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Modern American Poetry: Anthologies, Classrooms, and Canons

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In a 1940 essay appearing in both College English and the English Journal, Allen Tate claimed that “pampered by bad education,” the modern reader expects “to lie down and be passive when he is reading poetry” (568). Teachers and students find modern poetry especially difficult, he said, because they “have lost the art of reading any poetry that will not read itself” to them (572). Yet one of the remarkable features of the American poetry renaissance of the 1910s and 1920s was the rapidity with which its products found their way into the high school and college classroom. It is also clear, however, that there were two canons of modern American poetry. By “modern poetry” Tate meant work quite different from that which by 1940 had been firmly established in both the curriculum and the mind of the general public. As both represented and shaped by the anthologies that took it into the classroom, modern poetry meant the work of such poets as Vachel Lindsay, Amy Lowell, Edgar Lee Masters, and Carl Sandburg—poets not thought especially difficult then or now. For Tate, however, modern poetry meant the canon epitomized by T. S. Eliot.

If, as a survey of his critical reception shows, Eliot was “in the process of gaining a considerable place for himself in the world of letters as early as 1917” (Grant 8), it might seem surprising that 23 years later Tate would be so energetically attacking high school and college teachers and education in general for neglecting this poet and the way of reading required by his poetry. Tate’s energy implies opposition. Indeed, developments in both poetry and education had con-
spired to canonize what David Perkins has called “popular modernism,” as opposed to the “high modernism” of Eliot—or, in the terms often used during the renaissance, they favored “democratic” rather than “aristocratic” poetry.

It was against this canon that Tate, as an early advocate of New Criticism, directed his polemic. Often today adopted as a polemical adversary, New Criticism found one of its own major adversaries in the canon and pedagogical treatment of modern poetry as they had been established in American classrooms through anthologies and textbooks. Surveying virtually all one-volume collections of literature published between 1917 and 1934 and designed for a year’s work in grades nine through twelve, James Warren Olson found that the modern American poets most frequently anthologized were, in order, Sandburg, Robert Frost, E. A. Robinson, Sara Teasdale, Masters, Lowell, and Lindsay (312). A similar study found that as late as 1960, the 72 multigenre high school anthologies then available presented a canon of Frost, Sandburg, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Teasdale, Robinson, Lindsay, Masters, Arthur Guiterman, Eliot, and Lowell—Frost with 136 appearances, Lowell with 20. Although Eliot made the list, the authors of the study saw as striking “the relative neglect of many major poets and the considerable attention given to lesser ones” (Lynch and Evans 115).

In the early years of the poetry renaissance, traditionally dated from the founding of Poetry magazine in 1912, some of these “lesser ones” were considered major. By and large, the early promoters and propagandists of the new poetry saw it as simple, accessible to a wide audience. In their view, modern poetry had stripped itself of stale conventions and dealt with life more directly than the late Romantic verse against which it was in reaction. It would, they hoped, heal a wound Van Wyck Brooks had diagnosed in American society: a rupture between “highbrow” culture, devoted to a tenuous idealism and isolated from the realities of American life, and “lowbrow” culture, devoted to vulgar materialism and concerned with practical matters exclusively. They espoused an essentially popular modernism in which the highbrow genre of poetry would attain wide appeal through simplicity of language and theme and through a residual idealism usually expressed as an optimism and affirmation—or at least a good humor—very much in tune with the Progressive Era.

Unlike the high modernist work of Eliot, Marianne Moore, Wallace Stevens, Ezra Pound, and others denounced at the time as “aristocrats,” “radicals,” and “cerebralists,” this version of modern poetry was not characterized by intellectual complexity or informed by any sense of cultural crisis. To a large extent, it was not so much the end of the Genteel Tradition as a democratization of it. And it was not really so much a casting off of Romanticism as a transfer of romantic sensibility into a modern idiom and to the modern American scene. Thus if in 1819 Shelley could write, “Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is” in his “Ode to the West Wind,” so in 1918 could Sandburg write, “Lay me on an anvil, O God! / Beat me and hammer me into a crowbar” in his “Prayers of Steel.”

