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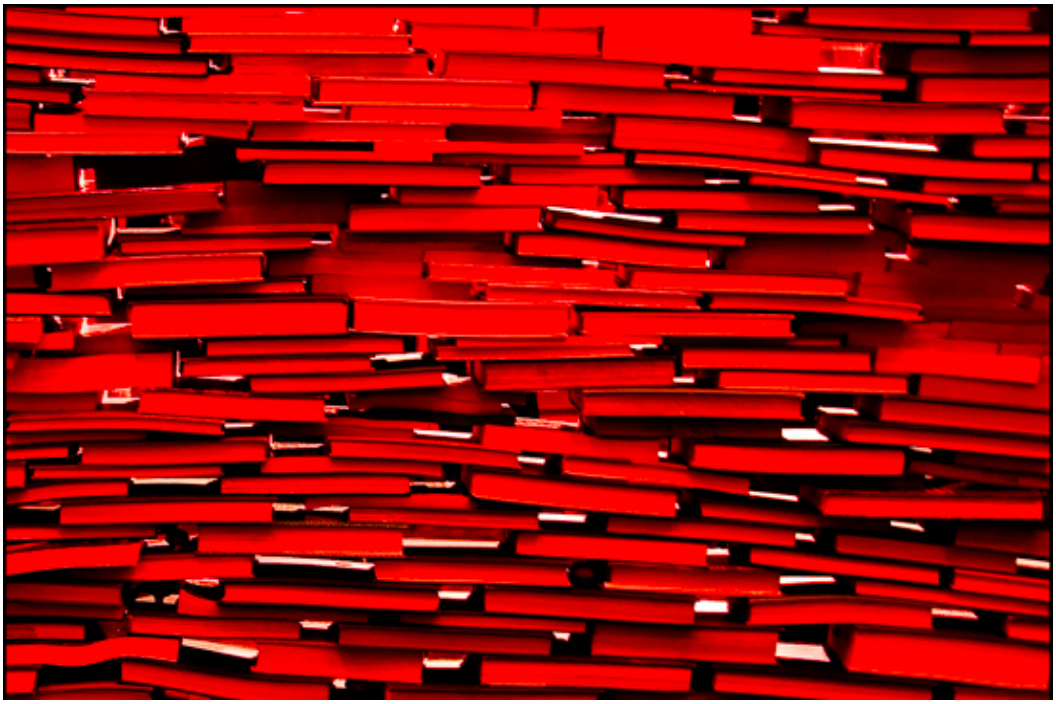
Poetry on the Brink

Reinventing the Lyric *Marjorie Perloff*

SAFETY FIRST brief fast has made me dangerously thirsty for juice.
—Craig Dworkin, Motes *(2011)*



Barbara Stumm

Dejà vu?
What happens to poetry when everybody is a poet? In a recent lecture that poses this question, Jed Rasula notes:

> The colleges and universities that offer graduate degrees in poetry employ about 1,800 faculty members to support the cause. But these are only 177 of the 458 institutions that teach creative writing. Taking those into account, the faculty dedicated to creative writing swells to more than 20,000. All these people must comply with the norms for faculty in those institutions, filing annual reports of their activities, in which the most important component is publication. With that in mind, I don't need to spell out the truly exorbitant numbers involved. In a positive light, it has sanctioned a surfeit of small presses . . . to say nothing of all the Web-zines.

What makes Rasula's cautionary tale so sobering is that the sheer number of poets now plying their craft inevitably ensures moderation and safety. The national (or even transnational) demand for a certain kind of prize-winning, "well-crafted" poem—a poem that the *New Yorker* would see fit to print and that would help its author get one of the "good jobs" advertised by the Association of Writers & Writing Programs—has produced an extraordinary uniformity. Whatever the poet's ostensible subject—and here identity politics has produced a degree of variation, so that we have Latina poetry, Asian American poetry, queer poetry, the poetry of the disabled, and so on—the poems you will read in *American Poetry Review* or similar publications will, with rare exceptions, exhibit the following

characteristics: 1) irregular lines of free verse, with little or no emphasis on the construction of the line itself or on what the Russian Formalists called "the word as such"; 2) prose syntax with lots of prepositional and parenthetical phrases, laced with graphic imagery or even extravagant metaphor (the sign of "poeticity"); 3) the expression of a profound thought or small epiphany, usually based on a particular memory, designating the lyric speaker as a particularly sensitive person who really *feels* the pain, whether of our imperialist wars in the Middle East or of late capitalism or of some personal tragedy such as the death of a loved one.

But even this formula is not a guarantee of continuing success. "Poets and scholars alike are specialists," Rasula says, but in one important respect the two factions are rather different. Whereas scholars gain cultural capital as they move up the academic ladder and can—by the time they become full professors—feel relatively comfortable in their careers, poets are always being displaced by younger poets. Whenever I sort out the hundreds of poetry books that come across my desk and rearrange my bookcases, I notice a curious phenomenon. Poet X has produced two or three successful books and keeps on writing in the same vein, but somehow the fourth book, no better or worse than the previous ones, gets much less attention for the simple reason that, in the interim, so many new poets have come on the scene. The newcomers are not necessarily better than their elders, nor do they write in an appreciably different mode, but the spotlight is now on them. Ezra Pound's "Make it New" has come to refer not to a set of poems, but to the poet who is known to have written them.

It was not always thus. The poetry wars of the 1960s—raw versus cooked, open versus closed, Donald Allen's *New American Poetry* (1960) versus Donald Hall and Robert Pack's anthology *New Poets of England and America* (1962)—produced lively and engaging debates about the nature of poetry and poetics. What made a lineated text a poem? Did poems require some sort of closure, a circular structure with beginning, middle, and end? Should the poet speak in his or her own person, divulging intimate autobiographical details? And so on.

In the 1980s, after Language poetry came on the scene, the poetry wars were renewed, although the context for the debate became more specialized than it was in the 1960s. Language poetry provided a serious challenge to the delicate lyric of self-expression and direct speech: it demanded an end to transparency and straightforward reference in favor of ellipsis, indirection, and intellectual-political engagement. It was closely allied to French poststructuralist theory, later to the Frankfurt School, and hence it was, by definition, a high-culture movement. By the late '90s, when Language poetry felt compelled to be more inclusive with respect to gender, race, and ethnic diversity, it became difficult to tell what was or was not a "Language poem."

The demand for a certain kind of prize-winning, 'well-crafted' poem has produced extraordinary uniformity.

