
FORUM

Why Contemporary Poetry is Not Taught in the Academy

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Poetry has become irrelevant. Even those of us who write poetry, a group as prone to self-delusion as any, recognize and lament its passage from the tale of the tribe, from “a traditional means of self-knowledge and a potent challenge to the decrepitude of habit” (Doreski), to just one more tiny wave of noise in the omnivave of information that washes endlessly over us. At best poetry, as it is represented in the mainstream, has become a careerist vehicle to tenure and, perhaps, to some morsel of prestige. At its worst a contemporary American poem in whatever guise (school, tradition, etc.) is a supercilious rant by some small, alienated version of an “I” whose purview is utterly domestic and approaches absolute solipsism, which is to say it is masturbatory in as much as it assumes no *other*.

Ezra Pound told us long ago that “it is the business of the artist to make humanity aware of itself” (*Literary Essays*), that the poet’s role in the culture is to bring to the level of consciousness, to make manifest in the form of a poem, what the race would otherwise not know about itself. The present version of a poem does this in a perverse fashion, by enacting our confusion as regards subjective being and the viability of meaning generally; but beyond its actualization of these deadliest of postmodern feedback loops, it is merely an artifact of this debauched age and as such an abdication by the poet of his/her traditional role for the race as hell-raiser and courageous chartmaker of the unknown.

Consequently, the results of my unscientific poll of colleagues around the country who teach contemporary American literature was not very surprising, although certainly disheartening. Many admit that they do not teach poetry at all, even in non-genre-specific survey courses. Those who do teach poetry mostly offer up canned responses to the staid standbys from literature survey textbooks, which

are, sadly, mostly interchangeable in spite of at least ostensible attempts by publishers in recent years to be more inclusive as regards gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. Poems like Elizabeth Bishop's "The Fish" and Roethke's "My Papa's Waltz" are certainly works of merit, but they are hardly contemporary and only nominally fulfill Pound's expectations. Even the poems meant by the editors to represent other than white male perceptions of the world, frequently by great poets like Li-Young Lee and Audre Lorde, tend to the more innocuous examples in those poets' oeuvre (although there were notable exceptions mentioned — Lorde's "Power," for example).

The few brave souls I spoke with who do take on the beast that is contemporary poetry are all poets themselves, which is perhaps understandable in as much as one must be steeped in the contemporary situation, given its complexity, to participate in it, but that fact is also delimiting for both our students and for poetry. All of these professors told tales of woe as regards their students' capacity to deal with textuality generally and especially the multifaceted product that is a poem. This suggests that poetry's problems are not merely aesthetic: "the one thing you should never do is to suppose that when something is wrong with the arts, it is wrong with the arts ONLY" (Pound, *Guide to Kulchur*). However, questions of the increasing passivity before information aside for the moment, what follows is an interpretation of the present situation of poetry, the reasons it is being largely ignored in literature classrooms. The categorical assertions made here are in no way complete, but they are meant to be representative of the chaotic morass that is contemporary American poetry.

I must admit that when initially contemplating writing an assessment of American poetry at the millennium, I expected to produce another diatribe against the general creative writing program tendency to poems that make form an end in itself, one more rant against the gentrified mainstream, one more lugubrious salute to the captains who control what we read (and, therefore, think) as the ship we are all on continues to list hopelessly in the heavy seas at the end of history. However, and in spite of my occasional despair, especially when I discovered more than enough blame for the current poetical malaise to go around, my notes for this piece revealed something quite unexpected: hope for the future of American poetry — and hope in a certifiable cynic must certainly *mean* something — and a discussion of meaning, that much maligned and assaulted creature, is precisely where this investigation will lead eventually.

My hope, however, is hope in the truest sense of the word, since it is premised upon possibility, potential in our current circumstances that will effloresce or die because of our (poets' and teachers' of American literature) actions or lack thereof.

In the words of a recent poem, and at the risk of sounding apocalyptic, as a culture generally we are at that strange point, *the dialectical fulcrum/ between renaissance and ruin...* (McIrvin, "Prelude," *Dog*) where the choice to act is not an option but a necessity if we are to survive. Paradoxically, however, the former must grow out of the latter and hence the pun in the title of this essay and my unanticipated discovery of hope in the situation of American poetry — it is probably a discredited archetype in the post-(?)poststructural milieu, but nothing grows unless fed from the roots by the decaying corpse of what went before it.

