

Article

Neo-Barroco, the Missing Group of the New American Poetry

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Abstract: The New American Poetry anthology delineated “schools” of North American poetry which have become seminal: *The Black Mountain School* (Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, Denise Levertov), the *New York School* (John Ashbery, Barbara Guest, Frank O’Hara), the *San Francisco Renaissance* (Robert Duncan, Robin Blaser, Jack Spicer), and the *Beats* (Allen Ginsberg, Gary Snyder, Michael McClure). The word seminal is used in a traditional way, from the root: “of seed or semen . . . full of possibilities”, but here also because the work is dominated by men and the omission of poets like Diane di Prima and Joanne Kyger seems especially egregious now. As compared to the whiteness of academic verse of the time, the New American Poetry was radical and more diverse, but could be seen as quite inadequate in those aspects from a contemporary perspective. Of course culture must always be judged in proper context, including its era and the anthology has had a powerful impact on the poetry of the continent from which it came. This paper posits that The New American Poetry, had it looked even slightly off the shore of North America, could have included the Neo-Barroco school of Latin American poetry. The affinities are almost endless and the limited scope of even the most radical poets of the post-war generation is exposed.

Keywords: poetry; Black Mountain; Organic Poetry; improvisation

About the New American Poetry anthology, the Poetry Foundation says this: “The anthology’s impact was immediate, and it continues to be recognized as both a cultural document and a collection of the finest avant-garde writing of the period”.¹

The anthology delineated “schools” of North American poetry which have become seminal: *The Black Mountain School* (Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, Denise Levertov), the *New York School* (John Ashbery, Barbara Guest, Frank O’Hara), the *San Francisco Renaissance* (Robert Duncan, Robin Blaser, Jack Spicer), and the *Beats* (Allen Ginsberg, Gary Snyder, Michael McClure). The word seminal is used in a traditional way, from the root: “of seed or semen . . . full of possibilities”, but here also because the work is dominated by men and the omission of poets like Diane di Prima and Joanne Kyger seems especially egregious now.² As compared to the whiteness of academic verse of the time, the New American Poetry was radical and more diverse, but could be seen as quite inadequate in those aspects from a contemporary perspective. Of course, culture must always be judged in proper context, including its era and the anthology has had a powerful impact on the poetry of the continent from which it came.

This paper posits that The New American Poetry, had it looked even slightly off the shore of North America, could have included the Neo-Barroco school of Latin American poetry. The affinities are almost endless and the limited scope of even the most radical poets of the post-war generation is exposed. Let’s start with the top.

Charles Olson is the key figure in both The New American Poetry and its companion book *The Poetics of the New American Poetry*. Olson leads off the poetics anthology with his landmark essay Projective Verse, characterizing his poetics as a use of speech “where it is least careless and least logical” (Olson 1997, p. 241). The poetry anthology also starts with Olson and his poem in rebuke of T.S. Eliot’s “The Wasteland”—“The Kingfishers”. The beginnings of a new civilization are born in the wreckage of an old one and so Olson ends



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with the line: “I hunt among stones”. So too are movements in art found in the last dying embers of a previous movement.

In the New American Poetry, we had the “open”, an alternative to the “closed” verse of its day, which Olson also in *Projective Verse* characterizes as “that verse which print bred” and one can see various degrees of openness in the “open form” of The New American Poetry which was to be understood differently than “free verse” as William Carlos Williams (one of the key predecessors of The New American Poetry) would point out. In fact, one can see all poetry (and life) from the continuum that poets like Olson and Duncan saw it, with the “open” on one end and the “closed” on another. According to Williams,

mental activity in most people is conducted primarily at the level of ordinary consciousness or the ego. The distinctive feature of such life is its tendency toward a rigid conservatism, a fear of new experience, and a desire to operate safely and fixedly within established categories. Locked within a system, cut off from fresh experience by the desire for security, the ordinary man will be emotionally and sensually starved; in a real sense, he will not even exist . . . Ironically then, the person who seeks security uproots himself from the present moment, the only thing that IS, and so he becomes a perpetual drifter. Because he is impoverished, his activity will be incessant; but because he is dissociated from the sources of life, his restless activity will be futile . . . his fear of the new, thwarting the creative process of renewal, is self-destructive” (Breslin 1967, p. 158).

The open in 1950s literary USAmerica³ was led by those sons and daughters of Pound and Williams: Olson and the Black Mountain School; the Beats (whom to a large extent had poetics quite similar to Olson’s) and perhaps all of the New American Poetry, who saw Eliot as “closed” despite the free verse mode in which he was operating. Williams in his autobiography called Eliot’s poem “The Wasteland”,

The great catastrophe to our letters . . . Eliot’s genius gave the poem back to the academics . . . I felt at once that it had set me back twenty years and I’m sure it did. Critically, Eliot returned us to the classroom just at the moment when I felt we were on a point to escape to matters much closer to the essence of a new art form itself—rooted in the locality which should give it fruit (Williams 1967, p. 146).

