

AN ITALIAN CANON FOR CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN POETRY?

by Antonella Francini



American poetry has recently received considerable attention by Italian publishers. Since 2002, eight anthologies of American verse have been published, and a ninth has been planned for publication by Guanda, the press that in 1949 issued one of the first two Italian collections of American poetry. Four of these new volumes include poetry by contemporary authors; two others cover the entire spectrum of American verse from colonial times to the present, with a rather large selection of today's poets; and two present 20th-century American poems inspired by Italy.¹ No doubt this host of anthologies is evidence of a desire to update the representation of American poetry in Italy, opening it up to new currents and new names. To find a similar flourishing of anthologies we must go backward in time by some fifty years when, between 1949 and the early 1960s, a distinguished generation of Americanists – Gabriele Baldini, Carlo Izzo, Alfredo Rizzardi, and, outside academia, Fernanda Pivano and Roberto Sanesi – delved into what was then contemporary and introduced Italy to authors they thought worth translating and preserving, paving the way for the publication and critical studies of individual poets such as Robert Lowell, Theodore Roethke, John Berryman, and Denise Levertov. Fernanda Pivano's legendary anthology of 1964, *Poesia degli ultimi americani*, which established a long-lasting reputation for the Beats in Italy, closed this Italian attempt at a canonical configuration for American poetry in the second half of the 20th century. Verse collections published thereafter were mainly parochial, devoted to specific groups of authors – feminist poets, the Black Mountain poets, Vietnam poetry, etc. – or they focused on a specific time period.² The current appearance on the scene of American poetry anthologies and collections is then a

timely phenomenon which, while threatening to dethrone the Beats from their privileged position, registers a shift in generations and leadership in the world of publishing, translation and criticism.

Anthologies, writes T.S. Eliot in *What is Minor Poetry?*, play a major role for both readers and poets. One use of the anthology, he points out, «lies in the interest of comparison, of being able to get, in a short space, a conspectus of the progress of poetry [because] there is much to learn by passing from one poet to another». And «the more comprehensive anthologies of new verse», says Eliot, «have the value of giving the poetry reader a notion of what is going on, a chance of studying the changes in subject-matter and style».³ Eliot's words draw attention to the dynamic nature of anthologizing and the role these tools of poetical historiography play, through an endless game of inclusions and exclusions that serves to create patterns for the interpretation of a given cultural context and its mutations across time. The absence of American poetry anthologies in Italy for such a long time has deprived Italian readers of concise, up-to-date overviews of 'what was going on' in the United States, while the most marketable poetical products from across the Ocean – Beat poetry and women's poetry, for example – were invading Italian bookstores, conveying to the larger audience a partial view of the remarkably rich and varied American verse production of the last decades of the past century.

It is well-known that the debate on the American canon that took place in the United States in the 1980s and 1990s resulted in a widening of literary boundaries and in a radical revision of the history of American literature to include minority authors as unquestionable agents in the formation of a national literary identity.⁴ In the field of poetry, the

legacy of the famous divide between «the raw» and «the cooked» launched by Robert Lowell in 1960, who characterized the state of American poetics in those years as split between street poetry on the one hand and academic poetry on the other,⁵ also forced the canon to open up to new kinds of work. The many poetry anthologies published in recent years in America bear clear signs of this canon reformation which has, in a way, given editors a free hand in their criteria for selection and in the recovery of neglected authors. Inclusiveness and eclecticism appear to have been guiding principles for American anthologists, who, ultimately, have each proposed his or her own canon, inevitably subject to personal tastes and biases.⁶ If this generous and varied offer now available in the United States, especially in terms of contemporary poetry, has been regarded as problematic by some American critics,⁷ foreign editors have instead had the advantage of benefiting from the widest range of selections ever displayed. Out of this plethora of poetry, just what has reached Italy, and how have Italian anthologists behaved vis-à-vis the many possible canonical and non-canonical poetical 'sets' at their disposal for presenting what was going on from coast to coast? And which authors have publishers printed? What is their criteria for selection?