American Hybrid: A Norton Anthology of Contemporary Poetry (2009) exemplifies the precarious rapprochement that followed. The editors, Cole Swensen and David St. John, try their best to fuse mainstream and experimental tendencies. Thus the introduction optimistically claims:

> Today's hybrid poem might engage such conventional approaches as narrative that presumes a stable first person, yet complicate it by disrupting the linear temporal path or by scrambling the normal syntactical sequence. Or it might foreground recognizably

> experimental modes such as illogicality or fragmentation, yet follow the strict formal rules of a sonnet or a villanelle. . . . Hybrid poems often honor the avant-garde mandate to renew the forms and expand the boundaries of poetry—thereby increasing the expressive potential of language itself—while also remaining committed to the emotional spectra of lived experience.

Well-meaning as such statements are, they don't quite carry conviction. For, by definition, an "avant-garde mandate" is one that defies the status quo and hence cannot incorporate it. Indeed, the implication of rapprochement is that poetic choice is arbitrary, that it has nothing to do with the historical moment or the cultural context, much less one's own philosophical perspective. The commitment "to the emotional spectra of lived experience," for example—the commitment of poets such as Whitman, Williams, and Ginsberg—goes hand in hand with the refusal of the sonnet's or villanelle's restrictions on open form, even as, conversely, Yeats declared that the collage mode of the *Cantos* made it impossible for Pound to get "all the wine into the bowl." From the perspective of Yeats and most Modernist readers, these seemingly unstructured poems were no more than beautiful "fragments."

A plus B, in other words, can't simply be combined to constitute a new C (the hybrid). Formal choices are never without ideological implications. Still, Swensen and St. John at least make the effort to forge an aesthetic consonant with the moment. With the publication of Rita Dove's *Penguin Anthology of 20th Century American Poetry* (2011), the very idea of such a project has disappeared. In her introduction, aptly subtitled "My Twentieth Century of American Poetry," Dove candidly admits:

> Although I have tried to be objective, the contents are, of course, a reflection of my sensibilities; I leave it to the reader to detect those subconscious obsessions and quirks as well as the inevitable lacunae resulting from buried antipathies and inadvertent ignorance.

One surmises from the table of contents of this chronological survey that Dove, from her perspective as a woman of color, has included many more minority poets than is usually the case. But her choices are oddly arbitrary: Harryette Mullen, widely considered one of the finest African American poets writing today, gets less than a page; experimental black poets such as Will Alexander and C. S. Giscombe are not included, and, more surprisingly, neither is the prominent Asian American poet John Yau. The Objectivists—Louis Zukofsky, George Oppen, Charles Reznikoff, Carl Rakosi, Lorine Niedecker—poets increasingly written about and studied both here and abroad, are simply written out the canon, as are such significant West Coast poets of the mid-century as Kenneth Rexroth and Jack Spicer.

If we grant Dove her donnée—"a reflection of my sensibilities"—we need not quarrel with these omissions, but what about the copyright issue Dove raises at the close of her introduction? Evidently, she wanted to include Allen Ginsberg (*Howl* gets a prominent mention) and Sylvia Plath, but the reproduction costs were prohibitive. The publisher "who insisted on unaffordable fees" is obviously HarperCollins; the paperback edition of Ginsberg's *Collected Poems*, a Harper Perennial Classic, is an Amazon bestseller, as are Plath's *Collected Poems* and autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar*. Clearly concerned about the omission of these important poets, Dove asks her readers to "cut me some slack" and reminds us that Ginsberg and Plath are readily available "in your local public library."

The newcomers are not necessarily better than their elders, but the spotlight is now on them.

But if the anthology is to have any sort of validity as a textbook or a selection for the general reader, this copyright caveat is unacceptable, and the fault is primarily the publisher's. How could a leading publisher such as Penguin fail to get publication rights for materials so central to a book's purpose? Imagine an anthology of twentieth-century drama that omitted Beckett on the grounds that Grove Press and Faber charge too much? Would such an anthology be worth anything? Ginsberg and Plath may be widely available, but, in that case, why produce an anthology in the first place? Most of the poetry in this anthology is available on the Internet anyway.

Indeed, what Penguin's editorial team seems to be saying is that the value of Dove's anthology's depends not on its overall plan or on the wisdom of its selections—its capacity to satisfyingly delineate a poetic canon or make some claim about the nature of poetry in a certain time or place—but on the prestige of its editor. How else to account for the folksy informality of the introduction, peppered by homely analogies and what is evidently designed to be straight talk:

> The beginning of the twentieth century was still partially populated by those who had crawled out of the wreckage of the Civil War thirty-five years earlier.
>
> Into this disquieting age strode Wallace Stevens, a man with a mind of his own.
>
> Almost all serious artists were, at least initially, deeply affected by modernism, even if what in youth might have seemed like a revolt would in later life often deteriorate into surrendering to one's own quirks.
>
> Every soup gets cold, however, and by the time the Beat poets were losing verbal steam, their take-no-prisoners approach had cleared a trail for the Confessionals, who were dedicated to uncovering a more intimate post-Beat self.
>
> During the seventies, while America was licking its self-inflicted Vietnam War wounds and most of her citizens were shaking their heads over the Nixon nightmare, more and more of her poets fell under the spell of higher education.

Accuracy is not this editor's strong suit: the "serious artists" of the early twentieth century were not "affected by" modernism; they *created* it. The Beats did not "clear a trail" for the Confessionals: the two groups coexisted and sometimes overlapped throughout the 1950s and '60s. And higher education may be credited with many things but perhaps not with casting a "spell" over fledgling poets. As I was reading these curious assertions, it occurred to me that perhaps this Penguin anthology was designed for Junior High School students—kids forced to study something called poetry, who would find those references to "crawling out of the wreckage of the Civil War" or to the "take-no-prisoners approach" of the Beats both accessible and colorful. "Into this disquieting age strode Wallace Stevens": it sounds like a sentence in a Victorian children's book. And since the editor is an undisputable star, the recipient of just about every prize and award there is, a former poet laureate, and currently a commonwealth professor of English at the University of Virginia, one evidently wants to read her anthology to learn not about American poetry of the twentieth century but about her likes and dislikes.