Consider one of the New American poets Jack Spicer who said: “A poet is a time mechanic not an embalmer” (Spicer 2008, p. 122) surely is a statement consistent with the notion that the New American poets saw Eliot’s poetry based in the closed nature of conclusions as opposed to the open Spicer and other New Americans were after. Contrast Eliot’s Anglican Church affiliation and Gary Snyder study of Zen in Japan for ten years, along with Snyder’s interest in indigenous culture. Zen is profoundly an exercise in the open, eschewing judgement for equanimous mind, judgment being the province of the ego which is to be transcended by Zen study and Sesshin. It is no wonder that several of the New American poets, Snyder, Whalen, Kyger, McClure, Ginsberg, among others who would find that practice to be supportive of their open stances toward poem-making.

A poet in the New American Poetry tradition, though of a latter generation, native Spanish speaker Victor Hernandez Cruz, wrote that upon discovering the poetry of Williams,

I began to feel how I could bring the rhythms of my language up to an immediate and urban speed. To make things shine in the present moment of our senses, in the language that circulated within the air of the city. I felt the pulse of Free Verse or, more accurately, Open Verse. Free Verse might imply a randomness or an aspect of chance or gamble in the writing, whatever comes up, there are many inner laws and concerns involved, such as cadence and harmony and blending of words, things must fit within the language of the poem.

Regarding Williams, Hernandez Cruz also wrote,

The poetry of WCW was like a gentle opening, things came at you, in the order they were found, no effort to undo them, as to undo the world with concepts . . . The natural order of things was in motion—almost like a practical poetics . . . A poetry of the Emergency Room . . . (Hernandez Cruz 1997)

Hernandez Cruz resonated with the organic order, the wisdom of what is “received” which is a quality of the open stance toward poem making. Compare that to Allen Ginsberg, whose Mind Writing Slogans included such phrases as “Notice what you notice, Catch yourself thinking, Observe what’s vivid” and “Vividness is self-selecting”.⁴

Hernandez Cruz and William Carlos Williams, Norte Americano poets, working so close to and yet so far from the poets of the Neo-Barroco school.

1. The Neo-Barroco

Perhaps the premier living practitioner of the neo-barroco (and of the penchant for parenthesis) is Cuban-American Jose Kozer, though he does not consider himself to be an American poet. (Surely not an USA in the parlance of George Bowering.) Kozer only writes in Spanish and, as such, has guaranteed his own marginalization in the U.S. Yet, in Latin American letters his influence is substantial. He gives Norte Americanos a sense of what’s involved in the literary movement he’s been part of:

I see two basic lines in today’s Latin American poetry. One is a thin line, the other thick. The geometry of the thin is linear, its expression familiar, colloquial. The geometry of the thick is prismatic, convoluted, its expression turbulent and dense. The first line I associate more with American and the more traditional Latin American poetry, aspects of its already assimilated Avant-garde included. I associate this line with say, Robert Lowell, a certain pellucid Eliot, or the work of Elizabeth Bishop. The second line, meaning the thick line, I associate with international poetry, a stronger converging and diversity, indeed more opaque, but in spite of thickness more encompassing. This international poetry includes aspects of 20th Century American poetry, as well as a basic source rooted in the Spanish Golden Century Baroque, Góngora and Quevedo above all (Kozer 2010)

Kozer would add a “sprinkling of the English Metaphysical poets”, Stéphane Mallarmé, Ezra Pound, Louis Zukofsky, Charles Olson and John Berryman, as well as examples in music including John Cage, Philip Glass and the French Catholic mystic composer Olivier Messiaen. That he calls work of the “thick” poets from the U.S. “international poetry” shows that the avant garde in North America has more in common with the international avant garde and not the “thin” poets he notes, nor those of that lineage which includes a gigantic swath of the new MFA/workshop poetry where thousands of graduates are sent off into the poetry world in search of a poetics which is also a cosmology, as it was for Olson, Duncan and many of the New Americans and those who have worked in that vein.

Kozer’s collaborator in an influential neo-barroco poetry anthology entitled *Medusario* was Roberto Echaverrén. In an essay published in *S/N New World Poetics*, Echaverrén says of the Neo-Barroco:

The long baroque poetical sentences, full of parenthesis, subordinate clauses, rambling digressions, attempts to grasp disparate levels of meaning, different fields of knowledge, a multipolar reality, as if poetry was the place for the synthetic articulation of them all, in the most plausible manner of true thought (Echaverrén 2010).