A quick survey, limited to the last six or seven years, shows that Charles Bukowski distances by far all other American poets in terms of quantity, as the twenty volumes of his work in Italian translation tower over all others. Ferlinghetti is present with more than ten books issued by different presses, as is Allen Ginsberg. Jack Kerouac's poetry is represented by three collections; Gregory Corso's personally edited anthology *Mindfield* is fully available in a paperback edition, as is another book of his work. Sylvia Plath's collected poems appeared in 2002 in the prestigious «Meridiani Mondadori» series, and several paperbacks of her work are also in print, as is a good selection of Anne Sexton's poetry, collected in two anthologies. These are the best-selling American poets, or at least the most popular, the ones who, for a variety of reasons that range from the biographical to the accessible and the fashionable, appeal to the larger audience. Then there are the classic contemporaries who have a niche of their own: Robert Lowell, present with three volumes of poems, and Elizabeth Bishop with one – both issued by major publishers. And, finally, there is a rather long and mixed list of contemporary poets of various generations and varying reputations, recently translated or re-translated in Italian – authors who have a limited circulation, often published by small or medium-size presses, and appealing mainly to experts or trained readers. We find here Pulitzer Prize winners, Poet Laureates, canonical names and representatives of gender and ethnical poetry: Charles Simic has three volumes of poetry in Italian and one of prose; Mark Strand, five or six books; Charles Wright is present with two anthologies of his work and the integral translation of one of his collections; Yusef Komunyakaa's poetry is available in two

books as are John Berryman's and Adrienne Rich's; James Laughlin, Denise Levertov, Robert Creeley, Gary Snyder, Robert Duncan, Sharon Olds, Susan Stewart, Louise Glück, Frank O'Hara, Billy Collins, Allen Mandelbaum, Alicia Ostriker, and Lucille Clifton are present on the Italian bookshelf with one book each; a large anthology of John Ashbery's poetry and one of Jorie Graham's selected poems have just been published; and a volume of Robert Pinsky's work will be in print in 2009.⁸ Their permanence in the bookstores, however, largely depends on the visibility of their publishers. A major publisher generally represents a guarantee that their works are likely to remain available for a long time, while with a small press everything depends on the distribution channel and on external factors – the personal connections of poets and translators with reviewers, journals and magazines; links with the academic world; the status of the critical work revolving around a specific author; or the presence of the translated poet at readings and literary events in Italy, which often guarantees a minimum of sales and a certain resonance.⁹

This quickly drafted inventory (I apologize for any involuntary omissions) confirms that, beyond popular taste and market laws, the effects of the open canon begin to be registered here, too, albeit in a random way and with little risk for houses that publish authors who certainly are, or have been, to various degrees, among the protagonists of the contemporary American poetic scene. But getting published in Italy often depends on mere chance, or, rather, on the interest of a translator for this or that poet – a translator who usually looks for a publisher equally interested, and promotes the book by setting up a small publicity campaign before and after its publication. If these fortuitous pacts-of-trust have the merit of having allowed some great American voices to be heard in Italian, they also have the fault of having left unheard equally major poets who, either because their work is too complex for a wide audience or because they have not had the good luck to meet with a translator or a publisher, or simply because they have not been ambitious enough to pursue an Italian translation of their poetry, have not yet received proper attention. This may in part explain why works by James Wright, Robert Hayden, Gwendolyn Brooks, James Merrill, W.S. Merwin, Richard Wilbur or Anthony Hecht, among others, are hardly available in Italian, and why the Black Mountain and the Language poets, quite popular in France for example, are almost entirely neglected here. The admirable entrepreneurship of either translator or poet may, however, sometimes lead to the 'magnifying lens' effect, that is to say an exaggeration of the value of an author who, within the wider American poetical context is, when all is said and done, marginal.

One looks, then, to anthologies to fill the gaps and reconstruct a cultural texture. Of the eight such books mentioned above, the first, *La poesia in America. Il fiume-Oceano* (2002), covers all American poetry. The editor, Tommaso Pisanti, states his aim in the preface: to compile

a distilled *summa* of verse in the United States through significant texts. The post-modern and contemporary section includes seventy authors, from the confessional poets to exponents of today's multiculturalism, each represented with from one to a maximum of three texts, which turn out to be Pisanti's favourite poems in his search for inclusiveness and diversity.

Representativeness was my own criterion when, in 2004, I edited an anthology of American poetry, prefaced by Massimo Bacigalupo. This was the 15th volume of a series of collections of foreign verse, a project directed by Francesco Stella which derived from *Semicerchio*'s long-standing editorial tradition of printing non-Italian poetry and comparative studies. This series was published by the Italian newspaper «La Repubblica» for nationwide distribution in newsstands. For the contemporary section we selected thirty-three authors to represent the main lines of American poetry in the second half of the 20th century, beginning with Lowell and Bishop. We favored the long poem and poetical sequences, privileging texts that help to highlight major themes and motifs in a poet's oeuvre, while at the same time they harked back to the American poetical tradition as represented in the previous sections of the anthology. Within the limits of space and budget, my aim was to construct correspondences and thematic plots in order to highlight the continuity of specific elements of American poetry generation after generation.

