

POETRY

Probably the most significant development in American poetry over the past fifty years has been the eruption of writing by women and people of color. “Eruption,” “explosion,” “outburst”—any of these nouns would be appropriate, suggesting as they do a force long suppressed suddenly finding its way into the open air. The twentieth century, for all its horrors, was also a time when previously silenced poets became vocal. Many of these poets addressed past and current injustices in their poetry; they challenged, adapted, and adopted the dominant poetic voices imposed on them by white writers. But their poetry wasn’t only about prejudice and discrimination (see “Identity Politics”). The whole range of daily life—both dramatic and quotidian—found expression among writers being fully

heard for the first time. The *cuentos* passed down to Latino/a writers from parents and grandparents found their way into poetry, as did the myths of Native American poets and the immigration stories of Asian Americans. African American poetry is, as Clarence Major notes, “vast . . . diverse and often brilliant” (1996, xxx). Among the important recent anthologies collecting this work are *The Garden Thrives: Twentieth-Century African-American Poetry* (Major 1996), *Paper Dance: 55 Latino Poets* (Cruz et al. 2000), *Harper’s Anthology of Twentieth Century Native American Poetry* (Niatum 1988), and *The Open Boat: Poems from Asian America* (Hongo 1993).

Women poets, likewise, have found new, more attentive audiences. Adrienne Rich led the way in the 1960s and 1970s, as her poetry evolved from the well-mannered verse selected by W. H. Auden for the Yale Series of Younger Poets to the radically charged lyrics of *Leaflets* (1969) and *Diving into the Wreck* (1973). Interested readers should turn to *No More Masks: An Anthology of Twentieth-Century American Women Poets* (Howe 1993), *A Formal Feeling Comes: Poems in Form by Contemporary Women* (Finch 1994), and *Claiming the Spirit Within: A Sourcebook of Women’s Poetry* (Sewell 1996), though these books anthologize but a sliver of the outstanding poetry published in the last half century. Equally important are the ever-growing number of volumes in which women poets articulate their aesthetics and their relation to literary history. Noteworthy collections include *Where We Stand* (Bryan 1994), *Dwelling in Possibility* (Prins, Shrieber, and Benstock 1998), and *We Who Love to Be Astonished* (Hinton and Hogue 2001). The voices of women of color have been an especially welcome change to the poetic landscape. Ai, Gwendolyn Brooks (the first African American to win the Pulitzer Prize in poetry), Lorna Dee Cervantes, Wanda Coleman, Rita Dove (the first African American to be chosen America’s Poet Laureate), Joy Harjo, Audre Lourde, Naomi Shihab Nye, and Sonia Sanchez are all significant American poets.

“Poetry is mostly hunches,” John Ashbery has said, but those hunches are based on more than instinct: they are calculated attempts to create a communication between one person and another. Everyone who has ever written a poem, no matter how ill conceived or cliché-ridden, knows this desire to connect with someone else. Indeed, nonpoets primarily interact with poetry on special occasions. A man writes a poem to his wife for their anniversary. A daughter buys a greeting card for her mother’s birthday. For all their sentimentality, these “Hallmark moments” are part of a long tradition of occasional, celebratory poems: epithalamiums for marriage, elegies for funerals, odes for military victories and defeats.

Poetry, from this angle, looks like a made thing. The poet is an architect, an artisan. As the word's etymology suggests, the poet is one who gathers and heaps up ideas and images in an artful way. Indeed, in the 1980s this model seemed particularly appealing to younger poets like Molly Peacock, Phillis Levin, Andrew Hudgins, and Brad Leithauser, who joined the ranks of established formalists such as Mona Van Duyn, Marilyn Hacker, Richard Wilbur, John Hollander, and Anthony Hecht. The younger writers called themselves the New Formalists, and they argued that poems that didn't wrestle with meter and take advantage of at least some of the elements of traditional English prosody weren't really poems at all. These poets invested themselves in villanelles and sonnet sequences. They pontificated, sometimes very eloquently, as in Timothy Steele's *Missing Measures* (1990) and Mark Jarman's *Body and Soul* (2002). They started presses like Story Line and magazines such as *Edge City* and the *New Formalist*. Many believed that the best poems were not only in meter and rhyme, they also told a story. R. S. Gwynn's anthology *New Expansive Poetry* (1999), for instance, argued for the importance of narrative poetry, and several book-length poems appeared that put theory into practice: Vikram Seth's *The Golden Gate* (1986), Frederick Turner's *Genesis* (1988), Gertrude Schnackenberg's *The Throne of Labdacus* (2001).