It’s my feeling that the mind, more accurately, works in this manner, so the neo-baroque approach allows one to close the distance in the moment of composition and with the reader/listener. (“The most plausible manner of true thought” indeed.) It too, is open. Unfortunately, the training we usually get as poets, or as students of poetry, is the opposite, making the neo-baroque poem seem odd and difficult. What is difficult

is the surrender to the logic of the individual poem, or poet. Convention prohibits this. MFA poetry workshops bristle at this. The New Americans were interested in closing the distance between, as Olson put it, the energy that propelled the poem into being and the poem itself and used the phrase “high energy construct” to describe the projective poem. Adjectives and similes create distance from that source of energy and, like abstractions and generalizations, must be earned, Olson’s mentor Ezra Pound argued. The neo-barroco equivalent would come from Vicente Huidobro, a forerunner to the Neo-Barrocos equal to Pound’s influence on the New Americans, and his assertion: “El adjetivo cuando no da vida mata.” (When the adjective does not give, life it kills).

2. Make It True Meets Medusario (Current Neobarrocos)

In 2019 I had the great pleasure of co-editing a poetry anthology with José Kozer and Thomas Walton. *Make it True meets Medusario* is book featured poets from the Cascadia bioregion, where I live, and poets from the Neo-Barroco school. Kozer curated the Spanish language poets and Walton and I, the English. The Neo-Barrocos featured were Eduardo Espina, Roberto Echavarren, Pedro Marqués de Armas, Kozer, Tamara Kamenzain, Soleida Rios, Roger Santiviáñez, Raúl Zurita, Néstor Perlongher, Carmen Berenguer, Maurizio Medo, Raynaldo Jiménez.

In his perceptive and articulate introduction to the anthology, Matt Trease notes the dearth of the work of neo-barroco poets available in English and that *Medusario* was akin to the New American Poetry in the way it established a potential lineage that included:

... much of the poly-vocal and paratactic experiments of high Modernism along with the meter and imagery of English Metaphysical poets and the bards of the Spanish Golden Century Baroque (Trease 2019).

As you can imagine, resistance was quite the topic amongst poets of the time of Trump era, with USAmericans getting their first taste of the actions of a would-be caudillo. Trease notes that while that resistance to colonialism, imperialism, capitalist exploitation of the planet and patriarchal authoritarianism is often clear in the anthology, at other times it is presented as shadow-boxing, “favoring evasiveness, irony, poly-vocality and elasticity over direct confrontation”. In Kozer’s words the obscure “can be an instrument for understanding the spiritual”.

The didactic and rhetorical is favored by the thin stream of poetry of the Western Hemisphere, but the Neo-Barrocos are drawn to more open approaches.

3. Open vs. Closed

While one can understand the moved toward the closed being the case in the United States, what with declines in literacy and critical thinking among the demands of capitalism and empire, the “difficulty” of the neo-baroque also existed in Cuba, as will be noted in a moment. It’s human nature to want to understand; to make meaning out of anything; to create a narrative; to not feel like we are not in on the joke, or the poem or the consensus.

Unfortunately, as the New Americans knew, as the Neo-Barrocos know, the need to understand, the absence of negative capability, the closed, is the road to entropy and not their intended destination. William Carlos Williams said: “there is no poetry of distinction without formal invention”. Poem as act of discovery. “Form is never more than a revelation of content” is how Denise Levertov put it and for the New Americans and the Neo-Barrocos, this is the gospel. This is the energy that animates. For Michael McClure, each poem: “is a kind of a spiritual challenge and ... adventure of ... consciousness ... a very sweet possibility of taking a trip through experience that I’ve never taken before” (McClure 2018).

“Open” in New American Poetry parlance becomes “thick” for Kozer and “closed”, “thin”. But the impulse is very similar and Olson is noted by Kozer. And while the poetry of Olson, Duncan and other New American Poets was dense, that of Kozer and the Neo-Barrocos is also dense and also finds in their lineage an Olson-like figure in the Cuban poet José Lezama Lima.

Lezama elaborated in his poetry, essays and novels a complex baroque syntax and deployed learned realms of the “image” (his own term), a second degree mimesis articulated by metaphors and double meaning (Echavarren 2010).

Lezama’s famous quote is: “only the difficult is stimulating”.