Both anthologies, though very different, move within the framework of reference established in America, giving space to authors by now considered 'major' or significant in their country, as does *West of your cities*, the volume edited by Mark Strand and his Italian translator Damiano Abeni in 2003. This book presents twelve contemporary poets, born between 1934 and 1950, a homogeneous group of outstanding figures at the apex of their careers. It includes seven Pulitzer Prize winners and four Poet Laureates, all published by major presses and affiliated with important universities; some of them are linked to Europe and Italy for personal or professional reasons, some have translated Italian poetry, some have been translated into Italian and awarded prizes in Italy, and they are all white. Revisionism of a dated canon for American poetry abroad is Strand's declared intention in his introductory note. «For most foreign readers», he writes, «American poetry seems to have ended with the Beats (Ginsberg and Corso), the Black Mountain Poets (Olson and Creeley), and »the New York School« (Ashbery, O'Hara and Koch). This work is an attempt to bring up to date the alert reader, to show that American poetry is alive and kicking".¹⁰ In collecting significant texts by authors already canonical in the United States, fixed stars in any contemporary discourse on poetry across that country, this *new* anthology of American poetry, as the subtitle states, stands out as a needed ratification of a *fait accompli*.

Another set of twelve authors, *Nuovi poeti americani*, edited by the Italian poet Elisa Biagini, was published by

Einaudi in 2006. In this case the adjective *new* must be understood subjectively, as the editor explains in the preface. This is «an attempt to present the rich and diverse poetic reality of America», she writes, «it is inevitably a partial and partisan representation assembled by a poet who chooses other poets»; *new*, she continues «means unknown, or almost so, to the Italian public», but it does not mean «young», nor does it mean «that all of them have attempted a radical canon revision». ¹¹ The focus must then be shifted onto the editor's own line of work: by placing canonized authors (Pinsky, Kinnell and Glück are included) next to representatives of American multiculturalism (Olga Broumas, Cornelius Eady, Kimiko Hahn, among others), and poets in their seventies and eighties (Lucille Clifton and Kinnell) next to poets born in the 1960s, at the beginning of their career and without a consolidated reputation in their own country, Biagini follows her own tastes and preferences, which include a strong accent on feminist poetry.

In 2005 and 2006 the first two heavyweight volumes in a series of six anthologies, *Nuova poesia americana*, edited by poets Luigi Ballerini and Paul Vangelisti, were issued by another major publisher, Mondadori. As we read in the preface, this eccentric project intends to provide a map of poetry written after the Sixties across the country, proceeding by geographical area, from California to the East Coast. The first volume runs for almost 400 pages and offers an unusual journey in the poetical underground of Los Angeles, where the editors live, through the work of 18 poets of different ages (the oldest was born in 1916, the youngest in 1972). Locally based, these authors are mostly published by small presses like Black Sparrow, or Sun & Moon and Green Integer of Douglass Messerli, himself a poet included in this anthology and the publisher of nine of the anthologized poets; or the Seeing Eye Book chapbook series edited by Guy Bennett, another poet included in the Mondadori volume. The group comprises followers or minor figures of the Beat generation, anti-establishment authors, active translators and experimenters such as Jerome Rothenberg, the promoter and theoretician of «ethnopoetics». Thus transported into one of the numerous undergrounds of American poetry, whose foreground remains still largely unexplored, the Italian reader may feel sceptical about this initiative, and yet encounter pleasant surprises along the way: for example, a series of «American Sonnets» by Wanda Coleman, one after Ugo Foscolo; or improvisations on Amelia Rosselli, Zanzotto, Villa, Ballerini, Pasolini, Giuliani, and Spatola by the poet-editor Douglass Messerli. The second volume, *San Francisco*, offers a broader and quite fine range of poets in its almost 500 pages, selected by the editors with the intent of presenting a 'live' document of the city's poetical scenery from the Sixties to today, through texts written by authors of different generations, from the Objectivist George Oppen (born in 1908) to Jeff Clark (born 1971). Leaving out Ferlinghetti, the implicit *genius loci* of the Bay Area,

the book embarks on a journey into territories which are still unexplored in Italy, presenting several first translations of significant authors – from the protagonists of the so-called San Francisco Renaissance (Duncan, Spicer, and Blaser) to the California poets close to the Beats (Kaufman, Lamantia), to representatives of Language Poetry (Hejinian, Silliman, and Palmer), to female western voices (Scalapino and Moriarty), and the work of the Poet Laureate Robert Hass.