THE CORPUS

Railing against creative writing programs and their generally banal products may be in vogue in some circles, but not merely so. In fact, that content has been sacrificed on the altar of form in the mainstream, period, might almost be a truism now. However, even form has de-evolved in most academic poetry to a mere semblance of its former self. Staunch rhyme and meter have given way to some chimerical, flickering thing that vaguely resembles an archmodel of a poem in its overall rhythm: it does one thing at the beginning, another in the middle, and something to resemble closure at the end, as if it were put together on an assembly line. These products are not the result of a constraint against which the poet must move creatively (not Berrigan's sonnets or Yeats' masterful use of rhyme) as a great chef works in the mode "soufflé" or "sauce," risking failure even as he/she reaches for success, but little squares of pasty nothing. Not ambrosia on the tongue, but not bile either; certainly not fortifying, but not exactly nauseating — just fast-food-sameness, as Donald Hall has referred to them: McPoems and McStories.

Much has also been made, in those same circles, of the neo-confessional inflection of the bulk of workshop poetry — poems frequently so private, so solipsistic in their imagery, that they are virtually meaningless for any reader except, in some poems, the voyeur at the window box with his hand in his pants. At least in this version, however, there is someone breathing under the cardboard printout, some small flavor in its consumption even if the reader gets little more than a slight prurient buzz from the experience.

Although there are probably good programs somewhere, and although there are certainly good teachers/writers struggling in bad ones, by-and-large the *fin de siècle* version of the creative writing program poem is compost for two further reasons: 1) the format itself has led to program saturation. That is, enough generations have been bred to replace their teachers so that the gene pool now approaches absolute banality — no mutation, no innovation, and too great a remove from real literary lineage, which is by definition multivalent and fecund. And, 2)

over the past few decades there has been a decay of English departments generally as places where much of interest (read creative and/or as regards new ideas) happens; which is to say that, not that long ago, to declare your critical/poetical allegiances was to have enemies, however collegial, with whom to argue with conviction over the shape of the discourse. Presently, however, critical and creative decisions seem merely menu choices determined by whatever will best serve one's chances of publication, and those decisions are offered as just that to students as well — no commitment, no fire in the belly required.

Likewise, however, those poets who generally consider themselves the creative writing program's antithesis are also compost, albeit for different reasons. These are the neo-beat/neo-Bukowski-ites who have seized upon much of the masturbatory adolescent rant of the former without either their political and social commentary or the latter's cynical wit. Although this movement as abreaction is understandable given the new conservatism and its mirror image, political correctness, now loose in the land, which together are more effective at stifling individual assertion than any uniformed protector of the status quo, these poets' attempts to out-Buk Bukowski (and there are exceptions — some of Ron Androla's work comes to mind) are usually as self-indulgent as the neo-confessional. Worse, their intention seems to be merely to shock in an age when nobody gets shocked by much of anything, and consequently these poems tend to be vignettes of human suffering that are rarely poignant and too often boring, which is a paradox of some import.

This is not to discount the *vox populi*, the voice of the people, the American idiom as Williams called it, the syntactical beauty of vernacular American English; but when both diction and subject become merely a pose, an ersatz stance toward the world offered up for effect, an affectation, that voice becomes self-parody, pastiche that is neither homage to a way of life nor ironic, just ridiculous. So-called spoken word poetry is a premiere example. The best of it is truly a reflection of the emotional life of the speaker as inflected by his/her political and economic reality, and it is shared in a community that uses language nearly as tribals use it, as a way of establishing and maintaining social bonds. Frequently it is also a way of establishing an identity in contradistinction to the larger culture that has marginalized the speaker. However, too often (especially in a slam environment, that strange conception of poetry as competition, which seems truly, and ironically, American — and is perhaps more like what takes place in the mainstream than participants would care to admit), each poet seems merely hell-bent on blowing the audience away, concerned with effect that is only effect. The ultimate result is too often, unwittingly, parody.

Likewise, although the etiological premises that underlie poststructuralism and the poetry it inflects seem valid, the poets who work in this mode may have done as much as any to bring us to our current state of poetical malaise. At the very least the opacity (Ashbery's term) of much of that work is as meaningless as the neo-confessional and, at its logical extreme, kills communication altogether.