A number of circumstances encouraged the entry of popular modernism into the classroom. Coinciding with the poetry renaissance, the progressive movement
in education fostered the study of literature for moral and social development, particularly for “democratization,” rather than for philological learning or as preparation for further academic study. At least if carefully selected, poems by Sandburg might serve as well as (perhaps better than) those of Shakespeare or Shelley. Though straddling several fences and embodying the contradictions of the times, a 1917 report (known as the Hosic report) by the National Joint Committee on English clearly reflected the progressive movement’s influence and thus the developments that made the schools a hospitable environment for modern poetry. Acknowledging that most students do not go on to college, the report called for English courses “organized with reference to basic personal and social needs rather than . . . to college entrance requirements” (26). It urged the reading of literature “closely connected with daily life” (65) and informed by “the spirit of the present” (97). It found this connection and this spirit in modern literature.

Even more explicit in this regard was a report prepared by Henry Neumann for the 1918 Bureau of Education Bulletin. While on the one hand the progressive movement could open the curricular canon by lessening the dominance of the restricted reading lists of the National Conference on Uniform Entrance Requirements, on the other it could also marginalize the teaching of literature in high schools, leaving it without any justification. Neumann provided one: in teaching American ideals, he said, “there can be no more serviceable vehicle than American literature,” for the nation’s literature takes as its themes the hopes that America “cherishes most widely and most ardently, and it sets these forth in the appealing garb of beauty” (5–6). Neumann was not hesitant in enumerating the ideals that the study of American literature should “enforce,” among them these: that America believes in “a certain greatness latent in the commonest of persons,” that America rates her children “upon their own merits and not upon their birth,” that America is “good-natured, kindly, and fond of fun,” that America has a “respect for differences,” that “democracy means obligation,” and that “the ideal of freedom requires changes in social arrangements as well as insistence upon personal duty.” It found this last item “perhaps the one most insistently stressed in literature of the present day” (9–17).

The teaching of American ideals through American literature seemed especially urgent given the flow of immigrants to American shores, a flow that reached its height between 1905 and 1914. And with the rise of nationalism during and after World War I, it gained renewed urgency and at the same time showed itself capable of serving conservative as well as progressive ends, as democratization increasingly came to mean Americanization. As Fred Lewis Pattee, then professor of English at Penn State College, said in 1919, “The new insistence upon the teaching of Americanism in our American colleges, especially in the colleges which have been under government control, brings the study of American literature into the foreground as never before.” American literature, he added, may be crude, but it expresses “our own voice, honest and spontaneous” (“Americanization” 271, 273). And in his anthology Century Readings for a Course in American Literature, published for school and college use in 1919, he observed: “More and more clearly
it is seen now that the American soul, the American conception of democracy,—Americanism, should be made prominent in our school curriculums, as a guard against the rising spirit of lawlessness which has followed the great war" (vi).

In effect if not by intention, of course, Pattee was also promoting his own anthology, justifying its use by justifying the study of American literature. He was doing so, in fact, at a time when the market for textbooks had considerably expanded. High school enrollment had risen from 519,251 in 1900 to 2,200,389 in 1920, and college enrollment from 238,000 to 598,000 in the same years (U.S. Bureau of the Census 207, 210–11). By 1926, Robert Leisy could report that Pattee’s *Century Readings* had “proved the most acceptable text” for the increasing number of college and university courses in American literature (309).

It was in this educational climate and market that the three major anthologists of the new poetry offered their versions of the developing canon—Harriet Monroe, with her *The New Poetry* (1917, revised in 1923 and 1932); Louis Untermeyer, with his *Modern American Poetry* (1919, followed by six editions through 1950); and Marguerite Wilkinson, with her *New Voices* (1919) and *Contemporary Poetry* (1923). Their anthologies were among the earliest attempts to define and present to the wider public the canon of modern poetry that had been developing in little magazines such as *Poetry*.

