Rachel Hadas

On Poetry Anthologies

The word "anthology" (and in what follows I'm concerned only with poetry anthologies) denotes two very different kinds of book. There are the hefty tomes like the various Norton anthologies—books in uniform, as it were, with double columns of text marching down pages of a tissue-paper thinness, designed, no doubt, to accommodate as much of the rapidly expanding canon as possible. And then there's the other kind of anthology—the kind some of us were lucky enough to encounter (perhaps a gift, perhaps a chance find) when we were young. I happily consign last year's Norton to the used-textbook man; but the latter kind I tend to hang onto. And even if we fail to retain early favorites physically, we hold them in our hearts. Not long ago I heard Donald Justice speak lovingly of a poetry anthology edited by Mark Van Doren (the title now escapes me) that Justice had cherished since high school. Anthologies I myself loved when I was growing up include Louis Untermeyer's *The Magic Circle* (1952) and John Hollander and Harold Bloom's *The Wind and the Rain* (1961), both given to me by my mother when I was about ten. Both, I believe, are now out of print.

Anthologies that mysteriously hit the spot, that work, prompt reverie and digression. *The Wind and the Rain* introduced me to Thomas Lovell Beddoes, Edmund Waller, John Clare, and John Davidson, all poets about whom for years I knew next to nothing but who when I encountered them years later seemed reassuringly familiar. In *The Magic Circle* I first encountered Alfred Noyes, Walter De La Mare, and Robert W. Service. *The Magic Circle* also offered Thomas Hood's "Song of the Shirt," Elinor Wylie's "Peter and John" (a beautiful poem about the Apostles I've never seen anywhere else), and Frost's "The Code," still one of his less familiar narrative poems. Untermeyer's anthology was illustrated with spiky, energetic line drawings by Beth and Joe Krush, and in my mind's eye I can still see the Lady That's Known as Lou cradling the dead Dan McGrew in her arms, or the irate farmer in "The Code" stalking off the hayfield.

The mind's eye is crucial, for certain anthologies become part of our private luggage, which we unpack when we need it. William Empson in China and Erich Auerbach in Istanbul created or recreated their own personal anthologies from memory. Auerbach's *Mimesis* draws upon its author's invisible library, while as for Empson, a recent reviewer tells us that with the Japanese invasion of China, Beijing University went into forced exile. Empson was reduced to typing out an anthology of English poetry from memory. That situation, he wrote, "has a great effect in forcing you to

consider what really matters." One can understand his irritation when scolded for his inaccurate quotations. Luxury makes us lazy. For many years I've been engaged in the opposite of Empson's project; instead of being forced to decide what's indispensable, I've fecklessly taken the path of least resistance, allowing poetry anthologies to proliferate on my shelves without sufficiently sifting, judging, assimilating, using them. Why the accumulation? Some of these anthologies have reached me because my poetry appears in their pages. There are also teaching copies, review copies, and books I inherited after the deaths of my mother and my friend Charles Barber. But I also buy poetry anthologies—in fact, I can hardly help buying them. A few summers ago, in a secondhand bookstore in St. Johnsbury, Vermont, called That Bookstore on Eastern Avenue, I swooped down first on an inconspicuous Dell paperback, Richard Neibling's 1964 *A Journey of Poems,* and then on Philip Larkin's edition of the *Oxford Book of Twentieth-Century Verse.* I suppose I knew I needed them. In the Preface to the latter book, Larkin touches—in his wry, understated way—on the challenges of serving as a cultural curator, a literary gatekeeper. "At first," he writes, "I thought I would let the century choose the poets while I chose the poems, but . . . this did not really work." How easy life would be if the passage of time alone, weeding out the bad and saving the good, could perform the anthologist's labors! "Time that is intolerant/Of the brave and innocent/And indifferent in a week/To a beautiful physique/Worships language and forgives/Everything by which it lives." But only in the guise of the anthologist does Time worship, by recording them, some poems and forget others. An *Oxford Book of Twentieth-Century Verse* edited by the twentieth century remains a figment of Larkin's fantasy. He knew all too well that the memory, taste, and patience of an all-too-human editor are needed, commenting in his *Paris Review* interview that "Most people make anthologies out of other anthologies; I spent five years reading everyone's complete works."

It's true that the best poetry anthologies give the impression of being not siftings from other anthologies but personal statements, even personal testaments. And the reader who browses through poetry anthologies also brings personal responses beyond simply liking one poem or disliking another. Increasingly, for example, what I notice in anthologies are mistakes. Richmond Lattimore seems to be undergoing a sea-change into Richard Lattimore; my own first name has been misspelled and my date of birth gotten wrong; and an anthology edited by the late M. L. Rosenthal confidently glossed a short lyric by James Merrill as being addressed to the poet's wife. Even more than errors, anthologies are known for sins of omission—how could Poem X or Poet Y possibly have been left out? But though I sometimes lament the absence of one poem or the inclusion of another, such ins and outs concern me less than the wider matter of context. For example, anthologies sometimes provide surprising new environments for old favorites. Presenting a poem in a certain light, the anthologist appropriates and transforms it for the reader. Or tries to—sometimes the anthologist's scaffolding collapses, but the poem stands up without it. If anthologies change, so do readers. As students, we accept as natural whatever it is that poetry anthologies, like other textbooks, present to us. Later we look at them with a more critical eye. Later still, students who grow up to be poets find themselves or their contemporaries becoming the editors of the next generation of anthologies. Does the editor's power