"Poetry," Dove concludes, "has become a business albeit a small one; the laws of supply and demand have taken on an urgency similar to the pressures in the wider world of commerce, though in a quirky, somehow Chaplinesque fashion." Quirky—and here is the paradox we might all ponder—in that, however individual and intuitive Dove's judgments on contemporary poetry, her Modernist canon—Frost, Gertrude Stein, Eliot, Pound, Stevens, Williams, Hart Crane, Marianne Moore, Langston Hughes, H. D.—is more or less everybody's Modernist canon. It was already in place when I graduated from Oberlin College in the mid-'50s, even if Moore and H. D. now get more attention than they did back then. When it comes to the great poets of the early century it seems that there really is consensus: Who, for example, would claim that Eliot was not a major poet?

World War II was the watershed. Since then, there has never been a fixed American poetry canon. What Irving Ehrenpreis pronounced "The Age of Lowell," was known to others as the Age of Charles Olson. Or the Age of Frank O'Hara, who said, "I think Lowell has . . . a confessional manner which [lets him] get away with things that are really just plain bad but you're supposed to be interested because he's supposed to be so upset." To this day, acolytes of James Merrill have little to say to those of Robert Duncan, even though Merrill and Duncan were among the first openly gay poets writing in the United States. Even Elizabeth Bishop, revered as she is by the American and British literary establishments, was never taken up by the Language poets or more recent experimentalists, nor is she popular in Brazil, where she lived for so many years. The composer-founder of Tropicalismo, Caetano Veloso, who has worked closely with the Concrete poets Haroldo and Augusto de Campos, told me that he could not fathom the Bishop cult. John Ashbery, surely—and, to my mind, deservedly—the most universally admired of living American poets, gets curiously short shrift from the French avant-garde, which has been strongly influenced by the Objectivist poets Zukofsky, Oppen, and Reznikoff.

Today's poetry establishment commands polite respect but hardly enthusiasm and excitement.

At this point, the lack of consensus about the poetry of the postwar decades has led not, as one might have hoped, to a cheerful pluralism animated by noisy critical debate about the nature of lyric, but to the curious closure exemplified by the Dove anthology. Today's poetry establishment—Robert Pinsky and Robert Hass, Louise Glück and Mark Strand, all of them former poets laureate—command a polite respect but hardly the enthusiasm and excitement that greeted and continue to greet such counterparts of the previous generation as O'Hara.

In the current climate, with thousands of poets jostling for their place in the sun, a tepid tolerance rules. Here is a poem in the Dove anthology called "Hot Combs":

> At the junk shop, I find an old pair,
> black with grease, the teeth still pungent
> as burning hair. One is small,
> fine toothed as if for a child. Holding it,
> I think of my mother's slender wrist,
> The curve of her neck as she leaned
> over the stove, her eyes shut as she pulled
> the wooden handle and laid flat the wisps
> at her temples. The heat in our kitchen
> made her glow that morning. I watched her

wincing, the hot comb singeing her brow,
sweat glistening above her lips,
her face made strangely beautiful
as only suffering can do.

This is an all-but-classic reenactment of the paradigm I described at the beginning of this essay: 1) the present-time stimulus (the fortuitous find of old hot combs in a junk shop), 2) the memory of the painful hair straightening ritual the poet's African American mother evidently felt obliged to perform, and finally 3) the epiphany that her mother's face was "made strangely beautiful / as only suffering can do." The poem's enjambed free verse, prose syntax, transparent language peppered by what passes for "literary" phrasing—"pungent / as burning hair," "slender wrist," "wisps / at her temples," "sweat glistening"—and emotional crescendo, dubious in its easy conclusion that beauty is born of suffering, would seem to place this poem somewhere in the 1960s or '70s. But "Hot Combs," written by the Pulitzer-winning Natasha Trethewey, was published in 2000.

Déjà-dit

So far I have been talking about the dominant poetry culture of our time—the culture of prizes, professorships, and political correctness. To dislodge the dominant paradigm is never easy, but in recent years we have witnessed a lively reaction from a growing group of poets who are rejecting the status quo.

If "creative writing" has become as formulaic as I have been suggesting, then perhaps it is time to turn to what Kenneth Goldsmith calls "uncreative writing." Tongue-in-cheek as that term is, increasingly poets of the digital age have chosen to avoid those slender wrists and wisps of hair, the light that is always "blinding" and the hands that are "fidgety" and "damp," those "fingers interlocked under my cheekbones" or "my huge breasts oozing mucus," by turning to a practice adopted in the visual arts and in music as long ago as the 1960s—appropriation. Composition as transcription, citation, "writing-through," recycling, reframing, grafting, mistranslating, and mashing—such forms of what is now called Conceptualism, on the model of Conceptual art, are now raising hard questions about what role, if any, poetry can play in the new world of instantaneous and excessive information.

The main charge against Conceptual writing is that the reliance on other people's words negates the essence of lyric poetry. Appropriation, its detractors insist, produces at best a bloodless poetry that, however interesting at the intellectual level, allows for no unique emotional input. If the words used are not my own, how can I convey the true voice of feeling unique to lyric?

With thousands of poets jostling for their place in the sun, a tepid tolerance rules.

This is hardly a new complaint: it was lodged as early as the 1970s against John Cage's writings-through—texts, usually lineated, composed entirely of citations, with source texts ranging from Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* to the notebooks of Jasper Johns. Here, for example, is a passage from "Writing for the first time through *Howl*" (1986):

Blind
in th**E** mind

towa**R**d
illuminatin**G**
d**A**wns
b**L**inking
Light

th**E**
wi**N**ter
li**G**ht

endless r**I**de

Bro**N**x
wheel**S**
Brought
th**E**m
w**R**acked
li**G**ht of zoo

The source of these minimalist stanzas is the following set of strophes, whose erasure, based on what Cage has called the "50% mesostic" rule, uncovers the thirteen letters **ALLENGINSBERG** required for the vertical mesostic string. I have highlighted Cage's chosen words, here beginning with the "B" for "–BERG."

> incomparable **blind** streets of shuddering cloud and lightning **in the mind** leaping **toward** poles of Canada & Paterson, **illuminating** all the motionless world of Time between,
>
> Peyote solidities of halls, backyard green tree cemetery **dawns**, wine drunkenness over the rooftops, storefront boroughs of teahead joyride neon **blinking** traffic **light**, sun and moon and tree vibrations in **the** roaring **winter** dusks of Brooklyn, ashcan rantings and kind king **light** of mind,
>
> who chained themselves to subways for the **endless ride** from Battery to holy **Bronx** on benzedrine until the noise of **wheels** and children **brought them** down shuddering mouth-**wracked** and battered bleak of brain all drained of brilliance in the drear **light of Zoo**

Cage's elliptical lyric functions as both homage and critique, subtly interjecting his own values into the exuberant, hyperbolic *Howl*. As hushed and muted as Ginsberg's baroque "ashcan rantings" are wild and expansive, Cage's poem is a rhyming nightsong, whose referents are elusive, with only the movement toward the "BroNx" transforming the "linking" of the "blinking / light" to one that is "wRacked" with "light of Zoo." Without deploying a single word of his own, Cage subtly turns the language of *Howl* against itself so as to make a plea for restraint and quietude as alternatives to the violence at the heart of Ginsberg's poem.