Although the anthologies enjoyed great popularity with the general public, all had been prepared with schools and colleges also in mind. Monroe, seeking to interest her publisher, assured him that “the need of an anthology . . . has been indicated by the letters we have received from various professors and teachers” (Letter to Marsh). In his autobiography, Untermeyer recalls that he compiled *Modern American Poetry* in response to his publisher’s request for a textbook (*From Another* 327). And Wilkinson’s *Contemporary Poetry* appeared in Macmillan’s Modern Readers’ Series, a line designed to supplement multigenre surveys of literature. In initially preparing their anthologies, though, the three editors evidently did not believe that they were offering a canon attenuated for the classroom. They purported to be offering collections representative of the main body of modern poetry, which they saw as autochthonous, democratic, and accessible. It was not the body Tate would privilege in his 1940 polemic.

As editor of *Poetry* magazine from its founding in 1912 to her death in 1936, Monroe repeatedly expressed her central belief in a reciprocity between poetry and the public, most notably in selecting as the motto for the magazine Walt Whitman’s statement “To have great poets there must be great audiences too.” Reciprocity demanded accessibility, both physical (in the pages of *Poetry* and *The New Poetry*) and interpretive. In the first edition of *The New Poetry*, as elsewhere, she characterized modern poetry as reflecting “an ideal of absolute simplicity and sincerity,” a devotion to the “language of common speech,” and the use of themes from contemporary life (vi).

Untermeyer’s version of modern poetry was essentially the same, though more influenced by his romantic socialism (which at the same time was compromised by his view of poetry as a genre of “exaltation” and by his role as purveyor of
poetry as commodity). It informed his editorial labors with \textit{The Masses} (1911–17), the \textit{Liberator} (1918–24), and \textit{Seven Arts} (1916–17), and his frequent reviews for the \textit{New York Herald Tribune}, \textit{Saturday Review}, \textit{New Republic}, and other publications large and small. In the first edition of \textit{Modern American Poetry}, he instructed his readers to note that the new poetry was “fresh, living and vigorous,” characterized by “more familiar subjects,” by “simpler and less stilted language,” and by “an American spirit” (viii, xi). He was not contradicting what he had said elsewhere. Modern American poetry, with its simplicity and contemporaneity, could appeal to a large audience—including that in the schools, where evidently the time was ripe for it.

As their anthologies went through successive editions, Monroe and Untermeier would come to adjust, reluctantly and only partially, to the development of a canon of modern poetry that, especially after the publication of Eliot’s \textit{The Waste Land} in 1922, was increasingly defined not by simplicity but by complexity and allusiveness, and not by an American modernism but by an international modernism. Thus even as early as 1922, Untermeier began another anthology, \textit{Modern American and British Poetry}, designed especially for secondary schools. While his original anthology admitted Eliot in its edition of 1921, this new one would wait until 1939. In 1926 he even more obviously let the classroom shape the canon that he presented in his textbook \textit{Yesterday and Today}. Its contents reflected his market research. He sent questionnaires to 150 high school teachers in the United States, asking them to list whom they considered the chief nineteenth- and twentieth-century poets. Among the twentieth-century American poets, Frost was the only unanimous choice, followed by Millay, Lizette Reese, Sandburg, and Teasdale. Asked to name a poem “most likely to survive,” the majority selected Joyce Kilmer’s “Trees” (which of course had appeared in the anthologies of Monroe, Wilkinson, and Untermeier himself). “Vitality, affirmation, definiteness, forthright optimism,” he concluded approvingly, “were evidently the notes on which emphasis was placed” (“Pegasus” 64). Untermeier’s anthropological strabismus, one eye on the schools and the other on developments in poetry, suggests the evolving division between popular and high modernism. Yet it also suggests the extent to which the popular canon, in part through the efforts of the three anthologists, had been adopted by the schools.

Wilkinson made less adjustment, continuing until her death in 1928 to identify the main body of modern poetry with what was suitable for the classroom, especially the high school classroom. That was the case whether she was writing her many reviews for the \textit{New York Times} in the 1910s and 1920s or preparing her \textit{New Voices and Contemporary Poetry}. The first of these, we are told in one biographical sketch, was regarded “as akin to gospel” by colleges, schools, and women’s clubs (Kunitz and Haycraft 1519). The second was singled out in a 1927 survey of anthologies for the schools as a “favorite,” so that “the name of Mrs. Wilkinson is not second to any in popularity” among anthologists (Wheeler 331). Briefly examining these two volumes reveals how modern American poetry was defined for and presented to an educational establishment ready to accept and encourage
literature "closely connected with daily life" and communicating "the spirit of the present." It reveals as well the linkage of popular modernism with the "passive" reading that Tate attributed to "bad education" and that he sought to displace with a kind of reading that would authorize a different canon. More broadly, it indicates the strongly established position against which New Criticism sought to define itself.