That our language carries the taint of its patriarchal origins and context is probably nearly another truism, and that it at least *can* be hegemonic certainly is true (and perhaps the best of poets have always existed to counterbalance this tendency). But so endlessly to displace meaning so as to achieve meaninglessness, to reduce language to amorphous cipher (and this pun, in spite of the fact that poststructuralism's great gift to poetry is the heightened awareness of the multivariate possibilities in every word to subvert the established and generally accepted order, here works against the poststructural agenda), to understand that the subject of the poem is the same entity subjected to power but not that this entity is also potential change agent, has led in its most extreme incarnations (in much L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E poetry) to dead graphemes on the white void of the page and the murder of the subjective speaker.

Such poetry has not only eviscerated meaning and embalmed the subject but is egregiously elitist. The limitations of language to achieve meaning for segments of the population seems valid, but how does anyone who is not steeped in critical and philosophical esoterica, Derrida and Barthes et al., understand the assertions in a poem in which certain premises are presented as a given? The paradox in Barthes is, of course, that the reader seems more subjectively alive than the writer, but if so the writers of such poetry are at least conscious enough to assume a small but "enlightened" readership, as if their work were an inside joke or the answer to a koan shared with a sneer among adepts. Worse, however, is the tendency among these writers, including those poets whose work has been self-consciously inflected by poststructural assertions but who do not fit neatly into the L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E school, such as the Jorie Graham of *The End of Beauty*, to use what seem to be canned devices. Although I assume the intended effect, if such non-poststructural language can be excused, of the blanks Graham uses throughout that book is to enact certain of poststructuralism's premises, such as offering up the possibility of infinite word choices and therefore potentially infinite interpretations in her use of elision/omission, at best such devices are overused; but mostly these poets seem to ride a one-trick thematic pony. Even the reader who is steeped sufficiently in esoterica to understand frequently wants to howl, "Okay, we get it. Now what? Please, step beyond these tired assumptions and do something new with words." This is of course exactly what those assumptions preclude.

In short, these poets have taken arguably valid philosophical assumptions as regards the relationship of language to power, and control and privilege, and replaced language itself with a silence to equal death. The most thanatos-ridden civilization cannot long stand such dark self-consciousness, such absolute quiet, and these poems are emblematic of the withering-away out of which America's poetry, if it is to survive, must be reborn.

RENAISSANCE?

*And these tend inward to me and I tend outward to them,
And such as it is to be of these more or less I am,
And of these one and all I weave the song of myself.*

Walt Whitman

*In the imagination we are ...
locked in fraternal embrace,
the classic caress of author
and reader. We are one. Whenever
I say "I" I mean also "you." And so,
together, as one, we shall begin.*

William Carlos Williams

So, rather than turning our backs and walking into the nearest wilderness, if one can still be found, to live out our days on trout and snow melt, what must poets do if poetry is to grow again out of its own decayed carcass? How can the dead grapheme give way to the well-placed phoneme and, ultimately, flower into loaded morphemes? How can American poetry not only be reborn but transcend its elitist former incarnations, those before it composted so utterly, without losing the best of what that poetry was?

Before these questions can be broached, however, account must be made of that other, much-less-discussed participant in the poem, the reader, which of course includes our students, however forced upon them the text might be; and here I must admit we will swerve dangerously toward despair. For one thing, I am a poet and thus open to accusations of sour grapes (and I readily admit to that part of the poet's condition: whining about not being understood), but this part of the interaction that is a poem is difficult to evaluate more because of the complex psychosocial scope of the exchange than my vested interest — but herein lies what is at stake if poetry is allowed to die away completely, and thus the imperative that contemporary poetry be taught in the academy.

In the bad old days, the poem's meaning was assumed to be fixed and only "experts," critics and professors, knew for sure what the thing meant. Although there was much lively critical discussion among the New Critics themselves, too many of their academic disciples tended to view the poem as equation: tone + figurative language + rhetorical situation + etc. = specific theme. Happily, that exercise in official reality gave way to what conservatives would characterize as idiosyncratic readings that were all somehow relevant, even if many veered toward the irrational, since any "true" reading was of necessity encyclopedic. Obviously, although decentralizing and democratic in the extreme, communication suffered since all but the most psychotic interpretations (and why not these?) were viewed as valid within the constraints of the individual interpreter's personal experience.