Of the two thematic anthologies, *La luce migliore*, published in 2006 by Alessandro Carrera and Thomas Simpson, has an old-time but still intriguing approach to American poetry – verses inspired by Italy. From the age of Modernism to today, 48 poets, all enchanted by the Italian light, take us up and down the peninsula, zooming in on places, landscapes, works of art, and Italian writers, – a useful tour for a study of American literary responses to this country throughout the past century to compare with previous ones. Along the same line, *Gondola Signore Gondola*, edited by Rosella Mamoli Zorzi in cooperation with Gregory Dowling in 2007, focuses solely on Venice, and offers 20th-century American poetry on the *Serenissima* organized in thematic sections and furnished with informative introductions to each poet. If Henry James in 1882 declared that «[t]here is notoriously nothing more to be said on the subject», and «[t]here is as little mystery about the Grand Canal as about our local thoroughfare, and the name of St. Mark is as familiar as the postman's ring»,¹² this volume once more proves the novelist's statement wrong, as it bears witness to the never-ending reincarnations of the ancient myth of Venice.

In the end, drawing their material as they do from the many canons that have emerged in the past decades, these anthologies may not be help much in making head or tail of contemporary American poetry; an Italian reader who knows nothing of the subject may feel growing bewilderment when faced with this generous but highly diversified offering. And yet, anthologizing today involves selecting from an extraordinary abundance of material, including books as well as paper and digital periodicals, specialized websites and blogs. Centres and peripheries have multiplied ad infinitum, and overlapped. The risk is, in T.S. Eliot's words in *What is a Classic?*, «to confound the contingent with the essential, the ephemeral with the permanent». Eliot is discussing here the need to «preserve the classical standard» (to him, Virgil for European literature) and to «measure every individual work of literature by it». Without such a criterion, writes Eliot, «we tend to become provincial», which to him means also «a distortion of values, the exclusion of some, the exaggeration of others». ¹³ By this token, the current publication in Italy of new American poetries should be measured by the classic standards that emerged out of the 19th-century and the modernist era, by the internal rationale of American culture as a whole. And yet, we are aware that the term 'classic' is an open and flexible word subject to constant revision, especially

when applied to a young literature such as that of the United States, marked as it is by a genetic multiculturalism whose recent explosion has revealed the artificiality of any alleged single canon.

Anthologists of contemporary poetry are therefore like gamblers: they bet on new voices. Sometimes they win, sometimes they don't. Three distinguished poet-anthologists and influential New England figures of the 19th century – William Cullen Bryant, Ralph W. Emerson and John G. Whittier – failed grandly in their attempt to fix a canon for American poetry, once and for all they believed, in the anthologies each one of them edited in the 1870s.¹⁴ In their view *the best* American poets were, besides themselves, Longfellow, Holmes, and James Russell Lowell. Poe was ranked as a minor author, and Whitman and Melville were totally excluded from their selections. But with the gradual re-appraisal of Poe and Whitman at home and abroad, and the appearance of Dickinson's poetry at the close of their century, the canon they meant to hand down to posterity collapsed. In 1950, F. O. Matthiessen's edition of the *Oxford Book of American Verse*, literally «demolished the nineteenth century» as Allan Golding writes, leaving very little of what was canonical fifty years before.¹⁵ In retrospect, looking at the course of literary historiography one recognizes, in this as in other cases, the vantage point anthologies offer in the reconstruction of the critical debates that determine the formation of canons, counter-canons and the cultural texture out of which they are born.

In this sense it is instructive to look at the history of American poetry in Italy through the first anthologies, published around 1950. Those editors worked in the wake of the first great season of American studies in Italy, the so-called «decennio delle traduzioni»¹⁶ as Cesare Pavese defined the years between 1929 and 1940 when, as is well-known, he and Elio Vittorini introduced American literature into Italy as an innovative aesthetic force, stressing its extraordinary capacity to transfigure reality, its metaphysical strain. They embraced it as a sort of ideology, a defence against Fascist culture and a way, as Pavese wrote retrospectively, to expose Italy «to the springtime winds blowing in Europe and the world». ¹⁷ «Each of your worthy writers», he wrote in his idiosyncratic English to his Chicago friend and book supplier, Antonio Chiuminatto, «finds out a new field of existence, a new world, and writes about it with such a downrightness and immediateness of spirit it's useless for us to match». ¹⁸ The strong impact of these writers' translations and criticism of American literature is well-known, and it lasted throughout the entire century.