provide a heady rush, the buzz of finally being in charge? For some editors, maybe. Never having edited a poetry anthology myself, I imagine the experience feels more like triage than triumph—the strenuous struggle, page by page, over what can be salvaged and what must be discarded. What is there room for? What to pass on and what to discard? Here, for example, is an anthology deaccessioned by the young, computer-conscious new librarian of my son's school. I bought it for a dollar at the Spring Fair. *The Silver Swan: Poems of Romance and Mystery* (1966), edited by Horace Gregory and Marya Zaturenskaya, might, had I encountered it as a child, have been as striking as its near-contemporary *The Wind and the Rain,* a book which, as I've said, cast a lasting spell. But as a jaded adult I find this anthology doesn't come up to scratch. The title raises both expectations and hackles—it seems hyperbolic yet limiting. It's odd to find Blake's "A Poison Tree" grouped with poems I hadn't known by MacNeice and Muir as examples of "romance and mystery" —a typical anthologist's gambit that yokes incongruities without changing the fact that some poems defy categorization. At the same time, the Muir and MacNeice poems are the reason I haven't yet brought myself to part with *The Silver Swan.* Where else would I have encountered them?

A world away from romance and mystery is the unifying idea behind X. J. Kennedy's 1981 anthology *Tygers of Wrath: Poems of Hate, Anger, and Invective.* The notion of devoting a whole book to angry poems is a good one; people's eyes sparkle when I tell them about Kennedy's anthology. Actually reading *Tygers,* though, is rather disappointing; not only is the quality uneven, but stubborn problems of classification arise, partly because many poems are also something other than simply angry. Kingsley Amis's little gem "Shitty," for example (another poem well worth getting to know), stirs anger into a poignant elegy.

> Look thy last on all things shitty
> While thou'art at it: soccer stars,
> Soccer crowds, bedizened bushheads
> Jerking over their guitars . . .
>
> High-rise blocks and action paintings,
> Sculptures made from wire and lead:
> Each of them a sight more lovely
> Than the screens around your bed.

Other poems in *Tygers* don't seem angry at all. Is it the flatness of William Carlos Williams's language that makes the raped woman's voice in "The Raper from Passenack" sound so disaffected? Or does this lackluster poem accurately mime depression? Whatever the reason, "The Raper" seems out of place among Kennedy's tygers.

Introductions are the traditional venue for anthologists either to proclaim their criteria for inclusion or to grumble at the limitations these impose, or both. Often the introduction is also the place to look for clues as to what kind of book the anthologist is reacting against. In his Introduction, Kennedy points out the simperingly roseate view of human nature evinced by many nineteenth-century anthologists; he

seems to be out to right the balance of bile. But *Tygers* illustrates a problem often faced by anthologists who choose to build their collections around a theme: what initially seems like a wonderful idea turns out to be hard to sustain.

Nevertheless, *Tygers* is a book I'm happy to have on my shelf. Even when I cavil at individual choices, the collection is amusing and informative. In addition, Kennedy's Introduction points the way toward two delectable-sounding books I've so far been unable to locate: Joseph Rosner's *The Hater's Handbook: A Survey of Abuse Hurled at the Famous* and Donald Carroll's *Dear Sir, Drop Dead! Hate Mail through the Ages.*

More massive and imposing-looking than *Tygers* is the next anthology on my shelf: Jerome McGann's 1993 *New Oxford Book of Romantic Period Verse.* At 832 thin pages and double-columned to boot, this anthology has the feel of a textbook, and, in McGann's Introduction, some textbook language, too: "The anthology format opens the doors of one's perception to changes of many kinds . . . I have tried, through the device of chronological arrangement of the texts, to break down the extreme domination of an author-centered perception of the poetry."

