

The Question of Anthologies

JAMES LONGENBACH

Tradition and the Individual Poem: An Inquiry into Anthologies, by Anne Ferry, Stanford University Press.

“MY OWN AWARENESS of the critical, even subversive, power of literary instruction does not stem from philosophical allegiances,” Paul de Man once said, “but from a very specific teaching experience.” That teaching experience was *The Interpretation of Literature*, a Harvard undergraduate course taught by Reuben Brower with the assistance of three younger critics: Paul de Man, Richard Poirier, and Anne Ferry. When Ferry published her first book, *Milton’s Epic Voice*, in 1963, she would readily admit that several of its chapters began their lives as lectures in Brower’s course. But perhaps more like Brower than any of her early colleagues, Ferry has spent her career refusing to preach about her practice. Oppositional gestures are so alien to her work that its meticulous attention to language might seem unfashionable even at times when such attentions are the fashion. And if it’s tempting to speculate that such self-effacement might be more legitimately subversive—especially at times when literary critics are driven to exaggerate the importance of their nostalgia or their newfangledness—there is none of what Marianne Moore called a “feigned inconsequence/of manner” in Ferry’s work.

Following *The Title to the Poem*, which received the Christian Gauss Award from the Phi Beta Kappa Association in 1997, Ferry has now published her seventh book, *Tradition and the Individual Poem: An Inquiry into Anthologies*. Like its immediate predecessor, this book stakes out a wider territory than Ferry’s earlier productions, ranging back as far as Wyatt and reaching forward to Frost, Bishop, and Larkin. She asks how anthologies have been conceived and designed; how particular poems have come to be known as anthology

pieces; and (most interestingly) how poets themselves have made use of anthologies.

There's something attractively humbling about this final question, since for all their cultural power, anthologies are not usually the place where a poet seeks professional legitimacy. "That from the gates of death," wrote Ezra Pound in the middle of the *Pisan Cantos*, having had nothing but the contents of his mind to write about,

Whitman or Lovelace
found on the jo-house seat at that
in a cheap edition! [and thanks to Professor Speare]
hast'ou swum in a sea of air strip
Through an aeon of nothingness.

What better place to find *The Pocket Book of Verse*, edited by M. E. Speare, Ph.D., Harvard University, than in the latrine? The discovery changes the entire texture of the *Pisan Cantos*, which from this moment forward are sprinkled with quotations from Chaucer, Waller, Jonson, Blunt, and the King James version of Ecclesiastes, which inspired the "pull down thy vanity" incantation concluding canto 81. When Pound defends the act of having "gathered from the air a live tradition," he wants us to remember the jo-house seat.

"I do not think," said Wordsworth in the 1815 *Essay, Supplementary to the Preface*, "that there is an able writer in verse of the present day who would not be proud to acknowledge his obligations to the *Reliques*." This reference to Thomas Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* is, so far as Ferry has been able to deduce, the first public declaration of a poet's indebtedness to an anthology. More predictable is the attitude epitomized by the title of Robert Graves and Laura Riding's *Pamphlet against Anthologies*, but Wordsworth went so far as to write about Percy's *Reliques* as if it were a single work of imaginative literature in its own right, the crucial step between Thomson's *Seasons* and *Lyrical Ballads*. Similarly, Robert Frost would speak of his discovery of Francis Palgrave's *Golden Treasury*, perhaps the most widely disseminated poetry anthology of all time, as the crucial event of his career. And as Ferry suggests, we owe the very notion of a published

collection of lyric poems to Tottel's *Songes and Sonettes*, the unprecedented anthology in which poems by Wyatt and Surrey first appeared (much bowdlerized).

Why then do we also find Ezra Pound referring to *The Golden Treasury*—without which Professor Speare's *Pocket Book of Verse* would have been unthinkable—as “that stinking sugar teat Palgrave”? It can't simply have been a knee-jerk response to Victorian literary taste, since Pound was quite pleased to have his poems included in Arthur Thomas Quiller-Couch's *Oxford Book of Victorian Verse*—“no small honor,” said Pound in 1912, around the same time that he was beginning to formulate the Imagist manifestos.

Ferry is right to suggest that Frost used Palgrave throughout his life as “his chief instrument in measuring his distance from modernism,” but we need not think of Palgrave as the inevitable enemy of the kind of modernism Frost associated with Pound. “What still makes *The Golden Treasury* one of a kind is the brilliant originality of its arrangement,” says Ferry. Unlike its many competitors, *The Golden Treasury* presented its poems with no visible apparatus. The poems are simply divided into four untitled movements, and the poems are not arranged (says Palgrave in a very brief preface) in “rigidly chronological order” but “in gradations of feeling.” The anthology's table of contents lists simply these four movements, nothing more; Palgrave compared the anthology's structure to a Mozart symphony. “The self-styled ‘editor’ seems to remove himself,” says Ferry, “not reappearing until the notes, which the reader would come to after some three hundred pages of verse closed with a kind of colophon, ‘End of the Golden Treasury.’” *The Golden Treasury* presents a very definite vision of English literary history—one that, above all, privileges the brief lyric poem above the narrative or discursive—but the terms of its vision are everywhere implicit, deducible from the book's contents and arrangement.