From the poem *Thoughts in Habana* (1949) (Lezama Lima 2005, p. 22)

The forest, breathed upon,
releases the hummingbird of the instant
and the old moldings.
Our wood is a toy ox;
the city state is today the state and a small forest.
The guest breathes upon the horse and the rains, too.
The horse rubs its muzzle and its tail over the harmonium of the
forest;
the naked man intones his own poverty,
the colibrí stains and pierces him.

My soul is not in an ashtray.

From that same collection, in an interview conducted by Armando Alvarez Bravo in 1964, Lezama is asked about the difficulty of his poetry and Lezama responds:

I do not think that the contemplation of my poetry offers at present a greater difficulty than that offered by the contemplation of any other poetic prism. It is true that our romantic and later our fin de-siècle poetry had no elements that could be considered enigmatic. But this fact cannot serve to join together, as is customary, the concepts of the enigmatic and the obscure. These two concepts are not necessarily tangent. Once I was told that Góngora was a poet who made clear things obscure and that I, on the contrary, was a poet who made obscure things clear, obvious, radiant. I have stressed the fact that it was among medieval minstrels that the *trobar clus* appeared, these being the minstrels who produced obscure poetry. Thus we see that even minstrelsy, which by definition was simple, had nothing to do with clarity, since already among the minstrels there were some who produced obscure or hermetic poetry. And in Nordic countries there were kings who were skalds that in their own palaces cultivated obscure poetry, just as there were kings who performed as buffoons in their own courts. The verses of the skalds were always nebulous and difficult to understand (Lezama Lima 2005, pp. 122, 123).

The prose poem is one method used by poets allied with the approaches outlined in the New American and Neo-Barrocos. A method used to break way past the old forms, to follow form as a revelation of content, as Levertov would put it. So much of the North American MFA poetry, the thin descendants of the closed form poets of the mid-20th century and their cousins the free verse poets whose poetry when linebreaks are removed looks like the mediocre prose Pound warned would not fool anyone, but has. See what Neo-Barrocan Raúl Zurita does with the prose poem:

Letter to the Living

For Valerie Mejer

My love is happy because we are alive. Once again she laughs and
hugs me and says North America is a daydream and South America is a night-
dream and then tells me she dreamed about my body being
dragged by the current crashing down against the river rocks. When she saw
her my mother asked if this was my girl and then turning asked: “But where
are this country’s ships?” The men answered shyly and one of them told her:

“Ain’t never been ships in this country”, but she was no longer listening, she only addressed me, only to me did she speak. The younger ones hid their laughter as if the elders did not understand much about what was going on, but she said: “I have never felt so young”. My love then told me that she had seen the countries; that Americans from the south and from the north passed each other like soap bubbles in the air and then they arrive. Then I thought, countries must be just like oneself and I talked a lot but it was like talking to the whole earth and I felt such happiness oh yes, brother river, sister clouds . . .

Dear Manhattan, beloved brown plains, that is why the youngsters arrived metamorphosing themselves by night and during the day they were plains of grass crossing the new New-American dream. Yes palomitali, like stubborn relatives they were all getting together, young Cambas, Mexicas and cajoling Chileans, and in the dream the torrent was descending breaking my flesh swollen by pure love. Yes, happily I said I am going with my living girl beyond the end. The teenagers traverse the night creating like countries on the rise . . .

The referenced “New-American dream” (almost typed “dread”) can be seen not as a nod to the New American poets I’ve been writing of, but about that American Dream lost to the demands of a neo-liberal culture is one take on this poem. A kind of culture the New American Poets railed against. (I think of Robert Duncan’s defense of the commons.) Notice also the echoes of the disappearances from the era of the Pinochet regime, the tension between indigenous lifeways and that of the descendants of settlers, the disconnection from nature and the inherent interconnection of all living things, all related in the shadow-boxing manner Trease referenced.

Kozer, like many of the New Americans (Snyder, Ginsberg, McClure, Philip Whalen, di Prima and others) also looks to Asian wisdom cultures for guidance in a culture entranced by the material life force, as in this poem from *Tokonoma*, a paean to Japanese culture. From that book, and Peter Boyle’s expert translation, there is one of the poems entitled “Meditation” (Kozer 2014). (Try reassembling this into prose blocks),

With the utmost care I place a few ounces of rice in
the clay pot. And with
care and attention I
boil water (circumcised) a pinch of salt.
Gram by gram my flesh flows reciprocally off its skeleton,
the shape remains (I
see it) rags of fish
are cawing like crows
in the branches of
a willow tree, virgin
pieces of a bird in a
stampede (smooth)
smooth in far off
waters.
A permanent state of insatiability, there is no calm:
what is far off (far
off) burns, punishes,
an immediate
arithmetic brands me
with its welts, wombs
in the shape of old

vessels, veins, stand out
 on my legs: upholding
 the heights, the sky a
 heavy etching they
 bear the weight of:
 I'm not iron, and the
 vegetation throbs
 (spreads) along my
 thighs, becomes
 stagnant puddles.
 The air a heavy piece pressing down, why bother standing up,
 you're under it.
 I'm precise, I have outdone
 myself: I know with
 certainty the size of
 what's necessary for
 our (virulent) general needs.
 I know it and spill out.
 I have an idiot eye. My vena cava of copper or
 plastic. Bags under my
 eyes a shiny jet-black
 from staring through
 the sleep in them . . .