I remember McGann as a dynamic teacher from his graduate course on the Romantics at Hopkins more than twenty years ago—what a pleasure it was to slope around the corner from the Writing Seminars wing of Gilman Hall to the world of "Beppo," "Julian and Maddalo," and *The Prelude.* But this scholar's youthful enthusiasm has evidently changed its spots, unless I was myself too young and naive in 1977 to understand McGann's thinking. My own instinct, if I wanted to "break down the extreme domination of an author-centered perception of the poetry," would be to look at themes, subjects, styles, formal characteristics of that poetry—in a sense, to break the poetry itself down, perhaps more a critic's than an anthologist's task. Such a breakdown is accomplished, in a way, by anthologies organized around a theme; in *Tygers,* for example, Yeats is pried out of national, chronological niches to stand cheek by jowl with Sylvia Plath, Amiri Baraka, and William Carlos Williams. But McGann's chosen way of de-emphasizing poetic authorship is to substitute a less interesting set of slots—years. Thus one learns, looking at his Table of Contents, that Hogg's "A Witch's Chant" appeared in the same year (1817) as "Manfred" and "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty." But are we any the wiser? Even if a chronological approach solves some problems, it creates others, for McGann regrets at some length that his chronological and other criteria prevent his including certain important poems: "My general purpose is to make a fair representation of the work (as well as the kind of work) being read in the period, of the poetry that was in more or less general circulation. This aim brought me to adopt the following rule: to include only those works that had been printed and distributed at the time. This rule of course yields some startling absences: *The Prelude,* most notably, but also . . . Shelley's 'Epipsychidion' . . . " McGann understands the invariably arbitrary nature of his criteria: "One could as easily imagine . . . a collection with a completely different emphasis: one, for example, that collected only those works which did not find their way into print, or which were held back from publication by their authors." I restrict myself to quoting only one other example of a hapless anthologist singing this tune: W. H. Auden in the Introduction to his 1966 anthology *Nineteenth-Century Minor British Poets:*

"Who is a nineteenth-century British poet?" is an easy question. All the poets represented in this volume were British subjects, born between 1770 and 1870, and all the poems here printed were first published between 1800 and 1900. Even so, inequities occur. Crabbe, whose first work was published after 1800, cannot be represented by his best poems since. . . .

And so on. But why set up boundaries you yourself chafe against? One answer seems to be that there's something inherently exclusionary in the very idea of any kind of collection. Whether the anthologist bewailing his dilemma knows it or not, poetry anthologies involuntarily foster limits and exclusions at least as much as inclusions and liberations. McGann's anthology contains many wonderful poems. It also boasts a striking cover, a somewhat Fuseli-like detail from a "Self-Portrait, ca. 1780" by James Barry. Lips parted, shirt open at the neck, brush in his right hand, the painter has portrayed himself staring at the viewer. With his left hand he holds up a painting, part of which we can see: presumably a mythological scene, with a glimpse of blue sky, mountain, ocean, and a titanic horned figure. The painter is probably posing in his studio; behind him is a stone pedestal on which the massive bare foot of a statue can be made out, as well as a coil of dragonish body and an upside-down reptilian head. Amidst these emblematic fragments, the painter neatly symbolizes the beleaguered anthologist at bay among masterpieces, excerpts, and choices.

Sometimes one wishes anthologists felt more beleaguered, less confident they're putting the right poem in the right pigeonhole. "The Raper from Passenack" may or may not belong in a collection of poems about hatred, whereas "A Poison Tree" and "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" defy categorization. Planting Blake's deadly tree among their poems of romance and mystery, Gregory and Zaturenskaya do the poem no harm but make themselves look a little silly. The same is true of William Pratt's inclusion of certain poems (among them "Blackbird") in an anthology I acquired in college and have doggedly held onto: *The Imagist Poem* (Dutton, 1963). Has it really taken me this long to react to Pratt's prissy Introduction? More likely I'd never read it before; a curious feature of introductions to anthologies is their optional, disposable nature. Pratt writes of Eliot's "Preludes" that the title "seems a proper way of describing all Imagist poems, for they were the prelude to the full orchestration of the modern poem." What "the modern poem" is we're not told. This kind of language may be a particular pitfall of a generic anthology: neither thematically nor chronologically arranged, generic anthologies are selected according to often rigid or narrow notions of literary history, so that style—that nebulous, protean, elusive quality—itself gets officially labeled.

I'm not advocating the exclusion of all important poems from anthologies on the grounds that such poems burst whatever niche they find themselves tucked into; great poems survive even incongruous surroundings. A striking example of a wonderful poem not distorted or belittled, exactly, but unmistakably bemused by its new neighbors is the very first piece one comes across in Jason Shinder's 1996 *Lights, Camera, Poetry! American Movie Poems, The First Hundred Years* (Harcourt Brace): Robert Frost's "Provide, Provide." I suspect Frost, who said poets should get the credit for whatever meaning anyone found in their work, would chuckle at this contingency. What is a "movie poem," anyway—a poem specifically about one or more movies, or a poem

that somehow alludes to cinema? "Provide, Provide," despite its reference to "the picture pride of Hollywood," is scarcely about movies. If we absolutely must classify, alternate categories abound. For example, since "Provide, Provide" also refers to both Abishag and the Stock Exchange, it could be pounced on by anthologists in search of Old Testament poems or Wall Street poems. (Everything is grist for the thematic anthologist's mill—love, illness, dogs.) A pleasant irony is that "Provide, Provide," possibly because of its lack of local New England color, tends to be scantily represented in selections of Frost's work; all the more reason to welcome its incongruous appearance in *Lights, Camera, Poetry!*

Shinder's compilation is an instructive specimen of the theme-centered poetry anthology. At least as often as they're interesting or unexpected, such collections are repetitious or incoherent. Assemble a hundred poems about the same topic and lo and behold, many of them turn out to resemble one another. What follows? On the one hand, the importance of the individual author may seem diminished (McGann, take note!). An AIDS elegy, for example, can hardly help seeming less urgent and poignant when it's planted in a field devoted exclusively to such elegies. On the other hand, a common theme, when treated by three or four poets, is often a good indicator of just how unlike their styles, voices, temperaments, or traditions really are. In teaching poetry, I like to use thematic clusters—three or four poems "about" motherhood, traveling, any common topic. Three or four, however, isn't a hundred; thematically organized anthologies rarely escape overkill.

