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Tracking Mind through the Wilds of 20th Century Poetry

The Wilds of Poetry: Adventures in Mind and Landscape by DAVID HINTON
Shambhala, 2017 \$22.95USD

Reviewed by JOEL WEISHAUS

Traced through one of its roots in Greek, an anthology is an *anthologia*: a bouquet of flowers. An anthologist, then, is a reaper of colors that enter the eyes, and perhaps the nose. What is most interesting about an anthology is, of course, who is in it, and who's been left out. In this sense, an anthology reveals more about the anthologist's vision than the writers anthologized.

One of the most successful anthologists of modern poetry is Donald M. Allen. His *The New American Poetry: 1945-1960*, first published 57 years ago by Grove Press in New York, has been kept in print by The University of California Press. After 16 years as an editor for Grove Press, Allen migrated to California. Settling in Bolinas, a few miles north of San Francisco, he founded Grey Fox Press and the Four Seasons Foundation, which, during the early 1970s, helped attract poets from around the country to move to, or visit, that small, discrete town.

The reason *The New American Poetry* is still held in almost mythic esteem is that the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s was a time when the New York Beat poets and San Francisco Renaissance poets, "a strong third generation," Allen calls them, after Ezra Pound, E.E. Cummings, Marianne Moore, Wallace Stevens, et al., joined in a movement that has since assumed an aura in the annals of Literary History.

The Wilds of Poetry may be less ambitious than Allen's anthology, but only from a different, although complimentary, perspective. Noted for his translations of ancient Chinese Poetry, it seems to me that David Hinton began his move toward the present anthology in the introduction to his 2005 book, *Mountain Home: The Wilderness Poetry of Ancient China*, in which he wrote:

the Chinese wilderness is nothing less than a dynamic cosmology in which humans participate in the most fundamental way.

The poetry of this wilderness cosmology feels utterly contemporary, and in an age of global ecological disruption and mass extinction, this engagement with wilderness makes it more urgently and universally important by the day. (xiii)

Also sensing the cant toward the superficial in our time, Hinton begins a trek toward a more interior poetry with Henry David Thoreau's "grueling two-week journey to the summit of Mt. Katahdin (Katahdin) in Maine" (1), made in midst of Thoreau's famous two-year residency by a placid Walden Pond.

Although, because of inclement weather, Thoreau couldn't reach the mountain's summit, it was on his descent that "Thoreau's experience of existential contact occurred" (1). Faced with a raw, unforgiving nature, Thoreau came up against the fundamental questions that "distill the central issue in nineteenth- and twentieth-century intellectual history: What is the self? What is the Cosmos?" (3). On this slippery slope, Hinton slides back 2,500 years, to when China "underwent a cultural

transformation very similar to that of the modern West,” which “entailed a rediscovery of consciousness in its original nature as woven into the tissue of existence” (6).

Hinton makes an important point. Neuroscientists are presently engaged in an effort to pin down, as if a butterfly, just what consciousness is, mainly by examining images of the brain made by fMRI machines under various prone circumstances, teasing out functions that, in reality, do not work in isolation. The human brain may be one of the most complex organisms in the universe. So, there is an attraction toward complexities that arise from unknown causes, driving scientists to parse chunks of the universe into digestible bytes of information, and mystics to dive head first into unfathomable mysteries.

What Hinton points out, and this is one of the main theses of his book, is that what’s missing from the curriculum of a modern poet’s education, and American educational institutions in general, is

a way of doing philosophy—not mere juggling of abstractions, but as lived and felt experience [...] a lived form of deep ecology, the ‘rewilding’ of consciousness [...] outside of received Western assumptions. (12)

Each chapter of *The Wilds of Poetry* is titled with a form of “Wilds,” beginning with Walt Whitman: “Procreant Wilds,” in which, “A few years after Thoreau posed his existential questions, Whitman began making poetry from the immediacy of *contact*, and in doing so he pushed the revelations of post-Christian science, Deism, and Romantic pantheism to new depths” (15). Hinton uses various forms of *contact*, along with Taoism, Ch’an Buddhism, and

“techniques of discontinuous fragmentation or collage that open the logical narrative of thought to non-logical insight and silence” (311), as some of the glues that hold the poets in this book together. In Whitman’s case, his masterpiece, “Song of Myself,” is his

attempt to say the unsayable, the reality of consciousness and Cosmos in all the immediacy of *contact*, where *who we are* is essentially the procreant Cosmos of *where we are*. (17)