However, synthesis of these dialectical extremes has yielded something far darker than mere convolution of meaning. The suppliant reader who once sat at the foot of the professor or critic for an exegesis now hears only pandemic noise — the poem as noise as well as its interpretation. That is, if those potential interpreters of the poem even bother to speak. Hence teachers who don't teach poetry except as the strange artifact of an age and the virtual extinction of the contemporary poetry critic, especially as strident interpreter of the poem in relation to the culture at large. Consequently, the reader him/herself is silent before anything that remotely resembles a poem.

To some extent of course poets are to blame. Poetry that is solipsistic and banal and masturbatory (i.e., seems to assume *no* reader, *no* other, and speaks to little beyond the poet's own tiny life) demands at best a voyeuristic reading or, more likely, a completely passive one in which no meaning is achieved for anyone except, maybe, the poet. The words just flow by for the reader like words across a screen.

But in an age in which information is entertainment, in which music is a vehicle of corporate pandering, in which the image especially is omnipresent as an adjunct to advertising, to trap us in that bleak simulacrum, in which all realities are mediated and thus vitiated and consequently our being attenuated, it remains to be seen whether we have merely transcended the limitations of interpretation (i.e., all is, merely, noise) or if our readers have lost the capacity for empathy and critical reason that any real achievement of meaning requires.

Therefore, the first logical objective for a reborn American poetry is to steal back what mass/capitalist culture has stolen from us: namely, music and imagery that enacts meaning for our readers. That is, we do not want to regain the "tyranny of the metronome" or end-rhymed lines for their own sake (mostly because strident form reflects a more ordered universe than we can believe in and thus is

inadequate to contain what we must convey), not technical facility of any kind for its own sake. Nor do we wish to canonize any stand toward the world. But poetry needs sound wedded to sense in order to awaken the higher cognitive faculties of readers, to open the doors of perception for them via a sensual engagement with the work. Like the moderns and some of the post-moderns, we need to sing, to paint pictures; but neither for its own sake. Our readers, once awakened, must be inspired, inflamed, saddened, truly sexually aroused, goaded to action ... something. Robert Bly laments in a recent essay for the literary magazine *Black Moon* that “maybe none of us, now that the language has been worked over so incessantly, by advertisers or evangelists, can create something that is consistently brilliant, golden, resonant,” but one thing is certain: art for art’s sake won’t cut it, or art as effluvia of the tiny alienated self, or there will be no art, period. Noise untranscended remains noise.

This brings us to the purpose for poetry and the promised discussion of meaning. It is conceded that any act of communication is an attempt to control discourse. Writing is, poetry especially (or at least it should be — so curse me for being prescriptive), an act of violence, even if the aim is beauty (another discredited concept, ringing as it does of Platonic idealism — *all* puns intended here too). It is an act of violence against the pathetic way-things-are, against exclusion and control, against the average citizen’s complacency as he/she sits vacant-eyed before the bizarre remnants of civilization — long an old bitch gone in the teeth, as Pound said, but now one of the walking dead and “living” off the blood of conscripted others.

In short, American poetry must also be far more than sensation and emotion; it must contain ideas again. When Williams said, “No ideas but in things,” he did not mean that poems were merely to be the containers of objects, but enactments (as in to make active, á la Charles Olson’s assertion in “Proprioception”) of ideas through the constituents of the work, the object being to reify ideas momentarily rather than to wax abstract, to leave room for the reader to interpret meaning within this dance as it is inflected by his/her own reality, their own being, to argue with other readers (including the instructor), to argue with the poet about what his/her poem says or does not say, to achieve some dynamic and provisional consensus, then to re-read the poem and start again.

And the poem must be inclusive, the poet a Whitmanic cannibal swallower of all the speakers he/she meets in order to give them voice, especially the utterly voice-less. The self no diminished oversoul, of course, not the diametrical opposite of the current tiny creatures who only ambivalently occupy our compost, but

a real product of human joy and suffering that must be sung, must be shouted, must be enacted to save us all from mechanomorphosis, to save us all from the willing slavery of marketplace and media that the masses, our students included, no longer even suffering in quiet desperation, seem sometimes to have already entered.

ENVOI

I can hear the voices of exasperation already: poets once more the unacknowledged legislators of the real? Who do they think they are? Poetry, the salvation of democratic individualism and the rebirth of real discourse? Right, and Grandpa Ezra was a fascist and some Romantics wrote opium-induced paeans and Rimbaud gave up poetry for gun-running (which is part of his celebrity but false) and the author of arguably the most widely read poem of the last half of the twentieth century proudly announced in that very poem his pederastic appetites and old so-and-so got scandalously drunk at his reading in our town and had adulterous sex with the hostess/her daughter/son/pets....