The problem of organization must be solved by anthologists of every stripe. *Lights, Camera, Poetry!* could easily have been split into sections about silent films, Westerns, screwball comedies, and so on; or arranged according to the films, actors, or directors the various poems refer to—possibilities abound. In fact Shinder has chosen to arrange his anthology chronologically by the birthdate of the poet, with interestingly random results. Frost, Sandburg, and Vachel Lindsay, leading off the volume, are uneasy bedfellows, as are Howard Moss, Denise Levertov, and Jack Kerouac later on.

The poems Shinder has chosen tend to press the question of just what "about" means. In Jorie Graham's "Fission" and Edward Hirsch's "The Skokie Theater," movies serve as backdrops to events as public as the assassination of President Kennedy or as private as a first kiss. In Marvin Bell's "On Location," the director is a clumsy stand-in for the creator (read poet). I miss John Hollander's early "Movie-Going," not only because the poem is a rich one but because it's explicitly about movie theaters on Manhattan's Upper West Side, and hence also the movies seen in them long ago, and hence also memory, art, and desire. Indeed, the net effect of *Lights, Camera, Poetry!* is to generate musings about the nature not so much of movies as of metaphor, memory, mimesis, and other questions of poetics. Isn't this true for all theme-centered anthologies? The editors of an anthology called *Dog Music* (St. Martin's Press, 1996, edited by Joseph Duemer and Jim Simmerman) are explicit on this matter in their Introduction:

> What follows in this kennel of verse is a wide assortment of recent works in English . . . which may or may not be about dogs, but which consistently use dogs as central figures of metaphor and for meditation. Thus, the topics of these poems include love, art, family, politics, religion. . . .

In addition to *The Tygers of Wrath, Lights, Camera, Poetry!*, and *Dog Music,* two other theme-centered anthologies have recently crossed my desk: Jon Mukand's *Articulations: The Body and Illness in Poetry* (University of Iowa, 1994) and Michael Blumenthal's *To Woo and to Wed* (Poseidon, 1992). (How many such anthologies sink without a trace? They rarely seem to get reviewed; are they swiftly remaindered, ending up in That Bookstore on Eastern Avenue or the Good Will? Do the appropriate anthologies somehow find their way into dog grooming salons, movie theater lobbies, or hospital gift shops?) *Articulations* is nothing if not highly articulated. It's divided into ten sections, which are not arranged chronologically by poets' birthdates, as in Shinder, or alphabetically by poets' surnames, as in *Dog Music;* instead, each section refers to aspects of or viewpoints about the experience of illness. Each section's title is then followed by a relevant phrase from a poem in that section. Thus three representative sections in *Articulations* are entitled "The Body: Just Where Grace Resides"; "The Medical Environment: The Hospital Smell Combs My Nostrils"; and "Patients' Views of Illness: The Dark Within Me is Growing." Mukand, a physician, is an anthologist who takes the presentation of his material very seriously. Surely he had help assembling this hefty collection? I have a vivid memory of my mother on her hands and knees on the living room floor, sorting index cards for my father's latest book. No doubt Mukand used a computer for his taxonomic tasks, but one still feels the loving attention put into his arrangements.

Unfortunately, most of Mukand's critical energy has gone into collecting and ordering the poems. He doesn't seem particularly interested in poetry itself, whether as a standard or an idea, an editor's yardstick or a cultural tradition. In other words, Mukand doesn't have much literary taste. His Introduction, which held my attention, deals with his experiences as a doctor rather than with the poetics of illness. The closest Mukand comes to aesthetic or literary judgments are a couple of all-purpose adjectives (my italics):

> Collected here are some of the most *honest* and *moving* poems that I have encountered. I hope that these poetic articulations will help patients cope with illness, friends and family members to understand the patient's condition, and health care professionals in their challenging work.

Mukand doesn't specify just how such help might work, but he clearly regards his anthology as a therapeutic rather than a literary project. Nor is this necessarily a deluded hope. This is a book that might well be—perhaps has already been—assigned to medical or nursing students, psychologists, or social workers. Nevertheless, for the reader who is also a lover of poetry, the familiar paradox remains: the very act of assembling so many like-minded poems on a similar topic inevitably homogenizes, flattens, and diminishes them. This inexorable law is never crueler than in a book like *Articulations,* where even as the subject matter cries out for compassion, empathy, individual human attention, the ranks of death-pale warriors one encounters in poem after poem involuntarily present a regimented appearance.