In next chapter, titled “China Wilds,” Ezra Pound’s reworking of ancient Chinese poems is coupled with Ernest Fenollosa’s “The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry,” in which Fenollosa

brings language and thought close to things themselves, thereby returning us to a more primal and profound form of experience, to that *contact* Thoreau describes, where we might discover *who* and *where* we are. (29)

Born in Massachusetts, in 1853, Fenollosa was an excellent art historian, although he had no background in poetics, nor was he a linguist or Sinologist. I doubt that anyone would propose that modern Chinese is pictographic, as Fenollosa argued for its ancient characters, but Pound was excited about “The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry,” whose manuscript was given to him by Fenollosa’s widow and edited by Pound, because Fenollosa’s theory elaborated Pound’s imagist interests.

After Pound comes the “Local Wilds” of William Carlos Williams, the

physician/poet from New Jersey famous for, "Say it. No ideas but in things," and whom Hinton proposes "brought mind as close as possible to Ch'an's 'immediate contact with the world'" (40). Hinton then moves to the opposite coast, to Robinson Jeffers, who

inhabits time at vast scales of elemental transformation, scales at which linear time is replaced by a unity of time and space moving like Lao Tzu's outgoing generative moment. (59)

Indeed, Jeffers was a man of the elements, his cup filled to the brim with the Pacific Ocean's raucous saline waters, and whose philosophy of inhumanism struggles

against the entire Western tradition, in which the human is assumed to be qualitatively separate from and superior to everything else in the material universe. (60)

I see this as one of the essential steps toward what we now call the "posthuman."

Kenneth Rexroth, father of the San Francisco Renaissance Poets, is "Mountain Wilds." Then, Hinton returns to the East Coast, where Charles Olson suggests

that we cultivate a life with the mind open simultaneously to all of the complexities of experience, which means a wild mind in *contact*, open to all its potential and beauty and depth. (92)

There are nine other poets in this anthology, including John Cage, known for scoring his music by leaving it to the chances and changes of the *I Ching*, more than for his free-wheeling, or constricted,

poems, and Jerome Rothenberg's working of the oral poems of primal peoples. Rothenberg's "translations" have always sounded to me drained of their original magic, which lives in their rituals, in their cultures, and in the shaman's "secret language" that cannot be performed on a page, or even in a recording.

In *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, Mircea Eliade writes, "Very often this secret language is actually the 'animal language or originates in animal cries" (86). Thus, in "Mammal Wilds" Hinton gives samples from Michael McClure's "Ghost Tantras," such as: "HRAHH ! grahr ! WRAH ! GROOOOOOOOOO !" (1).

While such an anthology must include Gary Snyder, the only actual scholar/practitioner of Zen Buddhism Hinton has chosen, Larry Eigner, is still an inspired choice. Although Eigner, who because of bungled delivery at birth, spent his life in a wheelchair, and so couldn't walk through wilderness, he made poems

reduced to (their) least possible materials, stripped down to a clarity only possible by abandoning those structures of meaning and explanation, the resources of a who shaping a *where*. (243)

Also included is the lesser-known Gustaf Sobin, an American who spent most of his life in Italy. Like Rothenberg, Sobin's work is

a return to the primitive. Often emphasizing the oral, he reaches for a language that operates as it did in the Paleolithic, before it became the medium of a spirit-center, a mimetic inside looking out on the empirical outside. (286)

Rounding out the contents of *The Wilds of Poetry* are the canonical W.S. Merwin, A.R. Ammons, and Ronald Johnson, who uses

collage techniques to construct poems free of the traditional organizing self, poems that open consciousness in a radical way to the possibility of *contact*. (263)

Hinton is generous with his samples of each poet's work, and for this reason alone the book is worthwhile owning. In addition, for those readers interested in the intersections of Taoism, Zen Buddhism, Environmentalist, and Poetry, it may exude a certain moral fragrance.

Most important, however, is that at a time when the standards of poetry have fallen to where there is usually a creative goal no more enduring than prizes, grants, and tenure, Hinton delivers a message of depth and delight that young poets, their audience, and their teachers, would do well to take into account.

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