The new poetry from America discovered in the «decennio delle traduzioni» was primarily published in the literary magazines of the Thirties – «Circoli», «Pegaso», «L'Italia letteraria», «Meridiano di Roma», «Il Frontespizio», «Letteratura». The Ligurian journal «Circoli», directed by Adriano Grande, was especially open to foreign poetry, and also published it – unusual in those days – in

the original language. The first issue in 1931 carries the eloquent subtitle «Rivista di poesia» and lists the members of its editorial board, all poets and poetry critics: Eugenio Montale, Sergio Solmi, Camillo Sbarbaro, Angelo Barile, Giacomo Debenedetti, Guglielmo Bianchi. The inaugural editorial states the goal of the journal: «*Circoli* will gather the really 'new' Italian poets, known and unknown; it will host some foreigners, it will make space for the best prose writers», in the firm belief that although «we hear too often (especially from those who neglect to be informed) that in Italy these are very sad times for poetry», there are interesting new poets after the *Crepuscolari* and the Futurists. One of the objectives of «*Circoli*», we read in this editorial, will be to support these new poets and prove that «today's poetry is not second to that of the past».¹⁹ In 1932, «*Circoli*» published Eliot's *The Waste Land* in its entirety, and in 1933 a whole issue was dedicated to American poetry, presenting works by 26 poets – a short anthology edited by Giacomo Prampolini with notes by Prampolini and Eugenio Montale (who published here his translation of *La figlia che piange* and re-issued *A Song for Simeon*, which had already appeared in *Solaria* in 1929). The review section shows their link to direct international sources: for example, the latest issues of «*Poetry*» from Chicago were under their eyes.²⁰ With the exception of Dickinson, all the poets included were contemporary authors. Among them we find some major modernists, then at the beginning of their careers: the editors of «*Circoli*», we might say, bet on them and won, as the selection they proposed matches almost exactly the canon later established for that generation of poets, including the African-Americans Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, and Langston Hughes.

The 1933 «*Circoli*» issue figured as one of the sources for compiling the first Italian anthology of contemporary American poetry in 1949, *Poesia americana contemporanea e poesia negra*, edited by Carlo Izzo.²¹ Likewise, Izzo opens his volume with the *newness* of Dickinson's poetry; then he includes a large selection of modernists and some younger poets. It is in the nature of anthologies to function as correctives to the status quo, and to match the given to new tastes, critical approaches, and political and cultural climates. While accepting the canon shaped by the Italian Americanists of the Thirties, Izzo also reconsiders in his preface the import of American poetry, defining it as an off-spring of the British poetical tradition, doomed to remain such.²² Gone are the times when Pavese and Vittorini discovered America. Pavese himself in 1950 declared the end of the first important season of Americanism in Italy: «...we have the impression the American culture has lost its excellence» ...²³ In 1964, as mentioned above, Fernanda Pivano published her *Poesia degli ultimi americani*, and the Beat generation began its long affair with Italian readers.

What lessons can a contemporary translator and anthologist of American poetry draw today from these past experiences? A few: That the reasons leading to the publi-

cation of a foreign poet depend on a complex network of cultural factors and exchanges; that the adoption of a criterion against which to measure new poetry offers a guarantee against chaos; that a strong intellectual project has long-term repercussions; that the publication of a new author, or a new anthology, is the result of background work that usually takes place in the pages of periodicals.

In Italy today there are poetry journals engaged in the exploration of contemporary American poetry, and some of the authors we find in current anthologies have first been published there. «*Poesia*», for example, publishes American poetry on a regular basis (over 30 articles accompanied by poems in the last seven years), as do «*Nuovi Argomenti*», «*Testo a fronte*», «*Pagine*», «*ClanDestino*», the on-line magazine «*Saragana*», and «*Semicerchio*». The American poetry review section of «*Semicerchio*», which I edit, has presented over twenty American poets in the last ten years and, through translation, introduced in Italy the work of significant contemporary authors, paving the way (as in the cases of Anne Sexton, Charles Wright, Yusef Komunyakaa, Charles Simic, and Jorie Graham) for their Italian reputation. Contributors are both Italian and American poets and critics who have illustrated specific aspects of the poetical scene in the United States, such as Language Poetry, non-profit presses, poetry websites, American Dante studies, and the social mandate of the poet. This is done to keep the door open to new voices and, as Eliot wrote recalling his experience as editor of «*The Criterion*» between 1922 and 1939, to guarantee «the circulation of ideas while they are still fresh».²⁴