For every poem featuring a dog or a movie, most contemporary poets have probably written half a dozen dealing with illness and death, for mortality is a great inspirer of poetry. One of the editors of *Dog Music* ventures to hope that even readers who are not dog fanciers will find some poems to their liking in the anthology. But who isn't

a fancier of illness? Inescapably implicated as we all are, we almost have to be interested. Virtually all the poems Mukand has assembled speak with the authority of experience. The problem isn't in authenticity but—to repeat—overkill, with its attendant risks of numbness and finally indifference. This issue arises with most subject-centered anthologies, but here the very poignancy of the theme fills the exhausted reader with guilt: how can I not care? Yet how, bombarded by so many poems about extremity, can I keep on caring?

Articulations includes work by some wonderful poets, among them Mona Van Duyn, Anthony Hecht, and Donald Justice, whose work is a hard act to follow for the many poems in the collection which seem to have been chosen on the basis of subject matter rather than technique. Many of my contemporaries turn up in these pages. In the Table of Contents, as at an artists' colony reunion, I can nod to Molly Peacock, Ellen Bryant Voigt, Rika Lesser, William Logan, and Kelly Cherry, among others. In the section entitled "Family and Friends: Afraid to Name This Dying," Kelly and I both have poems about our mothers' last illnesses. Looking at these two neighboring poems, I reflect that Kelly and I—I know her fairly well—have never talked to each other in any detail about our mothers' respective deaths. But because we are writers, poets, women, Americans, late twentieth-century, all of the above, it seems we feel no qualms in writing about our mothers' deaths. Confident that we are not being indiscreet or tasteless, cloying or dull, confident that our readers, whoever they are, will somehow find and take what they need from our poems, we apparently assume an audience of everyone and anyone. Looking through *Articulations* reminds me that these are very large assumptions.

I'm sure Mukand is wrong to subtitle this section "Afraid to Name This Dying." The culture at large may be afraid to "name" dying, but naming is what poets are best at. We shove shut doors open, stride to the bedside, take a good look, describe what we see, reminisce, rant, pray, address the comatose, the deceased, the doctors and nurses, and often castigate ourselves for failing to do more. Despite my cavils, *Articulations* is a book I want to hold onto.

On the other hand, Michael Blumenthal's *To Woo and To Wed* did not survive the last thinning of my anthology shelf. Its irritating qualities began at the Introduction, though they didn't end there. Blumenthal claims to be aware of the potential pitfalls challenging the wary anthologist:

> Like any anthologist, I have no doubt failed, at least in part. No doubt, some poets have been included who should, in some readers' eyes, have been omitted, and some omitted who should have been included. For every anthology is, in the end, also a compilation of compromises and prejudices, oversights and omissions. . . .

OK. As with McGann's "the anthology format opens the door of one's perceptions," truisms bear repeating. But it's harder to swallow when Blumenthal quotes from Montale's "bitingly satirical" essay (the phrase is Blumenthal's) "The Poet":

> The poet [Montale writes, or Blumenthal quotes, which may not be the same thing] isn't fond of other poets, but from time to time he turns into an anthologist and collector of poems of others so that he can include his own as well.

Whereupon Blumenthal blithely confesses "having not hesitated to include a none-too-small handful of my own poems, I think it would be an act of false innocence not also [*sic*] to subject myself to the scrutiny of Montale's words." But it's hard to see how Blumenthal subjects himself to any such scrutiny when he cozies up to Drayton (the two Michaels side by side) in the section entitled "Love Recognized" in addition to indeed including a generous handful of his own poems in his anthology. A comparison of the sixteenth-century Michael's work to the contemporary's is hardly to the latter's advantage; does Blumenthal not know this, or doesn't he care? There is, by the way, no coherent chronology in *To Woo and To Wed*. Shakespeare, Drayton, Byron, Shelley, Kahlil Gibran, and Michael Blumenthal all swim in synchronic waters; but recent American poetry outweighs other work throughout the anthology.

Given its theme, *To Woo and To Wed* can hardly fail to contain some beautiful poems. As with dogs, most poets have probably written at least once on marriage, and as with dog poems, many marriage poems may well be about something else. The section entitled "Epithalamia" is promising, if notable for certain surprising omissions, like Spenser. Here are poems by Robert Graves and Seamus Heaney I'm glad to encounter for the first time, as well as more familiar poems by Richard Wilbur and James Merrill. Here, still crackling with manic energy, is Gregory Corso's "Marriage." Yet no sooner do I start to enjoy a poem in this anthology than—precisely because it's by a poet whose work I know well—misgivings set in. Surely in Merrill's "Upon a Second Marriage," the second stanza should not be divided in two after the fourth line? I check the original in *The Country of a Thousand Years of Peace* and find that I'm right; and then I check Blumenthal's attributions and discover that, according to him, "Upon a Second Marriage" was first published in *Divine Comedies*. Opportunities for error are of course ubiquitous; many if not most anthologies contain a sprinkling of them. Still, Blumenthal sets a high standard in the inaccuracy department. In addition to the faulty lineation and erroneous citation of the Merrill poem, *To Woo and To Wed* spells my first name wrong once and right twice, and also gets wrong the title of the poem of mine it excerpts. These are only the errors I could easily detect; there are certainly others.

