

Let Us Give Thanks to the New American Poetry

Something happened to me at the waterpark.

--Allen Tate

Prelude

Not that anyone would or should
care for my fickle poetic leanings,
but I've elected now to share, half
naked and pickled as I'm presently
feeling (I'll explain), some thoughts
about some things, that these thoughts
might flutter about, with errant and
rowdy wings, while the mind is juiced.
So to begin and without further fanfare,
I'll just say so: that Mayakovsky and
Vallejo, fair poets of the hammer and
the sickle, are pillars in my heart,
without compare. And yet on other days,
alas, and at prevalent spells for near a
week, or two, I will seek a book by the
crook Villon, or the classical Greek
Cavafy; Yea, my poetical desiring is
queer and fleeting. Randomly, I think
of a variety: the grumpy sorceress
Moore, or the gorgeously enflamed
Césaire, or the sassy commie Dalton,
or the wacky virtuoso di Giorgio, say,
from Uruguay, where I spent my youth

and later went back, as fate would play,
to work as a gym instructor at the
YMCA. Which makes me think, I don't
know why; I've wondered it before, and
the question of a sudden comes back:
Shouldn't Language poets stop doing
State-sponsored tours in Stalinist China,
where numerous poets are imprisoned?
And now a question concerning Japan, if
I may: Is it uncouth (which rhymes above
with youth) for an ex-Trot WASP, like
me, to propose that an itinerant, alcoholic,
apolitical, Meiji-Taishō Zen haikuist is
more advanced and weighty than anything
out there, today, by Asian, Brown, Black,
or White avantists, of Poetry Nation U.S.A.?

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No doubt it is, but hold on, Mongrel
Coalition, why is my heart skipping
beats, is this ventricular fibrillation?
Alright, now it's stopped. Hot men
and women of all colors go back to
being hot bodies at the waterpark
with their breasts and bikini bottoms.
Is that bad to say, Stasi Po-police, of
today? Au contraire, I declare. I mean,
look at that ass--is Desire not a radical
good? Around her all that is solid melts
into air. But to return to my subject,

from this metal and rubber reclining chair:
I've been reading Taneda Santōka's bone-
marrow-haiku by this pool, in Wisconsin
Dells. I'm to give an out-loud reading
tomorrow, at a water park resort, believe
it or not (another one down the road—there
are quite a few of them here, right off I-90).
It's sponsored by the Wisconsin Dells
Optimists Poetry Group, you will scarcely
believe it. I'm really quite enjoying my
time, sipping an Old Fashioned, the third
or fourth, I admit, though some kids with
blue and pink life-preserver bubbles on
their stick-like limbs are screaming very
loud before their childhood dies and rots
away, like Emma Bovary's, and the world,
as well; it's like cicadas: They can't do
anything about it, nor can you. Why does
the jet of liquid jet into the blue?

2.

Santōka was writing in the late
Twenties and, yes, he was in his
late twenties, then, too; the haiku
Field was riven by infidel revolt:
It was Haiku-Dada-Time, one could
say. All the vanguard Japanese poets
were young and it was like there was a
mad dash to immolate their youths on
command from some vengeful God in

the *Man'yōshū*, and then youth was gone
in a flash. That's how life is, kids, deep
down beneath sad biology. So would
you please just keep it down, I'm
trying to write something about

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ideology. OK, forget it. At any rate,
there were, like, huge, blinding flashes
in the sky that had never been
experienced before by human
beings. And then the New American
Poetry appeared all of a sudden,
or so it seemed, to the people in
their twenties standing there,
amazed, within it. They too were
very young and full of life, as life
was full of them. Not that things didn't
happen in the Thirties and Forties:
There was Gertrude Stein writing
speeches for Pétain; the Fugitives
took their stand for slavery; Pound
was screaming in Italy; dark antennae

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began to get densely planted
on round summits; tons of kids
got washed out of turrets with
hoses at waterparks in Russia
and Europe, and so forth and so

on. But the New Americans were the loaded pistol and a half in follow-up, for sure: They were *crazy* against poetry getting mixed up with Academic Institutions and State and corporate money and slavish position-jockeying and stuff, as it was, back then, in proto, with the New Critics. They

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were stick-in-the-muds, the New Americans, I guess you could put it, quasi-Ultra types, party poopers, some might opine, not hip at all on cash bars at MLA-time and like-Academic decorum. Say what you want about their anarchist-line and righteous zealotry, but had it not been for them, Post-Avant American poetry would be in ten pickles of trouble presently, let me tell you, far from the wild and sovereign and honorable spirit that guides the Field today, thank God, against the careerist and protocolled rituals we've all so wisely

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eschewed. Because, thankfully,
the New Americans showed us
how it's done—how to fashion
scruffy Autonomous Poetic
Zones against the grain of
career-clubby dispensations; how
to resist capitulation; how to
resist getting turned into tools of
the Culture Industry, as Emily
Dickinson more or less said
in a poem about slave auctions;
how to refuse being a pawn in the
Rules of the Game; how to forbear
being a species of courtier. Phew!
Yes, granted, so the French
Surrealists and the Latin
Americans and the Negritude

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poets helped us to refine our praxis
(so what, we're internationalists,
we don't care who came up with
the key ideas, we don't have to
pretend *we* own it all). And not that
it's all sunny skies at the waterpark,
to coin a phrase, because sure,
there are two or three sell-outs, still,
hanging around, pretending they're
insurrectionists; you'll always have

a few wormy apples in the bushel; that kind of outlier aberration is assumed, it's one of those Rules of the Game.

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So all in all, were it not for the New American Poetry, we Post-Avant American poets would, if you think about it, possibly be the laughing stock of Literary History two hundred years from now(!), like those Georgians or Firesides or New Critics are today, with their enormous beards and sideburns so big you could wander around in there for a week, like Hansel and Gretel at the AWP, and get eaten by the Witch of Fuck. I mean, those ancient guys who thought they were so

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avant-garde and all that, when really they were totally funny bunkum? Can you imagine *our* ending up that way, as a group or period, our architecture all antique looking, with slender or thick postmodern columns, and wall surfaces with pilasters and decorative features, including

sculpted déjà vu figurines in
frozen, Mannerist pirouettes at
the top of the edifice? Well,
thankfully, we've learned key
lessons from the New American
poetry! These kids won't shut up,
dammit, but kids will be kids, it's
not like their screaming means
they'll be timid bourgeois sell-outs
when they get older, they're just
kids, but I wish the pink and blue
bubble-devices around their arms
would pop all at once, that would be
fun, and give some drama to this ersatz

10.

Wave Pool. No, just kidding. I
don't really want any kids to
drown. They are so happy, rising
and falling, there, innocent as the
soon-dead day, which now spreads
overhead, magnificent, its orange
and mauve gown. So, anyway: Let us
give thanks to the New American poetry.

--Kent Johnson