There is further dialogue between the two poems. For Ginsberg, sound and visual configuration support the poet's exclamatory particulars, the urgent things he wishes to *say*, whereas for Cage poetry is, by definition, first and foremost a visual and sound structure. Poetry is not poetry, as he put it, "by reason of its content or ambiguity but by reason of its allowing musical elements (time, sound) to be introduced into the world of words."

This attention to musical elements is absent in most contemporary poetry. Open the Dove anthology at random, and you find writing such as this:

> My father once broke a man's hand
> Over the exhaust pipe of a John Deere tractor. The man,
> Rubén Vásquez, wanted to kill his own father
> With a sharpened fruit knife

When I transpose this into prose—"My father once broke a man's hand over the exhaust pipe of a John Deere tractor. The man, Rubén Vásquez, wanted to kill his own father with a sharpened fruit knife"—I find it more interesting than the lineated version. Why lineate it at all?

Cage's mesostic poem, on the other hand, cannot be turned into prose. Its very formatting, as in "**B**lind /in th**E** mind" or "Bro**N**x / whee**L**s," produces a sense of Buddhist abnegation quite distinct from Ginsberg's own ready-to-burst, action-filled anaphoric strophes. Francis Scott Key's "dawn's early light," for example, here becomes the less glorious "dawns / b**L**inking / **L**ight," a sly comment on our National Anthem not present in the source.

A related example of the power of other people's words to generate profound emotion—maybe the most sustained example—is Susan Howe's *That This* (2010). The book is her tripartite elegy for her husband Peter Hare, who was found to have died in his sleep suddenly and without known cause one night in January 2008. Howe would not call herself a Conceptualist poet, and she regularly combines cited material with her own prose and verse. Still, she has always avoided the free-verse lyric paradigm (observation—triggering memory—insight) ubiquitous in the Dove anthology in which, incidentally, she is not included.

The first section of *That This*—whose very title, with its two indeterminate pronouns, suggests that we cannot really know the things we claim to be pointing to—begins with what looks like simple reportage:

> It was too quiet on the morning of January 3rd when I got up at eight after a good night's sleep. Too quiet. I showered, dressed, then came downstairs and put some water on the boil for instant oatmeal. Peter always woke up very early, he would have been at work in his study, but there was no sign of his having breakfasted. I looked out the window and saw *The New York Times* still on the driveway in its bright blue plastic wrapper.

It takes a few more moments (recorded minutely in Howe's narrative) for the poet to realize what has transpired, but with the shock of discovery—she finds her dead husband in his bed, ironically, still "with the CPAP mask [used for sleep apnea] over his mouth and nose" making a "whooshing sound of air blowing air"—comes her recognition that no words of her own can measure the horror and grief of this unanticipated death. At this point, the poem abruptly shifts gears:

> 'O My Very Dear Child. What shall I say? A holy and good God has covered us with a dark cloud.' On April 3, 1758, Sarah Edwards wrote this in a letter to her daughter Esther Edwards Burr when she heard of Jonathan's sudden death in Princeton. For Sarah all works of God are a kind of language or voice to instruct us in things pertaining to calling and confusion. I love to read her husband's analogies, metaphors, and similes.

Here is the donnée of the unfolding elegy. For Sarah Edwards, the wife of the great New England theologian, language, with its "analogies, metaphors, and similes," is the Word of God and hence a source of comfort at a time and in a place where death is always imminent. But Howe's consolation here is not their spiritual one:

> For Jonathan and Sarah all rivers run into the sea yet the sea is not full, so in general there is always progress as in the revolution of a wheel and each soul comes upon the call of God in his word. I read words but don't hear God in them.

Herself not a believer, Howe can nevertheless mine the Edwards archive for a series of ghost poems that alternately echo and question the religious faith of the Great Awakening as well as the poet's own belief system.

In the poem's long middle section, "Frolic Architecture" (the title comes from the last line of Emerson's "The Snow Storm": "The frolic architecture of the snow"), photocopied fragments from the diary of Jonathan's sister Hannah Edwards Wetmore are cut, taped, merged, overwritten, inverted, realigned, and collaged with the abstract photograms of the artist James Welling so as to dramatize the conviction that, in Hannah's words, "Our lives are all exceeding brittle and uncertain." The resulting poems become constellations designed for both the eye and the ear: now and again, we recognize bits of scripture such as, "Oh had I the wings of a dove" or narrative fragments such as "walking just below my father's orchard." But no sooner are these phrases articulated than they dissolve into clashing elements in the larger soundscape of Howe's own highly charged present—a soundscape that tests the very limits of readability. To further "thicken the plot," as Cage would put it, in 2011, Howe, working with the composer David Grubbs, created a musical environment for "Frolic Architecture," a performance piece in which Howe's voice, partly live, partly digitally recorded, is combined with multi-track electronic sound (organ, cicadas, dry leaves underfoot) to create a mesmerizing sound poem, each morpheme (e.g., *nent*, *trt*, *mys*, *fin*) given special emphasis by this poet's superb speaking voice.

A growing group of poets is rejecting the status quo.

There is not an original word in "Frolic Architecture": it is all recycled text, the poet functioning as arranger, framer, reconstructor, visual and sound artist, and, above all, as the maker of pivotal choices. If you set these fragments against their sources, you will see how much has been made of relatively little material, Howe's method being to repeat, re-cut, juxtapose differently, all in the interest of sound, rhythm, and the look of the poetry on the page. And although Howe's pages were composed by what are now old-fashioned methods of photocopying, works such as "Frolic Architecture" could not exist except in the digital age, where reproduction as well as instrumentation play a crucial role. As Howe asks in her final lyric response to her own "frolic architecture":

> Is light anything like this

stray pencil commonplace
copy as to one aberrant
onward-gliding mystery

The verbivocovisual—we might call it Joycean—mode of *That This* is one of the directions appropriation has taken in contemporary poetry. From the work of Steve McCaffery and Christian Bök, to Christian Hawkey and Uljana Wolf, such poems are designed to exceed their dimensions as print blocks, moving outward both aurally and visually to encompass the larger field.