In revising this talk I have added a question mark to the original title. *Vis-à-vis* eclecticism, multiculturalism, trans-nationalism, post-colonial and hyphenated poetry, any alleged fixed canon is bound to be slippery. Better would be to interrogate the given, to envisage an ideal active reader who, calling upon his or her own criterion of selection or intellectual project, attempts to define a possible itinerary through the many *best* American poetries currently travelling around Italy. Or to envisage for the future the renewal of a dynamic relationship between the publishing world, poetry studies and readerships in contemporary America and Italy, which would also see publishers more involved in supporting what is going on across the States. Meanwhile, Geoffrey Crayon's words in *The Sketch Book* of Washington Irving come to mind: loitering about London around 1820, he finds himself in an inner library of Westminster Abbey full of forgotten books. He accidentally wakes up a thick quarto from its century-long torpor and they start a conversation on the mutability of language and literary tastes. While the quarto reclaims visibility because in its own times it was considered «a model of pure and elegant English», «written for all the world, not for the bookworms of an abbey», Irving's *persona* passionately harangues against the overwhelming literary production, welcoming the beneficial cycle of rise and decline of the majority of authors and books. «Unless

some unforeseen mortality should break out among the progeny of the muse, now that she has become so prolific, I tremble for posterity», he proclaims; and yet, he continues with Shakespeare in mind, «[t]here rise authors from time to time who seem proof against the mutability of language because they have rooted themselves in the unchanging principles of human nature».²⁵ Aware of the mutability of language, canons, and their anthropological contexts, the contemporary poet Charles Wright echoes Irving's character in a 2006 poem spoken in behalf of his

whole generation:

Too strange for our contemporaries,
we'll prove to be
Not strange enough for posterity.

O you who come after us,
Read our remains,
study the soundless bones and do otherwise.²⁶

NOTE

¹ *La poesia in America. Il fiume-Oceano, 1650-2000*, a cura di Tommaso Pisanti, Napoli, Liguori 2002; *West of your cities. Nuova antologia della poesia americana*, a cura di Mark Strand e Damiano Abeni, Roma, Minimum Fax 2003; *Antologia della poesia americana*, a cura di Antonella Francini, introduzione di Massimo Bacigalupo, Roma, Gruppo Editoriale L'Espresso 2004; *Nuova poesia americana. Los Angeles*, a cura di Luigi Ballerini e Paul Vangelisti, Milano, Mondadori 2005; *Nuova poesia americana. San Francisco*, a cura di Luigi Ballerini e Paul Vangelisti, Milano, Mondadori 2006; *Nuovi poeti americani*, a cura di Elisa Biagini, Torino, Einaudi 2006; *La luce migliore. Poeti americani in Italia*, a cura di Alessandro Carrera e Thomas Simpson, Milano, Medusa 2006; *Gondola Signore Gondola. Venezia nella poesia americana del Novecento*, a cura di Rosella Mamoli Zorzi, con la collaborazione di Gregory Dowling, Venezia Lido, Supernova Edizioni 2007.

² Such as *Poesia dell'America puritana*, a cura di Tommaso Pisanti, Napoli, Studio Tesi 1986, or *Black Mountain. Poesia & Poetica*, a cura di Annalisa Goldoni e Marina Morbiducci, Roma, Eura La Goliardica 1987, or *Vietnam. Poeti americani*, a cura di G. Menarini, Parma, Guanda 1972.

³ T. S. Eliot, *What is Minor Poetry?*, in *On Poetry and Poets*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Cudahy 1957, pp. 40 and 36.

⁴ The battle for the American canon has been extensively discussed in Italy as well, as have been its effects on the editing of anthologies and literary histories. A recent contribution is *Ripensare il canone. La letteratura inglese e angloamericana*, edited by Gianfranca Balestra and Giovanna Mochi (Roma, Editoriale Artemide 2007), which also includes discussions, with very useful bibliographical information, on the literary canon examined through an analysis of the latest anthologies and histories of American literature (see especially F. Marengo and G. Nori). In her introductory essay, Balestra gives examples of the pluralistic approach that has distinguished the compilation of such textbooks, where one finds that the European 'discovery' of America and the literature of the English colonies no longer stand at the beginning of this literary tradition. Emory Elliot, for example, in editing *The Columbia Literary History of the United States* (1988), declares in the Preface that «[t]here is today no unifying vision of a national identity» and that diversity, complexity and contradiction must be acknowledged as «structural principles» (Balestra, p. 22). This volume opens with

a chapter entitled *The Native Voice* by the American Indian writer Scott Momaday who writes, «American literature begins with the first human perception of the American landscape expressed and preserved in language [...] . The native voice in American literature is indispensable. There is no true literary history of the United States without it. [...]» (*Columbia*, p. 6). Balestra also mentions *The Norton Anthology* (1989, 3rd edition) and *The Heath Anthology* (1990) as particularly representative of the new cultural attitude, in that their selections include non-canonical authors, thereby going beyond the traditional American literary canon in order to accept cultural pluralism.