Granted, the assumption made by some of their detractors that New Formalist poetics inevitably means conservative politics isn't always true. Annie Finch, for instance, advances the idea of "multiformalism," which includes avant-garde traditions. Nevertheless, many New Formalists lean decidedly toward the political right. In May 1991, Dana Gioia published an essay in the *Atlantic Monthly* entitled "Can Poetry Matter?" which seems worth returning to since in 2003 Gioia was named head of the National Endowment for the Arts by George W. Bush. "Poets are like priests in a town of agnostics," Gioia writes (1991, 2), and the simile is instructive. For Gioia, a conservative Catholic, the implication is that poems can be judged against a universal moral code. Moreover, it is not surprising that Gioia, who worked in marketing at the time he wrote his essay, disparages the great migration among American poets to colleges and universities. Yet for all his self-righteous bluster, Gioia does make the excellent point that most "serious" poetry is read only by other poets, and that books of poems are rarely ever given a negative review. Instead, he points out, poetry reviewing is largely a matter of logrolling and mutual back-scratching. And there is something touchingly optimistic about his belief that poetry can and should matter to the world outside of "po-biz," which

faintly echoes Shelley's famous belief: "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world."

If Gioia is a persuasive spokesperson for the right, the left is equally well represented by the voluble gadfly Charles Bernstein. While these two white male intellectuals would seem to share a number of similarities, their aesthetics, and their politics, couldn't be more different. With Bruce Andrews, Bernstein coedited the controversial journal *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* and the ensuing collection, *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book* (1984). Like Gioia, Bernstein has insisted that poets who don't theorize their positions are doomed to repeat poetry that wasn't worth writing in the first place. For decades now, and from a variety of pulpits, he has harangued, pleaded with, scolded, and cajoled that small portion of the American public that cares about contemporary poetry to reject the "bland blandishments" of "official verse culture." In *My Way* (1999) Bernstein embraces the possibilities of electronic poetry, a "medium defined by exchange rather than delivery," one that is "interactive and dialogic rather than unidirectional or monologic" (75). He applauds the potential of hypertextual organization "to break teaching, textbooks, and critical writing from their deadly boring fetishization of narrative and expository ordering of information" (72). Bernstein argues that the crime of the avant-garde artist "is not lack of accessibility but a refusal to submit to marketplace agendas; the reductive simplifications of conventional forms of representation; the avoidance of formal thematic complexity; and the fashion ethos of measuring success by sales and value of celebrity" (146). If Bernstein sometimes has chastening words for his allies, he saves his most potent sallies for "self-appointed keepers of the cultural flame" (146), such as Gioia. In one of his more memorable blasts of vitriol, Bernstein writes, "There's more innovation and more cultural acumen in any episode of *Ren and Stimpy* than in any of the books of our last trio of national poet laureates" (41).

One thing Gioia—in a *Hudson Review* essay entitled "Disappearing Ink: Poetry at the End of Print Culture" (2003)—and Bernstein—as editor of *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word* (1998)—have in common is a belief in the increasing importance of oral, or "spokenword," poetry. Naturally, though, their interpretations of this phenomenon are quite different. Because Gioia wants poets to use recognizable rhythm and meter, he cites with approval contemporary rap artists. For Bernstein (and his contributors), returning to orality means listening for new, alternative prosodies. Yet whatever rhythm one listens for in poetry, a poem nearly

always benefits from being said aloud. Denise Levertov says, “Writing poetry is a process of discovery, revealing inherent music, the music of correspondences, the music of inscape” (1968). Ideally, in a poem, phrases of words are like phrases of music; poets reading from their work are like musicians interpreting the notes on a page. Moreover, we should remember that if poetry’s earliest associations are with music, they are also with drama. The ancient Greek plays were written in verse. The prosody we still use today—trochaic tetrameter, iambic trimeter—comes to us from those comedies and tragedies. And Shakespeare’s blank verse not only helps actors remember their lines, it also gives power to the language, allows it to stutter and dive, sing and soar.

The first flourishing of spokenword poetry in postwar America was during the Beat era, when poets such as Jack Kerouac, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and Philip Whalen gathered in bars and clubs and coffeehouses to read their work. Kenneth Rexroth often performed accompanied by jazz musicians. It was at the Six Club in San Francisco that Allen Ginsberg wailed out his influential poem “Howl.” The energy and experimentation of this era continued into the sixties but waned in the seventies. However, in the eighties, working-class, anti-academic poets like Marc Smith once again tapped into this power source. In places such as Chicago’s Green Mill bar and New York’s Nuyorican Café, the tradition of poets performing their work—memorizing their lines, reading them dramatically instead of in a singsong monotone—reemerged. Anthologies such as *Aloud! Voices from the Nuyorican Poets Café* (Algarin, Holman, and Blackman 1994), *Bum Rush the Page: A Def Poetry Jam* (Medina, Rivera, and Sanchez 2001), and *Stand Up Poetry* (Webb 2002) showcase performance poetry. *Poetry Slam: The Competitive Art of Performance Poetry* (Glazner 2000) includes articles about how to slam, as well as examples of slam poetry.