In her essay, "A Leak in History," Adrienne Rich diagnosed what America is lacking as sensual vitality and pointed out how that lack leads to amnesia, the forgetting of our past as devastation in our present, and anomie, the personal that exacerbates the societal that deepens and reinforces the personal. Poetry has the potential to arouse all six senses (mind, as in Buddhist thought, being the sixth) and, thereby, to help us in some small way to retain/regain our humanity. Just maybe, if readers feel breath (*spiritus*) rising from their bellies, through their chests, and shining in their vocal chords, feel the buzz of creative attention deep in their brains, perhaps the species can again achieve an active connection to the universe, to life, can again belong here. And if we belong here, perhaps some notion of community, of shared identity, of individual identity that stands in opposition to all that is negative about what the species has wrought (please note the pun) thus far, renaissance is not so farfetched an idea.

That said, I am no utopian and have few illusions about the future of the culture or about poets as extra-human, which would of course only be an admission that we are extra-flawed (as I said, I am a cynic, certifiably), but a poem is potentially, as Williams said, the ground of the dance, where the poet and the reader can do the reality two step — and, right now, too few are dancing. However, some few poets and their courageous publishers and hungry readers *are* dancing, which brings us to that assertion of hope I made at the outset.

Although chaotic, and death always is — the final dissolve, absolute decadence — the current poetry scene is at least multivariate, filled with voices of all persua-

sions. The mainstream remains monolithic, exclusionary and elitist and conservative, but in truth educated, upper-class white males are no longer the only arbiters of what poetry should be in America. In fact, part of our conundrum is precisely that fecundity, that mad complexity, which inevitably yields a widely disparate perception of what good poetry is; but that fecundity also reflects the culture's desire to be inclusive — and not just in that Whitmanic version mentioned above, but in terms of who gets to speak, whose experiences are as valid as anyone's experience. However, my overall assertion here is that most strains of poetry, however vibrant when initially sprouted, have become static at best, if not destructive, have declined unto being compost, albeit a nutrient-rich compost.

But out of this luxurious chaos the first tentative new growth can be witnessed in the form of literary magazines like *Black Moon*, which promotes a poetry of imagination that rises out of South American and East European Surrealism (as opposed to the mostly frivolous French variety), and *Semi-Dwarf Review* which offers up a mix of the same in combination with authentic spoken word poetry that reflects the working-class reality of the poets who produce it. Likewise, *Cedar Hill Review* publishes poetry of depth, of ideas, frequently political work that dares to be didactic but that is never simplistically so; the *Pannus Index* attempts to explore the very difficult terrain of American literature in thematically focused quarterly issues; and a brand new publication, *The Raw Seed Review*, launched its inaugural issue recently with the most authentic poetry its young editor could solicit.

This is obviously a very short list, but the whole list is, sadly, not much longer. However, that these few exist is indeed cause for celebration. The editors have managed to attract writers, and readers, whose sensibilities have not been numbed by media-saturated American life, who have not yet succumbed to meaninglessness, but, on the contrary, stand in opposition to it. Regrettably, there is presently no single source of the best of the morass available for our age like Donald Hall's *Contemporary American Poetry* or Allen and Butterick's *The Postmoderns: The New American Poetry Revised* which served that purpose in earlier decades (and the reader is here advised to be skeptical before those current collections declaring themselves *The Best of...* — they tend to be mechanisms of mainstream banality). However, an intensive search through the melange, sorting the wheat from the overwhelming chaff, is not only well worth the effort but necessary.

Poetry may have become largely irrelevant in the culture at large, and as my survey indicates it may be becoming so in the academy; but the role that poetry has traditionally played as a means to explore the deeper self and the depths of human reality has not been usurped by anything else (all assertions that a text is a

text to the contrary). Teachers of literature long ago eschewed their role as perpetuators of the officialized version of reality, as the avatars of an elitist textual correctness. In spite of the effort necessary to find good poetry, which at its best remains a bastion of contrariety, and in spite of the effort necessary to teach our students how to deal with difficult texts, perhaps it is time for us to play an active role in the revivification of poetry: that the culture may not forget that meaning is a dynamic, the truth the purview of individuals rather than of power, that to *be* actively is an act of conscience. ✨

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