The opposite move—found in the work of leading Conceptual poets such as Kenneth Goldsmith and Vanessa Place, Caroline Bergvall and Craig Dworkin—is to foreground the choice of source text itself, the very selection of that text and its context generating the methods that determine its "copy."

An interesting example—this time from a poet who is not primarily a Conceptualist—is Srikanth Reddy's *Voyager* (2011). In a Web site accompanying his book, named for the famous spacecraft, Reddy tells us, "I began to delete words from Kurt Waldheim's memoirs [*In the Eye of the Storm*, 1985] in the autumn of 2003, hoping, for reasons beyond me, to discover something like poetry hidden within his book." In a series of erasures, the same material from the memoir figuring again and again, Reddy produced a series of propositions, then a narrative made of short print blocks, then a long verse sequence using the three-step line made famous by William Carlos Williams in late poems such as "Of Asphodel, That Greeny Flower," and finally an epilogue in which Waldheim's encomium to a brave, "neutral" Austria is almost wholly crossed out, leaving in just a few words that belie its author's self-justifying account.

But why *In the Eye of the Storm*? And what kind of "voyager" was Kurt Waldheim? Secretary-general of the United Nations from 1972 to 1981 and president of Austria from 1986 to 1992, Waldheim was exposed, in the mid-'80s, as having served in the Nazi Wehrmacht during World War II and quite possibly having committed major war crimes. The president, who had carefully covered his tracks for years, continued to claim he was innocent, and many of his fellow Austrians defended him, even when the evidence became overwhelming. His political and diplomatic success—he was allowed to finish out his term as president—has become a symbol for the hypocrisy and mendacity of the postwar era in an Austria that had strongly supported Hitler in the war years, before it received occupied-nation status in 1945. Avoiding the fate of its Iron Curtain neighbors Hungary and Czechoslovakia, Austria quickly became a prosperous nation.

Reddy's sequence of erasures or writings-through makes for a brilliant political poem—one of the few really notable political poems of recent years. By using only Waldheim's words but transforming his sentences so as to create absurd propositions and triads like the following:

I avoided speaking
  in my unhappy state,
    overcome by glory—

whereupon Silence leant across
  and asked whether I would be good
    enough to man the wheel.

(I consider him my maker,
and thus was disposed
to maintain good relations).

With the utmost courtesy,
I ~~Kurt Waldheim~~
frowned at the view

—the river sparkling outside,
a man delivering a sofa,
the high echelons of the saved

Writing through the memoir, joining unrelated phrases to one another, creates a devastating image of smarmy self-justification and self-congratulation on the part of a "cultured" but shameless liar. Waldheim seems never to have felt remorse. In the epilogue, the crossing out of whole phrases is used to isolate and heighten inadvertent revelations, for example:

> "~~It was allegiance to democracy, tempered by the~~ experience ~~of fascism, which~~ taught me that in the final analysis ~~nothing is weaker than dictatorship.~~

Just what *did* experience in the final analysis teach this protagonist? In turning Waldheim's own words against him, Reddy's poem is a powerful critique, not only of "Waldheim's disease" (forgetting one is a Nazi), but also of political mendacity in general. And yet *Voyager*'s fabric, generated, as the charts show, by the digital voyage through source texts, is curiously free of all moralizing or invective on the poet's part.

We have witnessed a return to the short lyric that depends for its effect on the recycling of earlier poetic material.

Like Howe's *That This*, *Voyager* has to be understood as a poetic book rather than a book of individual poems. In recent years—and here is another direction the language of appropriation has taken—we have witnessed a return to the short lyric, but now a lyric that depends for its effect on the recycling of earlier poetic material. In Charles Bernstein's *All The Whiskey in Heaven* (2010) we find a pseudo-folk ballad that follows hard upon a list of absurd newsflashes such as, "An unresponsive person was found lying in a boat on Half Mile Road." The song's question-and-answer structure weaves together folk and lyrical ballad motifs from Shakespeare's "Sigh no more"—"Converting all your sounds of woe / Into. Hey nonny, nonny'—to Goethe's "Erlkönig" ("Elf King")—"Who rides so late through night and wind?"—to the pop lyric "Every time you see me, what do you see?"

What do you see, Nonny?
What do you see?
A tune & a stain
Waiting for me

Will you go there, Nonny?

Will you go there?
It's just by the corner

Right over the bend

Who'll you see there, Nonny?
Who'll you see there?
A monkey, a merchant, a pixelated man

What will you say, Nonny?
What will you say?
I'm just a nobody making my way

Who is this Nonny (nanny), and how can a stain be said to be "waiting for someone?" "There" (lines 5–6) is a meaningless specifier, for "right over the bend" there may be many corners. "Bend" doesn't rhyme with "there," so that something isn't working. In the next stanza, "there" is the realm of children's story, what with monkey and merchant, but the pixelated man who takes up so much syllable space, has no real existence beyond the computer screen. Indeed, he seems to function only as mirror image for both Nonny and the questioner, the name Nonny finally expanding into the bathos of pop: "I'm just a nobody making my way."

Now consider the title of the sequence in which this little ballad appears: "Today's Not Opposite Day." The sentence sounds almost right—like "Today's not Armistice Day" or "Today's not laundry day." Today, we know, is the opposite of tomorrow, or perhaps today's not an oppositional day. With all these intertexts, the title remains elusive, for no day of the week, not even a holiday, has its *opposite*. It only has a series of alternatives. The little pseudo-ballad, in any case, tells us nothing about this poet's particular situation, but it communicates a sharp sense of anxiety especially when Bernstein recites it. On each reading, this ballad, like his "Doggy Bag" and "Castor Oil," becomes harder to pin down.

It has been argued that Bernstein's poetry has become "easier," that in recent years, it has lost some of the edge that defined the "non-sensical" language poems in such earlier books as *Controlling Interests* or *The Sophist*. But the ballads may be even more elliptical than the earlier satires and parodies because their tone is so difficult to assess. The title poem of *All the Whiskey in Heaven*, for example, opens on a note of absurd hyperbole—"Not for all the whiskey in heaven / Not for all the flies in Vermont / Not for all the tears in the basement." And before we have got our bearings and remind ourselves that the last thing we want is flies in Vermont or tears flowing in the basements of our world, the poem turns dead serious:

No, never, I'll never stop loving you
Not till my heart beats its last
And even then in my words and my songs
I will love you all over again

How to come to terms with this embarrassing bathos? That is precisely the question the poem asks, poised on the edge of irony as it takes on all those Tin Pan Alley love songs that flood the airwaves.

