 to 1950, and expands it, adding a huge number of poets previous editors overlooked, including many African American poets, such as Paul Laurence Dunbar, Jean Toomer, and Robert Hayden.

“In this case there are more poets, with less space for most,” the editor explains—211 in Lehman’s Oxford, compared to Ellman’s 78 and Matthiessen’s 51.

“Less space for most” means that Lehman preserved the ample pages given to Whitman and Dickinson, “our poetic grandparents,” and reserved fewer for John Greenleaf Whittier and James Russell Lowell, once-beloved and oft-recited Fireside Poets whose Victorian sensibility has fallen out of fashion.

But Lehman is no snob. He’s kept chestnuts like Oliver Wendell Holmes’s “Old Ironsides” and Longfellow’s “Paul Revere’s Ride” — not great poems by literary standards, but echoes of an era and part of the fabric of American poetry. The collection opens with Anne Bradstreet, the English emigrant whose father, brother, and husband all became governors of Massachusetts. “The first American poet” is not without English counterparts, or counterpoints: she was born four years before Shakespeare died and is almost an exact contemporary of Milton. In her “Prologue,” Bradstreet makes excuses for her “lowly lines”:

> *Let Greeks be Greeks, and Women*
> *what they are,*
> *Men have precedency; and still excell,*
> *It is but vaine, unjustly to wage war,*
> *Men can doe best, and Women know*
> *it well.*

It’s not exactly Paradise Lost, but there’s delight in the fact that this woman has “precedency” in American poetry, despite her polite self-effacement.

America, in addition to being the poets’ home turf, is strikingly often the subject of their poems. Early in the anthology, Philip Freneau, “the Poet of the American Revolution,” bemoans “Europe’s proud, despotic shores” and paints noble prospects for his “Western Country.” The poet’s patriotism is stirring, his imperfect prediction haunting:

> *Far brighter scenes a future age,*
> *The muse predicts, these states will hail,*
> *Whose genius may the world engage,*
> *Whose deeds may over death prevail,*
> *And happier systems bring to view,*
> *Than all the eastern sages knew.*

Fast-forward two centuries to Allen Ginsberg's ('48CC) post-atomic 1950s "America": "America when will we end the human war? … America when will you be angelic?" Ginsberg, a poetic grandchild of Whitman's, with his repetition and rangy lines, "sings" America more cynically than his ancestor, who celebrates the vast and varied country; but Whitman in his turn lamented the tragedies of the Civil War.

Here, discrete voices shed different light on the past. Phillis Wheatley, the slave of a wealthy Boston tailor and the first African American poet to be published, writes: "'Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land." Mercy, she explains, because the slave ship sailed her toward Christianity and redemption. A hundred and fifty years later, in his poem "Bitter Fruit of the Tree," Sterling Brown depicts his ancestors' bondage as anything but merciful: "They said to my grandmother: 'Please do not be bitter,' / When they sold her first-born and let the second die."

These pages, brimming with history, are also filled with American places — Robert Frost's New England and Hart Crane's New York, Robert Hass's Lagunitas and Wallace Stevens's Key West. Anyone who's ever taken a road trip will appreciate Stephen Vincent Benet's "American Names," which commemorates back-road outposts and mining claims like "Skunktown Plain" and "Lost Mule Flat."

Toward the end of the collection, in a poem titled "Morning in America," John Koethe tries to imagine "the pages of some legendary volume marked / Forever." Certainly if there were such a volume, it wouldn't be an anthology. Lehman knows this. "Successive generations," he says, "need to replace the retrospective anthologies of the past." Lehman has responded to that need now, as someone else will a generation from now.

But such a hefty anthology sets precedents, and there will be those who take exception to Lehman's selections. The fiercest debate will arise over the living poets who appear (or don't) in the last 200 pages of the book. But these pages will likely change the most in the book's next edition: some of Lehman's predictions will be right, some wrong.

A reader may be disappointed to find Sharon Olds's ('72GSAS) silly poem "The Pope's Penis" here, or Billy Collins's already-tired "Introduction to Poetry," which will be taught with a knowing smile by the next generation of high school teachers. The same reader might praise the inclusion of Aaron Fogel's ('67CC, '77GSAS) extraordinary poem "The Printer's Error," or the resurrection of lesser-read poets,

such as Ted Berrigan or Laura Riding. If John Ashbery's ('50GSAS) 25 pages — against Frank O'Hara's 11 — upsets the equilibrium, Edwin Arlington Robinson's outweighing Carl Sandburg helps to right it. Lehman has added poets as disparate as George Oppen, Weldon Kees, and May Swenson. A future editor may do the same for Jack Gilbert, Alan Dugan, or Rita Dove, none of whom appear here.

Lehman's selections may lean too far in certain directions, but to read a collection that catered to every taste would be the most boring business imaginable. The Oxford Book of American Poetry contains some of our richest cultural treasures and offers a wide-ranging, lively history of poetry in this country. If Lehman is right that in such matters "there is no court of final appeal," he has been, in any case, a shrewd and mindful judge.

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