T. S. Eliot once praised another Victorian landmark, *The Golden Bough*, as “a statement of fact which is not involved in the maintenance or fall of any theory of the author's,” but he immediately added that this “absence of speculation is a conscious and deliberate scrupu-

lousness, a positive point of view." The same remark might be made about Palgrave, whose anthology is by no means lacking a point of view: rapidity, brevity, and unity are Palgrave's highest aesthetic values. So while Pound may have found the anthology's idealization of a pastoral England reprehensible, its construction of that point of view is nonetheless similar to the method of juxtaposed lyric moments—no narrative tissue—which would become so crucial to Poundian modernism. The book feels, as Ferry suggests fleetingly, like the embodiment of Eliot's notion of literary history as "a living whole of all the poetry that has ever been written."

Glancing at the long trail of anthologies that followed Palgrave—Rhymers, Georgians, Imagists—Ferry remarks that the Georgians' desire to avoid high rhetoric and didactic themes harmonized "paradoxically" with "Palgrave's rules for the kind of poem admissible in *The Golden Treasury*." But this continuity seems paradoxical only if we think of Victorian literary culture as a monolith—all Browning Society and no Palgrave. "If Galileo had said in verse that the world moved," said Thomas Hardy, "the Inquisition might have let him alone." The novelist weathering the publication of *Jude the Obscure* turned to lyric poetry precisely because nobody expected it to carry much cultural weight. Far from protesting poetry's smallness, Hardy embraced it, and as much as he admired Wordsworth and Shelley, he felt that their grand ambitions were no longer appropriate. D. G. Rossetti once complained about Shelley hatching "yearly universes," and in the calculatedly antivisionary poem "The Woodspurge" he takes in the sublime grandeur of the natural world only to conclude one very particular thing: "The woodspurge has a cup of three."

The subsequent penchant for little poems about little things evinced by the Georgians and the Imagists is in one sense a turn against Victorian taste, but then so is *The Golden Treasury*. In its distaste for grandeur, in its preference for poems that (as Palgrave put it) "turn on some single thought, feeling, or situation," the anthology stands aligned with varieties of modernism that may otherwise seem mutually exclusive: the symbolist Yeats of *The Wind Among the Reeds*, the Imagist Pound of *Lustra*, and even the studiously modest poems of

the Georgians. Of course Pound could not remain content with little things for long—just as Rossetti's woodspurge sounds ominously Trinitarian. And though one might say that Yeats's early effort to write "a poetry of essences, separated one from another in little and intense poems" concealed a large ambition, the effort nonetheless points to the place where Pound and Palgrave made common cause. Part of the drama of the *Pisan Cantos* is Pound's rediscovery of little things, the lyric world collected by Professor Speare.

Ferry's devotion to minutiae has been more exquisitely consistent over the last forty years, and Eliot's remark about *The Golden Bough* might also be made about Ferry herself: her avoidance of speculation is also a conscious and deliberate scrupulousness, a positive point of view. Here is Ferry on Tottle's revisions of Wyatt's "They fle from me"—minutiae on which weighty implications depend:

The much reviled revision of Wyatt's line (in manuscript unpunctuated) "It was no dreme I lay brode waking" by the intrusion of the logical connective "for" (to add a syllable) is the clearest instance of this expressive pattern of revisions. The line loses its powerful immediacy: the sense of the lover reliving the beauty and wonder of that "ons in speciall," while at the same time feeling "nowe" a bewildering mixture of resentment, pain, anger, and bereavement. Instead, the revised line strengthens the sense that the lover is in control of his memory, using it to support his grievance. . . . The revised last line ["How like you this, what hath she now deserued?"] is a fully prepared culmination of this series of choices, but still powerful in the shocking nakedness of the lover's appeal to his audience to approve his vindictiveness, and by their approval to soothe his injured vanity at being now deprived of what he once rightly "enjoyed."

This kind of slow reading is what Ferry does best. The passage recalls *The "Inward" Language*, her brilliant account of the ways in which Renaissance poets created a modern sense of the "self" through subtle shifts in diction and rhetoric. Without venturing outside of the consideration of the texture of poetry, that book made a powerful historical

argument, one that hinged upon the changing implications of very small words.