"Echo," as Craig Dworkin reminds us, "literally, always has the last word." Let me give that last word to a poet whose recent lyric has made intriguing—and surprising—use of echo. Here is Peter Gizzi's "Gray Sail," from *Threshold Songs* (2011):

> If I were a boat
> I would probably roll over
> If I were a prayer
>
> If I were a beech stave
> Beech bark
> If I were a book
>
> I would sing in streets
> Alone in traffic
>
> If I had a gown
> I could be heroic
> With a flowering mane
>
> If I had a boat
> I would eat a sandwich
> In broad dazed light
>
> I would come visit
> As a holy book
> If I were a boat
> If I had a prayer

Various earlier poems and pop songs serve as intertexts here, but the one that I hear most keenly behind the "If I were . . ." clauses is the song "If I were a bell!" from *Guys and Dolls*:

> Ask me how do I feel
> Ask me now that we're cosy and clinging
> Well sir, all I can say, is if I were a bell I'd be ringing!
>
> From the moment we kissed tonight
> That's the way I've just gotta behave
> Boy, if I were a lamp I'd light
> And if I were a banner I'd wave!

So it goes for four more stanzas: "If I were a gate I'd be swinging," "If I were a watch I'd start popping my springs," "If I were a bridge I'd be burning," "If I were a duck I'd quack." "If I were a goose I'd be cooked," "If I were a salad I know I'd be splashing my dressing."

"Gray Sail" and Gizzi's other *Threshold Songs* were written in response to a series of deaths—his mother's, his brother's, one of his closest friends—so overwhelming they can hardly be processed.

Like Howe's "Frolic Architecture," the poem avoids the unsayable by its appropriation of other voices—here as unstated echo. Gizzi inverts "If I were a Bell" in a string of similes that take the common sense of the Broadway musical to absurd limits: "if I were a boat" immediately brings to mind Rimbaud's "Bateau ivre," but here the metaphor of the poet as drunken boat can hardly be sustained. For "if I were a prayer" confutes being and having: the words the poet can't articulate until the last line spell out the simple phrase "If I had a prayer," the implication at the end being that no, this desolate person doesn't have one. "Gray Sail" ends in a limbo where bells don't ring, lamps don't light—and yes, he must burn his bridges.

Night thoughts, death thoughts? What Yeats called the Spiritus Mundi becomes, for Gizzi and his contemporaries, a vast cybergalaxy of words, phrases, and images on which the lyric poet, consciously or not, has learned to draw.

"Echo," as Dworkin puts it:

> becomes a model of Oulipean ingenuity: continuing to communicate in her restricted state with far more personal purpose than her earlier gossiping, turning constraint to her advantage, appropriating other's language to her own ends, 'making do' as a verbal *bricoleuse*.

Increasingly, the "true voice of feeling" is the one you discover with an inspired, if sometimes accidental click.

Comments

1 | Poetry on the Brink

Poetry on the Brink

What happens to poetry?
its bright blue plastic wrapper
gaining cultural capital,
the sheer number of poets now
overcome by glory, all these people
must comply; poets of the digital age
in the poetry wars, hundreds of poetry
books; should the poet speak
in his or her own person or

should the poet speak
in his or her own person?
The commitment of poets;
start popping my springs!
I would eat a sandwich.
The "true voice of feeling,"
the high echelons of the saved

"the word as such"
all the good jobs
now called Conceptualism.
Night thoughts,
how to come to terms with this embarrassing
death thoughts
Poet X has produced
readily available "in your local public library"
I'm just a nobody making my way
simply written out the canon.

— *posted* 04/30/2012 at 19:05 by **Lina ramona Vitkauskas**

2 | Blue Bic Pen-Cap

I find a blue Bic pen-cap
and remember when I was a boy
in Texas how I played
with blue Bic pen caps
like they were star ships
but now I think about
how women are enslaved.

— *posted* 04/30/2012 at 19:55 by **Surazeus Simon Seamount**

3 | Honesty is the best poetry.

Honesty is the best poetry.
Regards,
Gregory Alan Elliott

— *posted* 04/30/2012 at 23:48 by **Gregory Alan Elliott**

4 | Typo alert and suggestion

That's "C.S. Giscombe," not "C.L." -- AND, when I read Peter Gizzi I hear Miles Davis playing "If I Were a Bell" -- Give it a listen some time --

— *posted* 05/01/2012 at 04:25 by **Aldon Nielsen**

5 | "inevitably"... as in... ?

"What makes Rasula's cautionary tale so sobering is that the sheer number of poets now plying their craft inevitably ensures moderation and safety."

Could someone explain to me the logic of this opening sentence? I fail to see how "number of poets" results in "moderation and safety". Is Ms. Perloff arguing that the steep competition ensures that poets will aim for the type of poem imagined to be desirable? Seems to me that massive quantities of would-be poets would more likely result in :a) aspirational uniformity, b) aspirational uniqueness/distinctiveness ("not running with the pack" - always a good brand) and c) non-aspirational non-conformity.

— *posted* 05/01/2012 at 14:25 by **Henry Gould**

6 | Whatever the merits or the demerits of the Trethewey poem, concluding that its "emotional crescendo" is "dubious in its easy conclusion that beauty is born of suffering" is itself easy -- especially in the context of the "painful hair straightening ritual the poet's African American mother evidently felt obliged to perform." Is it only for the sake of beauty that this suffering takes place?

— *posted* 05/01/2012 at 14:58 by **Ana Bozicevic**

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7 | Experiment yourself out of your body

"If "creative writing" has become as formulaic as I have been suggesting, then perhaps it is time to turn to what Kenneth Goldsmith calls "uncreative writing." Tongue-in-cheek as that term is, increasingly poets of the digital age have chosen to avoid those slender wrists and wisps of hair, the light that is always "blinding" and the hands that are "fidgety" and "damp," those "fingers interlocked under my cheekbones" or "my huge breasts oozing mucus," by turning to a practice adopted in the visual arts and in music as long ago as the 1960s—appropriation. "

Have to say I find this passage rather strange. Ms. Perloff's critique is constructed upon an image of conventional mainstream establishment American poetry as a ponderous, intellectually-supine mass professional strivers, writing unrhymed and unmetered free-verse effusions which celebrate their identity and emote lyrically about personal experiences. This in itself is a massively abstract & Olympian generalization - which comes to its climax precisely here, in a sort of aesthetic revulsion from the Tretheway poem;'s images of a black woman's body. And the solution to this great problem of American literary is.... experimental inauthenticity! Step back from your supposedly "authentic" experiences, stupid poets - befuddled and naive believers in your own personal "identity"! Join the ranks of the true uncompromising avant-garde - copy stuff from the internet!