*New Voices* and *Contemporary Poetry* appear to have been influenced by what Arthur Applebee has identified as a "central metaphor of the educational process" between the two world wars—that of experience. Lessening the didacticism implicit in the earlier emphasis on teaching American ideals through literature, this metaphor encouraged teachers to approach and justify literature "as simple vicarious experience" (80). Thus, in *New Voices*, Wilkinson defines poetry as "simply the sharing of life in patterns of rhythmical words." It is not, she assures her readers, "an intricate game for sophisticated intellects." Instead, "It is for the business man, tired or rested, and for his wife. It is for rich employees (for the fortification of their souls!) and for poor employees (for the comfort of their hearts!)" (9). What these readers must do, she says, is adopt this perspective:

I must be what I am, one person with one person's experience. But if I will, I can have, through poetry, a share in the lives and adventures of others. I can travel on roads that my feet have never touched, visit in houses that I have never entered, share hopes and dreams and conquests that have never been mine. Poetry can be, for me, the fishing trip that I was never able to take, the great city that I have not seen, the great personalities that I have not met and fathomed, the banquets to which I have not been invited, the prizes that I did not win, the achievement that was a little beyond my reach. It can even be the love that I have not known. (13)

Poetry, in other words, offers through vicarious experience some consolation for personal and social limitations in the lives of its readers. And although the experience is vicarious, it is not remote from the lives (or dreams) of the great mass of readers. Indeed, in her central chapter, "Democracy and the New Themes," Wilkinson claims that while poets of the past sang of "the princess in the tower," those of the present sing "of little Miss Stitcher, the seamstress; of Mrs. Suds, the woman who takes in washing; of Polly Cornfields, wife of an Iowa farmer" (215). Modern poetry offers common themes of common folk in common language.

Wilkinson's view of poetry is reflected in the canon she presents. The "most notable" modern American poets, she says in *New Voices*, are Frost, Lindsay, Lowell, Masters, and Teasdale (2-3). It is not an idiosyncratic list, reflecting as it does those who had captured public attention and praise at the time. One of the earliest critical surveys of the poetry renaissance, Lowell's *Tendencies in Modern American Poetry* (1917), had selected for extended discussion Frost and Robinson, Masters and Sandburg, and H. D. (Hilda Doolittle) and John Gould Fletcher (the
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last actually a surrogate for Lowell herself). Of the 101 poets in Monroe's 1917 *New Poetry*, ten occupied almost one-third of the pages: Pound, Lindsay, Masters, Lowell, Monroe, Sandburg, Frost, Doolittle, Fletcher, and Robinson (in that order). Untermeyer's 1919 *Modern American Poetry* was more egalitarian in its assignment of space, with Lindsay, James Oppenheim, Frost, Anna Hempstead Branch, and Guy Caryl having only a slightly greater number of pages than the other 75 poets he included. His 1921 edition, though, more clearly favored Frost, Lindsay, Millay, Robinson, Oppenheim, and Sandburg. In the section of the 1921 *Cambridge History of American Literature* devoted to the "later poets," Norman Foerster singled out Robinson, Frost, Lindsay, Masters, and Sandburg. When in 1926 Pattee added to his *Century Readings* what he termed "a rather extensive survey of the typical work of the leading contemporary younger poets," he selected Masters, Robinson, Lowell, Frost, and Sandburg. The considerable overlap among these lists (as well as the unanimous exclusions) indicates how, not long after the beginning of the poetry renaissance, there was already a remarkable consensus as to who were the major poets. There are also the poets who dominate the high school collections surveyed by Olson and who are recognized by Wilkinson.