But in *Tradition and the Individual Poem* Ferry approaches cultural questions that are not always answered so readily by a scrupulous formalism. She suggests without a shred of self-congratulation on the one hand or self-defense on the other that the “sociology of poetry” is not part of her project; she has much to say about Elizabeth Bishop, for instance, but nothing to say about Bishop’s well-known refusal to appear in anthologies of poems by women. Still, however stalwart Ferry’s own refusals, the “sociology of poetry” is inevitably a part of her project. As she admits, “it is easier to trace how any author’s poems got into anthologies—by what circumstances at work in the literary system—than it is to answer why those particular poems and not others.” It is even harder to do so without venturing beyond the analysis of a poem’s intrinsic qualities: questions about anthologies are questions about “the literary system”—readership, audience, public taste. As a result, Ferry’s argument occasionally slides onto the sociological battlefield without sporting much armor: while Larkin’s “Church Going” represents “a generation that sees itself living in a period of cultural loss,” Arnold “did not find the voice of his age [in ‘Dover Beach’] by approximating the idiom and tone of Victorian speech.” The assumption about Larkin’s generation seems taken for granted, making his poem emerge from the argument as the inevitable representation of public feeling; the assumption about the “voice” of Arnold’s “age” feels similarly distant from much consideration of what Ferry calls the “literary system.”

The problem here has more to do with critical vocabulary than with critical method as such, for, like Palgrave, Ferry prefers to leave the larger terms of her analysis implicit. Ultimately, her patient analysis of Tottle’s revisions of Wyatt’s “They fle from me” is enlisted in service of the very question she attempts to address more generally apropos of Arnold and his age. Tottle, she explains, tried consistently to disguise poems that were “too readily mistakable for popular verse.” The variously shaped sonnet was acceptable, but rondeaus and ballads were not; short refrains and uneven lines were streamlined into pen-

tameters. So while “They fle from me” is probably the poem by Wyatt that readers are most likely to know today, “it got to be an anthology-piece only recently, when *immediate, dramatic, spoken, ambiguous*—a far cry from *polished, corrected, improved*—became preferred terms to describe favorite poems in short forms.” As this sentence demonstrates, Ferry’s acute awareness of the social valences of particular formal properties carries her larger argument—an argument that is sociological only inasmuch as it is literary, literary only inasmuch as no general principle is automatically deducible from the specific instance.

I have called Ferry’s reticence Palgravian, but another lineage is suggested by the poet-critic whose best-known essay resonates in the title of Ferry’s book. As she explains in the book’s coda, “T. S. Eliot’s *Imaginary Anthology*,” Eliot scorned anthologies. But he also coveted their power. In his influential review of Herbert Grierson’s anthology of metaphysical poetry, published in 1921 along with other essays and poems that reinforce its argument, Eliot created what the strategically self-effacing Palgrave could only aspire to—an anthology without an anthologist, an anthology that is not one.

[Eliot] chose to argue for his kind of poetry by promoting a collection of much earlier verse gathered by a scholar who wanted to reshape poetic tradition disinterestedly. Grierson did that, but in a way Eliot could describe in terms that located his own poems along a traditional line. This appropriation of Grierson’s collection made it do the work for Eliot that other poets, Yeats and Larkin above all, have done by designing an anthology that writes literary history so that it accommodates their sense of their own poems in it.

Eliot’s reticence is notorious, and we’ve come to read it, perhaps too quickly, as merely subversive. When Eliot praised *The Golden Bough* for its lack of theoretical speculation—as if it too were an imaginary anthology—he was standing on philosophical ground formulated many years earlier: “in a sense,” wrote Eliot in 1914, “no philosophic theory makes any difference to practice. It has no working by which we

can test it. It is an attempt to organize the confused and contradictory world of common sense, and an attempt which invariably meets with partial failure—and partial success.” As he wrote these sentences, Eliot hung between philosophy and poetry, the pragmatism he’d absorbed at Harvard pushing him toward the latter. “I distrust and detest Aesthetics,” he wrote to Pound after reading the Vorticist manifestos, “when it cuts loose from the Object.”

Visible here are the seeds of certain New Critical prejudices; but to witness the terms of their gestation is to make prejudices seem more like considered choices between inevitably partial alternatives. The kind of New Criticism Anne Ferry absorbed from Reuben Brower was far less programmatic than the movement too often epitomized by Brooks and Warren’s *Understanding Poetry*—just as the modernist aversion to explanation and narrative feels less tied to the pretense of subversiveness in Eliot than in Pound. By refusing that pretense, *Tradition and the Individual Poem* may allow itself to seem small, but Ferry knows the stakes are large. “What is there,” asked Marianne Moore in “Critics and Connoisseurs,” “in proving that one has had the experience/of carrying a stick?”

Copyright of *Raritan: A Quarterly Review* is the property of *Raritan: A Quarterly Review* and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.

Longenbach, James. "The Question of Anthologies." *Raritan* 21, no. 4 (Spring 2002): 122-129.