— *posted* 05/01/2012 at 15:59 by **Henry Gould**

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8 | I Sing the Body Colorless & Weightless

Tongue-in-cheek as that term is,
increasingly poets of the digital age
have chosen to avoid those slender wrists
and wisps of hair, the light
that is always "blinding" and
the hands that are "fidgety" and
"damp," those "fingers interlocked
under my cheekbones" or "my huge
breasts oozing mucus," by turning
to a practice adopted in the visual arts
and in music as long ago as the 1960s—
appropriation. Sigh
of relief as I turn my slender digits
to my odorless Ipad, my
cozy-cute laptop (designed
by lovable Stanford geeks) -
as I lift my immaculate critical gaze
to the smelly history of American bodies
of poetry, all clamoring for my attention... as
with a simple flick of my professional wrist
I can press the "delete" button - or

maybe "reformat" - & email my work
instantaneously, ethereally
to Kenny or Craig or Chuckie or Bob
(where's Bob? still on campus?)
for a cutting-edge sample
or provocative shred.

— *posted* 05/01/2012 at 16:21 by **Henry Gould**

9 | Poets

It's absurd to think that everyone can or will ever be a poet. This view or pool of thought often takes place in the minds of writers who become overwhelmed by the fact that there are numbers of people who want to be us. But, that's a small, ego-centric view. Look at the world and how many people are in it. How many people have said to me they can not do what I can do? How many people have said to me they don't want to do what I do? But, there are many writers and we all can service our audiences even if we don't ever make it to the big stage. We can all find our audience and we can supply them with the words they want. A reader also can read more than one author. They have that right. So, while they might be my audience for a moment, I have to give that spotlight up when my moment is gone to allow another writer to entertain them. Then, I work on my next moment. In fact, I think with this inspiration here that I will move on to my next moment. I think I have an article to write.

— *posted* 05/01/2012 at 17:00 by **Michael Allen**

10 | Where has Perloff been all these months?

Did Marjorie Perloff live under a rock during the discussions raging around the publication of The Penguin Anthology of 20th Century American Poetry? It's been nearly half a year that Rita Dove explained (in interviews with AWP's "The Writer's Chronicle" and on David Lehman's "Best American Poetry" website, and also alluding to it on "Bill Moyers & Company") that the problem with the Ginsberg, Plath and other HarperCollins permissions was not Penguin's fault - Penguin had been willing to pay the line fees demanded for Ginsberg and Plath. The problem was solely HarperCollins's behavior, which raised the suspicion that this Newscorp-affiliated publishing house might have attempted to derail a competitor's anthology. HarperCollins, at the very last minute (the day before the anthology went into physical production) withdrew all rights to their poets because a) Rita Dove and Penguin had shortened the Ginsberg / Plath contributions by a few poems in order to stay within budget and b) Penguin made it clear that under no circumstances could they pay HarperCollins's extraordinarily high fees for living poets (= fees higher than for any other living poet in the anthology) because that would have violated so-called "most favored nations" agreements with those other poets' publishers. (Penguin had promised those publishers that no living poets would receive higher fees than theirs.) Not only kept HarperCollins insisting that Penguin pay more for their poets, they also insisted that the list of poems Rita Dove had originally inquired about would not be shortened. This, in addition to the dubious financial aspects, clearly constituted an attempt at undermining the editor's independence. Well, maybe one shouldn't be too surprised when it comes from a Fox News cousin - although it is disconcerting that Allen Ginsberg and Sylvia Plath are owned by Rupert Murdoch. Maybe this is something to ponder even by those who live under a rock.

— *posted* 05/01/2012 at 20:53 by **Fred Viebahn**

11 | Too many and too few

There are 7 Billion people on the earth. If 1/100th of one percent of us are "poets" then we are 700,000 strong.

Does any one of us have enough time to sift through the writings of 700,000 poets to separate the wheat from the chaff?

Are there enough non-poets who still read poetry to help us? Is there anyone left who has an interest in poetry who doesn't consider him/herself a poet?

Who besides poets goes to poetry readings anymore? Who besides poets reads poetry journals anymore?

A few critics who are supposedly sufficiently well-read to have identified the cream within the yearly crop of thousands of poems?

How many traditional iambic pentameter Petrarchan sonnets are written each year? If more than one-thousand (and I bet that's a low number) is it still a poetic dead end?

The type of poetry that Ms. Perloff is discussing is the literary equivalent of post-modernism that's been done to death in the world of literary fiction ... and even non-fiction.

How does that make it new or even interesting, except in the few instances where it happens to work?

— *posted* 05/01/2012 at 22:48 by **DAS**

12 | No Longer Writes For Humans

My response is that we only write poems and make art for computers now. For they are the market.
http://formeika.wordpress.com/2012/05/02/no-longer-writes-for-humans/

— *posted* 05/01/2012 at 23:05 by **meika**

13 | Wonderful, human responses

Thank you Henry Gould, Michael Allen, Meika.
It might sound bathetic, but I love you. You make me laugh and cry.
You've said what I didn't know I was thinking.
And said it well.

— *posted* 05/01/2012 at 23:46 by **Laura Foley**

14 | I liked this essay a lot, no surprise as I'm a big fan of Marjorie Perloff. I wondered, though, how she managed to avoid mentioning, much less discussing, The Waste Land or other, earlier prototexts of poetical 'appropriation'.

— *posted* 05/02/2012 at 00:25 by **Christopher M**

15 | After reading the article I felt reasonably certain about how poetry has become an aesthetic and professional pyramid scheme; albeit, Ms. Perloff's critique plays the role of Backseat Driver scolding Frontseat Driver for driving off a cliff, whereas it might be better to simply exit the vehicle.

After reading the comments I experienced, for the first time in my life, the sensation of certainty. There is more than one kind of artistic stagnation, and one of them comes from not being commercial enough; having no mission to communicate with and transform readers.

The word is "bubble."

— *posted* 05/02/2012 at 02:49 by **Jon**

16 | all of them

each and every poet, aspiring poet or critic of poetry should be jailed.

— *posted* 05/02/2012 at 03:13 by **balu**

17 | pop quiz

When was the last time a poet made a genuine contribution to the expressive power of the English language?