Accuracy aside, what about our old friend theme? Blumenthal shares Mukand's itch to categorize and label various subtopics of his subject, but the results are less intelligible than Mukand's. Blumenthal's Table of Contents includes eleven categories: I Because; II Epithalamia; III So Much Happiness; IV Toward a Definition of Marriage; V Two-Part Harmony; VI Identities; VII A Man and a Woman; VIII The Ache of Marriage; IX From Grief to Grief; X Love Recognized; XI Anniversaries: The Progress of Love. Despite the plethora of categories, incoherence prevails. In "So Much Happiness," for example, it's startling to come upon Elizabeth Bishop's posthumously published and singularly private poem "It is marvelous to wake up together." Bishop's poem is about—well, a thunderstorm, intimacy, desire; lots of things, but a honeymoon (which might be thought to follow the section entitled Epithalamia) is not one of them.

Happiness, not marriage, is probably Blumenthal's true topic. A Kübler-Ross of joy, he plots an emotional arc from commitment to continuation, with a few ups

and downs along the trajectory. It's also possible, though, that this anthologist's hidden agenda isn't human emotion but poetry. Blumenthal's own poem "Revisions" (embarrassingly juxtaposed with Drayton's "Since There's No Help") compares a troubled marriage to a problematic poem in progress; both poem and marriage are flawed but neither is doomed. For some reason, this unmemorable poem and Drayton's classic sonnet are both to be found under the rubric "Love Recognized." Much great poetry since Sappho has been occasioned by love—recognized or otherwise, happy or wretched. But we don't need the elaborately sloppy *To Woo and To Wed,* a book which the publishers probably hoped would be a popular wedding present or—even worse—a source for homemade marriage vows. By contrast, Duemer and Simmerman's *Dog Music,* already referred to, is an agreeably straightforward anthology which features many unfamiliar poems by familiar poets, as well as some surprises. I've already quoted the comment in *Dog Music*'s Introduction that "these poems may or may not be about dogs, but they certainly use dogs." In fact, the most successful poems in the volume are—or do—both. It's worth pausing over this question of aboutness, a crucial one for many anthologists. The problem is pondered by Lynne Sharon Schwartz in her meditation *Ruined by Reading.* "Few subjects," she writes, "are inherently dull; language is where dullness or liveliness resides. Subject, it seems, is little more than a bridge to something more crucial." It follows that all subjects are at the mercy of the writer's skill with words. Schwartz quotes from Adam Zagajewski's "The Untold Cynicism of Poetry," where the Polish essayist goes farther than Schwartz does in altogether denying the importance for the writer of subject matter. Zagajewski's provocative words should be pondered by every anthologist:

> Poetry pretends it is interested, oh yes, very interested in external reality . . . . War? Terrific. Suffering? Excellent . . . reality is simply indispensable; if it did not exist, one would have to invent it. Poetry attempts to cheat reality; it pretends that it takes reality's worries seriously. It shakes its head knowingly.

Many contemporary poets and anthologists would claim that pretending is immoral; that in order to be honest and moving (Mukand's adjectives in his Introduction to *Articulations*), the poem must deal with reality. But my reading in all these anthologies suggests that a poem or indeed a whole collection can lean so hard on its subject matter that the ostensible theme—the slice of reality constituted by illness or marriage or dogs—topples over like a piece of rickety scenery. And then what's left? In Wallace Stevens's prescient lyric "Of Modern Poetry," the challenge is to find "what will suffice," in the absence of the traditional mise-en-scène of beliefs. Of course what will suffice has to be rediscovered again and again, generation by generation, poet by poet, poem by poem. A respirator, a vet's office, a bedroom—all these may seem like topics, yet if Schwartz is right and if they truly suffice, all are merely "bridges to something more crucial." That something has to be the language of which the poem is composed. Once we have crossed the bridge, it may be that we can leave the theme behind.

That being said, *Dog Music* is an engaging collection, one I can easily imagine giving as a gift to a dog lover with even the slightest tolerance for poetry. A pungent odor seems to rise from its pages, compounded of nostalgia, wet dog hair, and hopeless

longing—hopeless because so many dog poems are poems of love and loss. Hopeless also because like so many of the addressees of love poems, dogs do not respond in kind; deep within the bond linking man and his best friend lurks the quintessentially human wistfulness of isolation.

Like my shelf of anthologies, these remarks could be weeded and pruned and still go on forever. Among the anthologies I've omitted here are more in which my own work appears (*A Formal Feeling Comes; The Gazer's Spirit; Rebel Angels*) and others, like *Strong Measures,* in which it does not. There are also anthologies of love poems by women; of poems ostensibly by (as versus about) dogs; of poems by gay poets about their dogs. There are anthologies of poems about motherhood, about grandparents, about sex. Drop by any big bookstore: poetry anthologies are almost as plentiful as cookbooks, and increasingly (like cookbooks) targeted at variously segmented readerships. Despite symptoms of surfeit, I remain grateful for poetry anthologies—the general idea of them and a few memorable examples in particular, to which I'll end by paying tribute.