Wilkinson's list of the "most notable" in *New Voices* does represent some compromise between her preferences and her awareness of the public notice the poets had received. Although she includes Lowell, she also characterizes Imagists like her as radicals, poets of a "minor school" who sometimes forget that "poetry, after all, is the sharing of life" (122). The compromise does not extend to Robinson and Sandburg. She admits that "in shrewd understanding of personality and as a brilliant analyst of character," Robinson "has no superior among living American poets." Nevertheless, she adds, he "is not a poet of the people" but a "poet of the intellectuals," and thus she is "unwilling to call him a great poet." Instead, he is "an exceedingly brilliant poet" who writes with "a quiet distinction of manner that is sometimes annoying to all but intellectual aristocrats" (354-55). If Robinson is too aristocratic, Sandburg is too vulgar. Though he has written some poetry "close to the heart of the folk, whence the best poetry comes," Wilkinson objects to his crudity and his tendency to let oratorical propaganda displace poetry. Her conception of the folk and of poets as their voices (in this case their new voices) excludes the aristocratic. It also excludes from greatness "humanitarian radicals" like Sandburg (who, because of his tender moments, like that presented in the much anthologized "Fog," does get represented in the selections appended to Wilkinson's chapters on theme and poetic language).

As one might expect, Wilkinson's version of modern poetry has little room for the likes of Eliot and Pound, both unrepresented in the appendicular anthologies of *New Voices*. Again, the trouble is that they are "very far from the folk." They are "undeniably alarmingly clever" (182). Pound is "too clever to be a poet"; indeed, he is "so clever that one mentions him with trepidation, knowing how much amused he would be at the wrong thing said" (183). Both Pound and Eliot write poems "subtly charged with conscious superiority" and thus "will hardly give pleasure to many readers, because they themselves never have cause to know
what conscious superiority is like, and therefore can not share the mood” (183). Wilkinson was not alone in her view. In his 1921 *Modern American Poetry*, Untermeier judged Pound “too special to achieve permanence, too intellectual to become popular” (302). Similarly, in a 1925 essay Monroe asserted that Pound’s work had become desiccated by “super-sophistication” (“Ezra Pound” 96), and a few years later she denounced Pound (along with William Carlos Williams, Hart Crane, Tate, and others) for appearing to be “as scornful of the *profanum vulgus* as any aristocrat of the Augustan age, as profoundly convinced that great art must rise above all contact with the common people” (“Looking Backward” 35). Wilkinson’s treatment of Teasdale provides a contrast: Teasdale “is never that most deplorable of all pseudo-artists, the *clever* poet”; her poems are accessible and “reecho in us because we can not fail to know at once just what they mean” (280).

For Wilkinson, then, modern poetry is defined (and evaluated) by its accessibility, thematic and linguistic. This definition also informs her anthology *Contemporary Poetry*, published two years after *New Voices*. Her brief preface promises “a conservative collection of familiar poems by contemporary poets,” a collection compiled “not for mature intellectuals” but for “the young sons and daughters of ordinary intelligent Americans” (xiv). It presents a canon established by popular reception, with Lindsay, Lowell, Frost, Robinson, Masters, and Teasdale well represented. Robinson is now, as he was not in *New Voices*, “sometimes a great poet” (67). He had received the Pulitzer Prize for his *Collected Poems* in 1921, and with it a popularity that could have suggested to Wilkinson that she had underestimated the folk. Unrepresented are Eliot, Moore, Pound, Stevens, and Williams.