I am indebted to Balestra's bibliography for the discovery of *Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture Wars* (1992) by the renowned African-American critic Henry Louis Gates (and co-editor of *The Norton Anthology of African-American Literature* in 1997), who offers stimulating and brilliant perspectives on the arbitrary, ironical mechanisms of canon formation, on the issue of cultural diversity in its relationship with academic curricula and literary pedagogy, on African-American culture as «a cultural palimpsest» by nature. Black writers and artists, he writes, «have always blended forms of Western literature with African-American vernacular and written traditions», and the future of cultural studies resides in the overcoming of divisions in terms of ethnicity, race, gender, etc. while within the academy, «we must seek to explore the hyphen in African-American, on both sides of the Atlantic, by charting the porous relations between African-American culture and an 'American' culture that officially, even today, pretends that an Anglo-American regional culture is the true, universal culture...» (pp. xvi and 125). The other side of the coin, the representation of the 'Africanist' presence in some white American writers, is explored in Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York, Vintage Books 1993). In Italy, Alessandro Portelli, among others, talks of a plurality of canons within American literature in his collection of essays entitled *Canoni americani. Oralità, letteratura, cinema, musica* (Roma, Donzelli Editore 2004), and investigates contaminations, conflicts and exchanges among diverse elements, languages, and genres in a selection of authors and texts.

⁵ Robert Lowell's, acceptance speech of the National Book Award for *Life Studies* in April 1960 as quoted in Ian Hamilton,

Robert Lowell: *A Biography*, New York, Random House 1982, p. 277. «There is a poetry», Lowell said, «that can only be studied, and a poetry that can only be declaimed, a poetry of pedantry and a poetry of scandal [...] The cooked, marvellously expert and remote, seems constructed as a sort of mechanical or catnip mouse for graduate seminars; the raw, jerry-built and forensically deadly, seems often like an unscored libretto by some bearded but vegetarian Castro».

⁶ Here follows a list of anthologies published in the United States since 2000: *American Poetry: The Twentieth Century*, The Library of America 2000; *Anthology of American Poetry*, ed. by Cary Nelson, 2000; *Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry*, 3rd edition, ed. by Jahan Ramazani, 2003; *The Oxford Book of American Poetry*, ed. by David Lehman; *The Vintage Book of Contemporary American Poetry*, 2nd revised edition of 2003, ed. by McClatchy; *The Iowa Anthology of New American Poetries*, ed. by Reginald Shepherd, 2004; *Twentieth-Century American Poetry*, ed. by Dana Gioia 2003; *The Autumn House Anthology of Contemporary American Poetry* ed. by Sue Ellen Thompson, 2005; *The Music Makers: An Anthology of Recent American Poetry* ed. by A. Stanton Coblenz, 2007. The state of contemporary American poetry can also be observed through the popular *Best American Poetry* series, a series of anthologies published annually since 1988 under the general editorship of David Lehman, with a renown poet as a different guest editor every year.

⁷ Marjory Perloff, for instance, in reviewing David Lehman's edition of *The Oxford Book of American Poetry* («Force fed with little portions», in «TLS» (September 1, 2006, pp. 10-11) offers an overview of the «giant anthologies» recently published, which run for thousands of pages, and expresses her perplexity about such eclecticism.

⁸ A possible fourth category would include poets published in translation by cultural association presses revolving around groups of poets and critics engaged in specific projects. For example, The Felix Series of Marco Giovenale has published the experimental video poet Jon Leon's *Diphasic Rumors* and Jennifer Scappettone's *Thing Ode / Ode Oggettuale*; Multimedia Edizioni has printed four volumes of the poetry of Jack Hirshman, a poet who has been enjoying great visibility in Italy in recent years thanks to his frequent readings.

⁹ Of 20th-century classics, Pound and Eliot remain the most popular in Italy, with a large number of publications and selections; Marianne Moore's *Collected Poems* are available in a single-volume edition, and Wallace Stevens is present with three volumes of poetry and one of prose. Robert Frost had a substantial selection of poems in paperback, but at the date of this writing it has gone out of print, as have the volumes of William Carlos Williams. Among the lesser known Modernists, Mina Loy stands out with two books of her poetry.