First: Kingsley Amis's 1988 *The Amis Anthology: A Personal Choice of English Verse.* Having savored this unique collection, I wasn't surprised to learn from the *Times Literary Supplement*'s notice (5 July 1996) about the then upcoming Sotheby's sale of Amis's library that Amis had been an enthusiastic marginal commentator:

> The catalogue mentions . . . that [Amis's] copy of *The Penguin Book of Contemporary Poetry* contains remarks "approving the work of Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley and James Fenton, but with very derogatory remarks about the others ('never mind . . . BALLS . . . a fool . . . not obscene but formless . . . piss poor . . . ')"

Such marginalia would have been very helpful when it came to assembling the annotator's personal favorites. (No doubt Amis could easily have collected his least favorites, too.) For Amis's anthology is a window into one man's taste, memory, and emotions; it amounts to a compressed literary memoir. It is also an excellent example of the kind of anthology which guides the reader only backwards, if at all, from the beauty of the language to the subject matter which occasioned that language.

Amis is often bowled over—and seeks to bowl the reader over in turn—by poems which, if we insist on theme, are "about" sex, death, patriotism, childhood, or an old horse out at grass. Rather than arranging these topically under a series of headings à la Mukand or Blumenthal, Amis presents the poems chronologically by author, supplying the poets' dates in the Table of Contents. Instead of the usual Notes on Contributors, he offers far more interesting notes on the poems themselves, beginning helpfully with a "Note on the Notes," which ends with a stern double admonition:

> Two cautions. It should not be thought that the more I (or anyone else) find to say about a poem or poet, the better or more interesting the poem . . . will be. And read the poem before looking at the notes on it, not the other way round.

I tried to obey the second command, but the notes on the poems were so interesting that I kept helplessly doubling back to them. Some record a moment of enlightenment; thus on George Peel's (1558–97) "Chopcherry," a luscious brief evocation of springtime and sex, the editor notes in the third person that "the song . . . surprised the young

Amis by showing that proper poetry could be about that too." The young Amis makes another cameo appearance (in the first person this time) in a note on a poem by Auden:

> Auden's poetry was for me an acquired taste: as a schoolboy I made nothing of it. Its obscurity put me off and still does, though not enough since then to prevent me from thinking his best poems as good as any in English in the last hundred years.

Some of Amis's most trenchant notes are all the more authoritative for making no mention at all of the anthologist who writes them, as for example this on Thomas:

> Dylan Thomas knew no Welsh from first to last, though he is sometimes sloppily alleged to have "thought" in that language. This poem ["The Hunchback in the Park"] shows him, for once in his life, writing about something outside himself.

A final example of the kind of note that kept this reader of the Amis anthology happily if guiltily flipping back and forth from text to commentary is this one on John Davidson's magnificent poem "The Runnable Stag." Here Amis pithily covers his own developing reactions not only to the poem but to what has to be called the human tragedy. My own note here: "The Runnable Stag" is much too long to quote in full and doesn't lend itself to being excerpted, but it is about hunting, and the animal of the title is doomed. Amis writes:

> For years I read this as a passionate attack on one particular form of selfish behavior, made the more effective by fully celebrating the attraction of that behavior. Then I thought of it as an attack on all selfishness and irresponsibility, one that said 'This is the kind of terrible, pitiful thing you do when you enjoy yourself regardless of others, and it serves you right when, as often happens, you don't even enjoy it.' Now I see in it not so much indignation as sorrowful acceptance of human suffering. A less "Victorian" poem it would be hard to imagine.

I can best give the flavor of another wonderful poetry anthology, John Hollander and Harold Bloom's *The Wind and the Rain* (which I mentioned earlier), by reproducing its Table of Contents. In a format that should seem familiar by now, *The Wind and the Rain* is divided into thematic sections—but sections which I didn't realize until graduate school were probably derived from Northrop Frye's Orderings of Myth in his *Anatomy of Criticism,* an influential book with which the young editors of *The Wind and the Rain* were certainly familiar.

Luckily, it isn't necessary to have heard of Frye in order to respond intuitively to the evocative grouping of poems in this anthology—that is, according to the four seasons, with a coda-like final category entitled "Beyond Winter." This arrangement is an inspiration to readers whether they're poets, lovers of myth, or simply, as Frye was, inclined toward compendious organizations (anatomies) of experience. Moreover, it manages to move individual poets from their pedestals far more evocatively than does McGann's bald chronology. In *The Wind and the Rain,* George Darley and Edgar Allan Poe, John Milton and John Davidson, Christina Rossetti and Edmund Waller are all harmoniously and simultaneously present. Synchronicity reigns—or to put it more poetically in the words of the passage from *Paradise Lost* excerpted here, "With thee conversing, I forget all time."