Instead, Wilkinson includes many selections well received by the public though written by poets Wilkinson would admit were minor and not especially modern except in a chronological sense (to call them “popular modernists” requires considerable stretching of Perkins’s term). Thus she includes Katherine Lee Bates’s “America the Beautiful” because it “has found a well-deserved place in the hearts of hundreds of people” and has been adopted as “the official hymn of the American Federation of Women’s Clubs” (49). She admits that Richard Hovey “has written poetry that goes deeper into life and has more subtlety and power” but selects his “A Stein Song” because it “has become a favorite with young men everywhere” (58). She includes Josephine Preston Peabody’s “The House and the Road,” which is “one of the best loved of her short lyrics” (125); Robert Haven Schauffler’s “Scum o’ the Earth,” which is “still a favorite with people who believe that America is the ‘Melting Pot’” (138); and of course Kilmer’s “Trees,” which “has become one of the most popular poems ever written by an American” (201). Actually, not all of the poems were familiar at the time (and obviously many are not familiar now), but they dealt with familiar subjects in familiar ways. Thus Ina Coolbrith, crowned poet laureate of California at the Panama-Pacific Exposition in 1915, is represented by “When the Grass Shall Cover Me” because it “presents with adequate sincerity a mood and emotion well known to everybody” (41). And selection from Teasdale’s poems is easy because “thousands of people know what is felt and said in them” (173).
Accessible because familiar, Wilkinson's version of contemporary poetry requires no critical apparatus, and she supplies none. Indeed, her headnotes to the poets' selections reassure readers with a frequently repeated refrain: "The wit and wisdom" of Eugene Field's "Our Two Opinions" and the "tenderness" of his "Little Boy Blue" will "need no explanation" (37); Clinton Scollard's "A Day for Wandering" is "gracefully and sincerely written and needs no explanation" (54); Monroe's "The Water Ousel" "needs no explanation" (109); Teasdale's "Star" could "never be explained to a person who could not feel it, and the person who can feel it needs no explanation" (173); Kilmer's "Trees" "needs no explanation" (201). Wilkinson would limit interpretation when it might seem called for. William Rose Benet's "The Horse Thief," for example, "should be read for the sheer joy of it, without making any attempt to find analogies," although the poem explicitly establishes one between poetic creation and the capture of a wild horse (189). When she does provide interpretive comments, she simultaneously limits interpretation, often through the use of the word "simply": George Sterling's eschatological "The Last Days," for example, "simply tells how one person feels about the coming of autumn" (65); Robinson's "Neighbors," about the defamiliarizing presence of a "wolf-haunted wife," is for Wilkinson "simply the story of the woman who can never afford to dress well" (67); Teasdale's "The Coin" is "simply a wise little maxim made into verse" (173).

Just as Wilkinson characterizes modern poetry as simple, she urges simple reading. Reading, she says, should be "as simple and natural as possible" (5). The approach should be "simple and sincere" so that readers "simply receive and share the poem"—a way of reading "simpler, easier, and more direct" than "a scientific approach" (8). After all, she says, "the simplicity of the approach will save us from difficulty" (9), and poetry "does not exist so that it may be studied" (3). In one of my copies of Contemporary Poetry, a student has written what was evidently a question for discussion in one of the many classrooms using the anthology. Indexing "Scum o' the Earth" (a poem rehearsing the rich cultural heritage one ignores when disparaging "Polacks," "dagos," and so forth), the student wrote: "What has each of these immigrants to give America? Is there any advantage to a nation to be a melting pot?" It was not the poem itself that was to be studied, though presumably it was to supply the "American ideal" that would form the basis of the student's answer.

In 1928 Wilkinson's New Voices appeared in a "new edition revised and enlarged." Reprinted from the unrevised plates of a minimally revised 1921 edition, this third edition adds only a final chapter entitled "Retrospect and Prospect." If the earlier chapters stand as a fair summary of popular modernism, the added chapter recognizes (but does not accept) its end. Wilkinson regrets that whereas the voices of the "poetry revival" that reached its height between 1919 and 1921 spoke with "clarity and directness," now

certain alleged poets of to-day who have been elaborately praised in intellectual circles are building words together as they have never been
Without naming these poets, though she clearly means such poets as Eliot, Moore, Pound, and Stevens as well as younger ones such as Crane and Tate, Wilkinson resolves to waste "no more time in discussing what is valueless or specious in the work of the period" (446).