¹⁰ *West of your cities*, p. 6. Poets included are: Frank Bidart, Louise Glück, Jorie Graham, Robert Hass, John Koethe, Heather McHugh, Robert Pinsky, Charles Simic, Mark Strand, James Tate, C.K. Williams, Charles Wright.

¹¹ *Nuovi poeti americani*, p. V (my translation of: «un tentativo di raccontare la ricca e diversa realtà poetica Americana: è una rappresentazione inevitabilmente parziale e partigiana fatta da un poeta che sceglie altri poeti [...] 'nuovi' sta per sconosciuti o quasi al pubblico italiano [...] non vuol dire giovani quindi, né che tutti abbiano

tentato una radicale revisione del canone»). The poets included are: Elizabeth Alexander, Olga Broumas, Lucile Clifton, Mark Doty, Cornelius Eady, Luise Glück, Kimiko Hahn, Galway Kinnell, Sharon Olds, Alicia Ostriker, Willie Perdomo, Robert Pinsky.

¹² Henry James, *Italian Hours*, New York, Grove Press 1979, p. 1.

¹³ T. S. Eliot, *What is a Classic?* in *On Poetry and Poets*, pp. 71-72.

¹⁴ A detailed discussion of American poetry anthologies published in the United States from 1793, when the first one appeared, to the 1960s is to be found in Alan C. Golding's essay «A History of American Poetry Anthologies», in Robert von Hallberg ed., *Canons*, Chicago-London, University of Chicago Press Journals 1984, pp. 279-307. I am indebted to his study for these data.

¹⁵ Golding highlights Mathiessen's radical and influential revision of the canon: «He redefined the canon in almost every way imaginable: the canon of individual poems, of genres, of subject matter, and of names. That redefinition, by diminishing many nineteenth-century reputations, helped shaped the nineteenth-century canon that we hold today», considering Poe and Whitman as the pivotal figures, and «furthering the modernist imperative to wring the neck of rhetoric» (Golding 298).

¹⁶ Cesare Pavese, *L'influsso degli eventi*, in *Letteratura americana ed altri saggi*, Torino, Einaudi, 1990, p. 223.

¹⁷ Id., p. 223. My translation of «i venti primaverili dell'Europa e del mondo»

¹⁸ Cesare Pavese, *Vita attraverso le lettere*, Torino, Einaudi 1966, p. 81.

¹⁹ «Circoli», I, 1, gennaio-febbraio 1931. My translation of: «Circoli adunerà i poeti italiani veramente 'nuovi', noti e ignoti che siano, ospiterà qualche straniero, farà posto ai migliori scrittori in prosa»; «troppo si sente dire (specie da chi trascura d'informarsi) che in Italia volgono per la poesia tempi tristissimi»; «non è seconda a quella del passato».

²⁰ «Poetry» is defined as «l'unico vero 'magazine of verse', secondo il significato etimologico della parola araba: un inestimabile repertorio per la conoscenza della recente poesia anglo-americana», and the forthcoming Canto XXXIV of Pound is announced («Circoli», III, 6, novembre-dicembre 1933).

²¹ That same year, Gabriele Baldini edited *Poeti americani (1662-1945)*; in 1953, Izzo re-edited his anthology with the title *Nuovissima poesia americana e negra, 1949-1953*; in 1958, Alfredo Rizzardi was the editor of *Poesia americana del dopoguerra*, and Roberto Sanesi of *Poeti americani da E. A. Robinson a W. S. Merwin (1900-1956)*.

²² *Poesia americana e poesia negra*, edited by Carlo Izzo, Parma, Guanda 1949. On Izzo's American scholarship see Massimo Bacigalupo, «Pound/Izzo», in *Ambassadors: American Studies in a Changing World*, ed. by Massimo Bacigalupo and Gregory Dowling, Rapallo, Busco 2006, pp. 63-80.

²³ Cesare Pavese, *Ieri e oggi*, in *La letteratura americana*, p. 175. My translation of «ci pare che la cultura Americana abbia perduto il magistero...».

²⁴ T. S. Eliot, *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*, in *Christianity and Culture*, New York, HBJ Books 1977, p. 193.

²⁵ Washington Irving, *The Mutability of Literature*, in *The Sketch Book*, New York, New American Library 1961, pp. 134-35.

²⁶ Charles Wright, *Scar Tissue*, New York, FSG 2006, p. 64.