Spokenword poets are given a soapbox and often a ready, rowdy audience. Not surprisingly, many poets choose this forum to make political statements. Of course poetry is always political, inasmuch as it preaches a particular point of view, a privileged way of seeing the world; however, its politically outspoken form has been criticized by poets on both the right and the left. The position of those on the right is well summarized by Edwin Muir, who argued that the poet couldn’t speak the language of the public, “which is the language of the third party and the onlooker. [The poet] abhors the cliché. He is not concerned with life in its generality, but in its immediacy and its individuality. His object is to see into the life of people, to enter into their feelings and thoughts, good and bad. What can he say to the public, or the

public to him?" (1962, 102). While those on the left are typically more sympathetic to political poetry, some believe that the job of advocating is done more efficiently in prose. If Shelley believed that poets were the "unacknowledged legislators of the world," he also believed "[p]oetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and makes familiar objects be as if they are not familiar." One consistent criticism of political poetry is that it does not reach beyond the rational to the imaginative, that it becomes mired in its own arguments.

That said, outside America the political poem seems much easier to write. As Adrienne Rich notes, "the taboo against so-called political poetry in the US . . . was comparable to the taboo against homosexuality. In other words, it wasn't done. And this is, of course, the only country in the world where that has been true. Go to Latin America, to the Middle East, to Asia, to Africa, to Europe, and you find the political poet and a poetry that addresses public affairs and public discourse, conflict, oppression, and resistance. That poetry is seen as normal. And it is honored" (Klein 1999).

In addition to the spokenword anthologies cited above, *Poems for the Nation* (1999), edited by Ginsberg and others, and Carolyn Forché's *Against Forgetting: Twentieth Century Poetry of Witness* (1993) give testimony to the number and variety of poets writing well on political themes. According to Willie Perdomo, "Shouting slogans doesn't do it for me; it doesn't move me. I'd rather paint a picture, take you for a walk and show you shit that affects my community through dialogue, scenes, and images" (n.d.). Perdomo's values clearly originate in the streets, and many would argue that the most effective political poetry today is being written by "conscious" rappers such as Mos Def, Talib Kwali, Common, and the members of the Roots.

If the poetry of rap is appealing to young people, canonical poets like Pope, Tennyson, and Dickinson frequently receive a much less enthusiastic reception. We first *hear* poetry as nursery rhymes, but we first *study* it in school, so it's not surprising that poetry often has negative connotations for the general public. It's boring. It's affected. It's difficult. It's "abstract." In grade schools, poems are memorized, recited in front of the other students, then forgotten. In high school and college, we are meant to dissect and explicate a poem. It doesn't matter if we love it or not. Of course poetry does hold a certain appeal for some students through the luster shed on it by hip-hop and the Beats. Fortunately, creative writing teachers have managed to tap into this vein of word appreciation, and Poets in the Schools programs continue, even in difficult financial times, to promote an early appreciation of poetry.

Poetry is also useful to writing teachers of all sorts because it provides a compact arena for teaching grammar, style, and diction. In *In Praise of Pedagogy* (2000), the authors of this book argue that writing poetry has many values outside those conventionally ascribed to it. Among the many cognitive functions a poem performs are theorizing and investigating positions, highlighting contradictions, and shedding light on new issues. As Art Young writes, “The purpose of poetry across the curriculum . . . is not to teach students to be better poets but to provide opportunities for them to use written language to engage course content in meaningful ways” (2003, 475).

So what, finally, is a poem? The answer is that it can take almost as many forms as one’s imagination allows. With the increasing prominence of the prose poem, the standard idea that poetry is that which has a ragged right-hand margin is no longer valid. Coleridge’s dictum that it is “the best words in the best order” makes sense, although one could obviously apply that to prose and dramatic writing as well. Keats thought: “If poetry comes not so naturally as leaves to a tree, it had better not come at all.” While this may occasionally be true, every poet of any experience knows that revision plays an essential part in the composing process. Charles Olson writes, “From the moment [the poet] ventures into *FIELD COMPOSITION* . . . he can go by no other track than the one poem under hand declares, for itself” (1950, 614). This idea echoes earlier statements by poets as diverse as Wallace Stevens, who said, “Poetry is a pheasant disappearing into the brush,” and Robert Frost, who believed: “Like a piece of ice on a hot stove the poem must ride on its own melting.” Perhaps it is sufficient to say that in a good poem, even a very long one, every syllable counts. This is not to say that we necessarily count the syllables, but that every moment, every sound, seems somehow necessary. Ultimately, though, no definition of poetry can, or should, satisfy everyone. It is fitting, therefore, to end this provisional essay on the subject with Paul Valery’s famous quote: “A poem is never finished, only abandoned.”