

Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures, Faculty of Arts,
Charles University

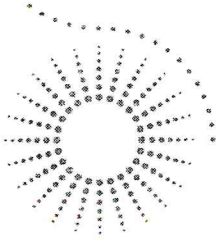
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Supervisor's Report on
Behind Enemy Lines: The New American Poetry and the Cold War Anthology Wars
Doctoral Thesis
by Stephan Delbos
Submitted June 2017

I strongly recommend that Stephan Delbos's doctoral thesis go forward for defence. It is an excellent work that displays a precocious critical intelligence, careful research and is fuelled throughout by intellectual excitement. It was a pleasure to work with a student who was so dedicated and perspicacious; it was energising to see how new angles continually opened up as the student probed the material further, revealing an original narrative of post-war US poetry.

For all the geographical vastness of the US and the concomitant range of its poetry, critical narratives often overlook the broader connections between this nation and other traditions. By exploring how Donald Allen's aesthetic ideology fitted into the evolution of US culture, Delbos argues convincingly that the anthology was one of the means by which experiment in poetry was effectively nationalized by the US, a perception that structures debates to this day, rendering British poetry as inherently and essentially conservative, traditional and backward looking in contrast to unorthodox and edgy American practice. Over the last decade or so transnational approaches to culture have tried to open up these issues, but little has been done in Delbos's chosen area. While critics such as Donald Pease and Wai Chee Dimock have illuminated the extranational influences on a *soi-disant* American literature, Jahan Ramazani explores the implications of transnationalism for our understanding of poetry. His work transforms our ideas of postcolonial poetry, liberating them from the centre-periphery structure so that they can range further in the anglophone canon. But no transnational questions have been asked of US poetry in the period in question, and this is where Delbos's work comes in.

Carefully sifting through archives and engaging in correspondence with extant actors in this chapter of US literary history, Delbos shows how this binary was constructed and put into effect. The major consequence of this is a shift in the way we view not only US poetry, but, by corollary, British poetry also. In this, the work connects with new accounts of the latter by critics such as Eric Falci and David Wheatley, in which Britain emerges not only as the homeland of Hardy's epigones (among them several fine poets), but also of radical figures like Roy Fisher, Jeremy Prynne and Denise Riley. Likewise, his study teaches us to see poets such as Richard Wilbur, Howard Nemerov and A. E. Stallings not in the least as unAmerican, but part of a US canon that is now more extensively conceived. His work has significant



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consequences for the critique of contemporary poetry, which concerns itself mainly with the three axes of form, gender and race. His approach helps us to break out of older patterns of argumentation, and read this poetry in refreshing ways.

The next important aspect is the treatment of the context of the Cold War. For this Delbos has had to orient himself in a dynamic field of both political and cultural history. This has been developing swiftly in the last decade or so, fuelled by archival discoveries and the shifts in the political landscape of the US, where cultural agents are asking once again what their relationship should be to state power. One index of this are the energetic debates around Frances Stonor Saunders's study of US soft power during the Cold War, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and World of Arts and Letters* (2000). Delbos dextrously avoids all obvious cloak-and-dagger maneuvers, employing instead a more nuanced critical idiom that never loses sight of the poetry, and its longer tradition (in this respect his consideration of Allen's poets in the modernist context is noteworthy). This is the mark of a conspicuous critical maturity.

A further bracing aspect is Delbos's attention to the material and financial conditions of the book's production: the economics behind the book offer valuable insights into its contents and its reception. That in turn leads him helpfully to the design aspects of *The New American Poetry*; he is strikingly and subtly able to connect his readings of poems and poets with these issues in an innovative fashion.

When beginning his research, Delbos wished to cover a wider range of cultural phenomena – from the visual arts to contemporary music. Now, having persuasively written a thesis on poetry, he may well wish to return to this broader context. Equally, he could begin exploring the literary commerce between the US and the Czech side. A third option would be to pursue both. In short there is an embarrassment of options for this talented and engaging critic, with whom it was always illuminating to work.

Justin Quinn Ph.D. (Associate Professor)