Here is *The Wind and the Rain*'s Table of Contents: I The Wind and the Rain; II

Spring: Pan; Diana; Courtship; the Road; III Summer: Birthdays; Hunting; Madness; Nonsense; Music; IV Fall: Outlaws; Soldiers; the Sea; Evening; Elegies and Farewells; V Winter: Snowstorm; Separations; Hauntings; The Night; Witches and Spells; Drinking Songs; VI Beyond Winter: The New Year; Love; The Muses; The Earthly Paradise. Of course such a menu de degustation is open to the cavils of the literal-minded. Isn't fall, not spring, hunting season (at least in America)? Don't birthdays come at every time of year? What is especially autumnal about soldiers? And so forth. But even the questions elicited by *The Wind and the Rain* are poetical and imaginative, not least because of the quality of the poems Hollander and Bloom have chosen.

Finally I want to salute Francis Palgrave's *Golden Treasury,* a book beloved by Robert Frost among others. The Preface to the edition of Palgrave I happen to own is chiefly remarkable for the contrast it affords with the prefaces and introductions of some of the more recent anthologies considered here. To start with, Palgrave's chief criterion appears to be simply excellence:

> This little Collection differs, it is believed, from others in the attempt made to include in it all the best original Lyrical pieces and Songs in our language, by writers not living,—and none beside the best. Many familiar verses will hence be met with; many also which should be familiar;—the Editor will regard as his fittest readers those who love Poetry so well that he can offer them nothing not already known and valued.

When, as anthologists often do, Palgrave comes to account for his ordering principles, the criteria are even more unfashionable in their frank attention to aesthetic pleasure:

> In the arrangement the most poetically-effective order has been attempted. The English mind has passed through phases of thought and cultivation so various and so opposed during these three centuries of Poetry, that a rapid passage between the Old and New, like rapid alteration of the eye's focus in looking at the landscape, will always be wearisome and hurtful to the sense of Beauty. The poems have therefore been distributed into Books corresponding, I to the ninety years closing about 1616, II thence to 1700, III to 1800, IV to the half century just ended . . . A rigidly chronological sequence, however, rather fits a collection aiming at instruction than at pleasure, and the Wisdom which comes through Pleasure:—within each book the pieces have therefore been arranged in gradations of feeling or subject. The development of the symphonies of Mozart and Beethoven has been here thought of as a model, and nothing placed without careful consideration. And it is hoped that the contents of this Anthology will thus be found to present a certain unity, 'as episodes,' in the noble language of Shelley, 'to that great Poem which all poets, like the cooperating thoughts of one great mind, have built up since the beginning of the world.'

So many of Palgrave's ideas and assumptions are now in eclipse ("the English mind"; the notion of "the Wisdom which comes through Pleasure"; the existence of a "sense of Beauty") that reading this Preface becomes a poignant little lesson in cultural history. Palgrave's lofty sense of his mission and his confidence that he can carry it out are, at the very least, worth bringing to the notice of today's anthologists and their readers. Such certainties have fallen from grace; what has replaced them? And how will today's anthologies look in a hundred years?

BIBLIOGRAPHY OF ANTHOLOGIES
(ALPHABETICAL BY EDITOR)

The Amis Anthology: A Personal Choice of English Verse, chosen and edited by Kingsley Amis (Arena, 1988)

Nineteenth-Century British Minor Poets, edited with an Introduction by W. H. Auden (Delacorte Press, 1966)

To Woo and To Wed: Poets on Love and Marriage, edited by Michael Blumenthal (Poseidon, 1992)

Dog Music: Poetry about Dogs, edited by Joseph Duemer and Jim Simmerman (St. Martin's Press, 1996)

The Silver Swan: Poems of Romance and Mystery, edited by Horace Gregory and Marya Zaturenskaya (Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1966)

The Wind and the Rain: An Anthology of Poems, edited by John Hollander and Harold Bloom (Doubleday 1961; Anchor Books 1967)

Tygers of Wrath: Poems of Hate, Anger, and Invective, Collected and Edited by X. J. Kennedy (University of Georgia Press, 1981)

The Oxford Book of Twentieth-Century Verse, edited by Philip Larkin (Oxford University Press, 1973)

The New Oxford Book of Romantic Period Verse, edited by Jerome J. McGann (Oxford University Press, 1993)

Articulations: The Body and Illness in Poetry, edited by Jon Mukand (University of Iowa Press, 1994)

A Journey of Poems, edited by Richard Neibling (Dell, 1964)

The Golden Treasury of the Best Songs and Lyrical Poems in the English Language, edited by Francis Turner Palgrave (London: Macmillan and Co., 1861)

The Imagist Poem: An Anthology of the First Imagist Poems, edited by William Pratt (Dutton, 1963)

Lights, Camera, Poetry! American Movie Poems, The First Hundred Years, edited by Jason Shinder (Harvest Books, Harcourt Brace, 1996)