Seven years earlier, in 1921, Eliot had issued what in effect and doubtless by intention was a rebuttal to the view of modern poetry held by Wilkinson, Monroe, Untermeyer, and others like them. In "The Metaphysical Poets" he asserted that "poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be difficult." The complexity of contemporary life, he said, would be reflected in a complex poetry, with poets becoming "more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect" (65). This statement and the example provided the following year by The Waste Land set the agenda for high modernism, for a poetry that Wilkinson would dismiss as "valueless and specious" because it was not self-interpreting and would not reinforce generally accepted "American ideals." As John Guillory has observed, "The problem of the canon is a problem of syllabus and curriculum" (240), and it was in the syllabus and curriculum that Eliot and high modernist poetry still had no firm place. In the late 1930s and early 1940s, however, there was a successful campaign to redefine the curricular canon in direct, sometimes explicit opposition to that which the progressive movement in education had encouraged and which anthologists like Monroe, Wilkinson, and Untermeyer had supplied with appropriate texts and definitions.

The most directly influential document in this campaign was, of course, Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren's Understanding Poetry, the first edition of which appeared in 1938. This anthological textbook encouraged close, analytical reading and argued that poetry needed such reading because, like human experience itself, it was "infinitely complicated and various" to all but the "fanatical or stupid" (492). Their belief that teachers themselves needed instruction in reading poetry was obvious from their twelve-page prefatory "Letter to the Teacher" calling for emphasis on "the poem as poem" rather than on the poem as narrative, as inspirational lesson garbed in beauty, or as product of its times. The accompanying revision of the canon is pointedly made by their contrasting analyses of Kilmer's "Trees" and Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." "Trees," they conclude, is a "bad poem" enjoyed only by "people who do not stop to look at the poem itself or to study the images in the poem" (391), while "Prufrock" is "very rich and meaningful" to all but the "casual and careless reader" (590, 595). Here, at last, was the pedagogical equivalent of the motto sported by the Little Review ("A Magazine of the Arts, Making No Compromise with the Public Taste") and that of transition ("The plain reader be damned"). These mottoes had reflected one side of a conflict
within modernism, just as Poetry's "To have great poets there must be great audiences too" and Seven Arts's "An Expression of Artists for the Community" had reflected the other. Yet Understanding Poetry also held out the promise that, instructed in critical reading, great numbers of people could gain access to otherwise difficult works of literature, contemporary or not.

Understanding Poetry was followed the next year by Brooks's Modern Poetry and the Tradition, which was dedicated to Tate and which Tate in turn was recommending to teachers in his 1940 essay. It explicitly provided an alternative to "the history of modern American poetry as written by the Untermyers and Monroes." While they saw modern poets casting off "dead conventions" and taking up "American scenes, American things, and the American people" (69), Brooks saw the best of them adopting the complexity, irony, and wit of the symbolist-metaphysical tradition. Lindsay, Lowell, Masters, and Sandburg would be displaced by Eliot, Stevens, Pound, and even Frost. (Appropriating Frost was possible because only "the casual reader," according to Brooks, suffers the misapprehension that he is not a poet of indirection.)

Modern Poetry and the Tradition represented, of course, a consolidation of the theory and method that came to be called the New Criticism and that had been developing in the writings of such figures as R. P. Blackmur, Eliot, William Empson, John Crowe Ransom, I. A. Richards, and Tate—a critical elite that during the 1920s began to displace in criticism more strictly journalistic figures such as Untermyer and Wilkinson. It provided the theoretical basis for the pedagogical approach of Understanding Poetry, which gradually became, as Applebee has noted, "the single most important influence in transforming such critical theory into classroom practice" (163). It was thus equally influential in establishing, at least in the colleges, a canon of modern American poetry very much at odds with the popular modernism championed by Monroe, Untermyer, and Wilkinson and established in both the schools and the colleges, partly through their anthologies. Understanding Poetry appeared at the height of the progressive education movement and shortly before its precipitous decline under attack for its optimism, antiformalism, utilitarianism, and neglect of intellectual training and discipline. This decline and the subsequent influence of New Criticism coincided with the schools' new attention to reading competence and their gradual recognition, if not wholehearted adoption, of an alternative to the Wilkinsonian version of modern poetry. If, as is generally agreed, New Criticism succeeded in the colleges by supplying a methodological rigor that justified criticism as an academic discipline, so too did the high modernist canon gain acceptance there by supplying texts that required study, not the Wilkinsonian "simplicity of approach" that had its origins in the progressivism of the 1910s.

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