Of course Kozer's self-effacing humor mixed with his genuine appreciation for Japanese cosmology and the sacred nature of how he approaches the dailiness and old age. Born in 1940, a generation after *The New Americans*, he could have fit nicely into the *New American Poetry's* Neo-Barroco chapter had there been one.

Satori

Overnight
 my pubic hair
 white.

And also:

Wo

The philosopher Mo Tse teaches: refuting me is like
 firing eggs at a rock.
 You can use up all the eggs but the rock remains unharmed.
 The philosopher Wo uses up all the eggs of the world
 against a rock
 and conquers it.
 First, to make the rock memorable.
 Second, because in the future, given its
 excess yellowness,
 whoever approaches
 the rock confuses the
 moon and horses.

And third, even more importantly: one verdict
acts on another
verdict,
cancels the obsession of its words.

Compare that with Diane di Prima's famous poem *Rant* (di Prima 1990):

There is no way out of a spiritual battle
There is no way you can avoid taking sides
There is no way you can not have a poetics
no matter what you do: plumber, baker, teacher
you do it in the consciousness of making
or not making yr world
you have a poetics: you step into the world
like a suit of readymade clothes
or you etch in light
your firmament spills into the shape of your room
the shape of the poem, of yr body, of yr loves
A woman's life/a man's life is an allegory
Dig it
There is no way out of the spiritual battle
the war is the war against the imagination
you can't sign up as a conscientious objector
the war of the worlds hangs here, right now,
in the balance
it is a war for this world, to keep it
a vale of soul-making
the taste in all our mouths is the taste of power
and it is bitter as death
bring yr self home to yrself, enter the garden
the guy at the gate w/the flaming sword is yrself

Buddhists will recognize the allusion to Mañjuśhrī, one of the most significant bodhisattvas in Buddhist lore. This does not suggest the New Americans and the Neo-Barroccans are the only poets who have leaned on Buddhism, but the New Americans opened the door for it in North America and they and the Neo-Barroccans have a sense of the wild mind to which a successful Buddhist practice leads. An ancient forest (thick) not a (thin) garden where poems are arrayed in rows like potatoes, Duncan quipped, or McClure after him, comparing typical, left-margin justified verse to a lawnmower that trims the grass of the well-maintained suburban chemical lawn.

While not everyone has discovered Buddhism or started a meditation practice, the old gods are surely failing for Neo-Barroccans as they are for just about everyone else. Case in point Carmen Berenguer's poem "Terrible Memory of My Untangled Hairdo" (Berenguer et al. 2019),

With my hands I split my hair into four equal
parts I noticed the ends were burnt
with scissors I trimmed them remembering the neighborhood hairdresser
I divided my head into three parts the first one I untangled
with the comb making a steep rise on top

straightened some strands to cover the tangled mop
 while I was disentangling random images appeared from when
 they pulled at my hair
 at the downtown hair salons but the most important hairdo
 that made my eyelashes quiver was the one in the scene with
 Sophia and Marcello while she waited for him she tried to comfort
 the mother of the boy who did not want to become a priest because he
 no longer loved god he loved the goddess next door the Loren who greeted her
 fetishist lover I did so much untangling that when I looked
 in the mirror there was a three-layer cake illuminating the room
 with my borrowed macramé dress to
 dress a bride.

Buddhism, density, a desire to close the distance and not worry about syntax, as Olson argued: “that the conventions which logic has forced on syntax must be broken open . . .” and many other affinities await those looking to bridge poetry divides, or at least find affinities for a wild literature that would rather wrestle with a demon for duende than petition a benevolent muse and her tidy suburban lawn verse.

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Notes

¹ <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/learn/glossary-terms/new-american-poets>.

² <https://www.etymonline.com/word/seminal>.

³ “USAmerican” is a phrase used by Vancouver, BC, Canada poet George Bowering to differentiate poets from the United States, from those outside the U.S. who still live on the North American continent and could be considered “Americans” just not in the way the term is used in the U.S.

⁴ <https://allenginsberg.org/2016/02/mind-writing-slogans/>.

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