— *posted* 05/02/2012 at 03:47 by **BDL**

18 | Oldest grivences againest poets

What happens to poetry when everybody is poet? I think this is oldest divergences against poets.Simple reason is writing poem is very easy, anyone can write poem, express your emotion. Other medium just like fiction,essay,drama are difficult you to study,create plot, developed characters, prepared dialogue,built structure on the contrary in poem nothing is needed only composed the words rhythmically.When printed books not developed poets orally sung their poems before audiences,at that time also people were grumbling about too much poets and their poems

— *posted* 05/02/2012 at 04:40 by **Ramesh Raghuvanshi**

19 | She's right

so much depends
upon
a red table
cloth
with a glazed chic
ken
beside the white
wine

But seriously (even though I have been thinking about writing that poem all day), it is clear that many "poets" do not study poetry. They know nothing of form, little about larger, deeper conversations across literary history, and are driven by the facile, pretentious easiness of just writing about what they feel while holding a thesaurus. And of course political correctness is behind much of this. As Vendler (somewhere else) rightly pointed out about the selections in the Dove anthology, much of it should be relegated to the sociology of literature, asap.

— *posted* 05/02/2012 at 04:57 by **K. G. Knalb**

20 | Larry Levis doesn't need me to defend him, but I feel compelled anyway

I must admit I am disgusted. If Marjorie Perloff can't find the wonder in Levis' "Winter Stars" then she should probably write critical essays about something other than poetry. Levis is the rare poet who inspires poets with the type of enthusiasm for poetry that Perloff so flippantly argues is absent from

poems "like his." Using the opening lines of a Levis poem to talk about what is wrong with poetry shows that Marjorie Perloff is more concerned with furthering her thesis than furthering poetry. At least let him finish the remarkable opening sequence before reducing it to mere fodder for a critical agenda.

My father once broke a man's hand /
Over the exhaust pipe of a John Deere tractor. The man,/
Rubén Vásquez, wanted to kill his own father /
With a sharpened fruit knife, & he held /
The curved tip of it, lightly, between his first /
Two fingers, so it could slash /
Horizontally, & with surprising grace, /
Across a throat. It was like a glinting beak in a hand,/

Levis is clearly using the line breaks to modify images IN TIME, which is a musical effect, and a delightful one for anyone who reads poems and has a pulse. If you can't find the music in these lines, good luck with your life.

The statement that poetry is not poetry "by reason of its content or ambiguity but by reason of its allowing musical elements (time, sound) to be introduced into the world of words," is a nice bit of propaganda in Perloff's hands. Writing musically with no respect to content greatly reduces the Ambition of poetry, and suggests that poetry is merely a subjugate to the art of music.

One of the reasons poetry seemingly inspires so little passion among people in contemporary society is that it has ceased communicating with people. It has lost the ambition to do so. Passion matters in poetry. Passion pervades the poems of Larry Levis. Liking Levis' poems better transposed into prose is very telling of Ms. Perloff: hers is the mind that finds the critical essay more thrilling than the poem.

— *posted* 05/02/2012 at 05:54 by **Tyler Dwyer**

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21 | OUR POETRY CUP RUNNETH OVER!

1800 poets teaching in MFA programs?

If these supporters of "the cause" graduate just three students each June that's 5,400 certified poets per year; 54,000 per decade; and 540,000 by the end of this century.

And if the teaching poets in the non-MFA creative writing departments total(as Mr. Rasula estimates)18,200, and they are graduating just three students each June-- that's 54,600 junior-poets per year; 546,000 per decade; and 5,460,000 by the end of this century.

Add the two grand totals together and the 21st Century will produce 6 million university-certified poets.

If each of them publishes 50 poems in the 35,000-plus journals that I estimate will be available by then (see my "New Math of Poetry" at the Chronicle of Higher Education) the Marjorie Perloffs of the 22nd Century will have 300 million poems to read, contemplate, assess, and write about!

Not to worry. Very few of the junior, non-MFA poets are likely to get much published. If the MFA poets publish an average of 100 poems each during their lifetimes that's a mere 54 million poems that lovers of poetry will need to attend to.

By 2100, exponentially increased life expectancies will doubtless make such reading easily doable.

— *posted* 05/02/2012 at 09:24 by **David Alpaugh**

22 | Poetry for Poets

It's not like anyone reads poetry anymore anyways.

— *posted* 05/02/2012 at 11:14 by **George Dubeuth**

23 | Poet Bio-Computers, or AI (Artifice Intel)

@David Alpaugh: so David, the implication of your computation is that the sheer mass of poets & poems results in a sort of collective human-computer, producing millions of poems beyond any possible structural control, which means that this vast entity of quantity is really only readable BY computers, not people.

Seems to me this situation renders the kind of avant-garde promoted by MP already redundant redundant and obsolete obsolete.

Unless... unless there's something to the old traditional chestnut, that art & aesthetics are involved with something strictly UN-quantifiable, having to do with some mysterious "quality" which involves what Keats termed "truth & beauty"... & moreover (according to little Johnny Keats)... "this is all ye know, & all ye NEED to know." What a wild & strange dilemma for futurist civilization!

— *posted* 05/02/2012 at 13:12 by **Henry Gould**

24 | Poem

This is MY poem.

— *posted* 05/02/2012 at 13:51 by **Kenneth Nowell**

25 | high-falutin hokum

Poetry is too uniform, therefore poets should copy existing material.

Someone explain how this passes even the most elementary logical test. Actually, don't. I've wasted enough time mired in this slop. I'm no more worried about poetry for having done so, but I am considerably more worried about what passes for big-gun academic thought and writing.

— *posted* 05/02/2012 at 14:02 by **Eugene**

26 | Wish I had a better appreciation of poetry

Ogden Nash is about my speed. I enjoy aphoristic poetry, preferably with meter & rhyme, but aphoristic nonetheless.

— *posted* 05/02/2012 at 14:10 by **The Sanity Inspector**

27 | It's up to young poets

I think reformers should focus their critique on the academic system for the production of poets and of poetry. As a young poet, I fled from the scene with not a little horror, but now, three, four years later, I miss my colleagues and feel lost. It's never a problem of having too many poets, or not having standards - would that we were all prophets! and standards are something that each artist has to work out for herself,

according to her time and understanding and needs, and love. I think it's up to young poets now to transcend the system, which served poets very well many decades ago (think of all those good to excellent talents who became amazingly successful), but has subsequently dragged us all down into unreasonable and meaningless competition. Can we please do away with creative writing professorships? with laureateships? with academic awards? We need help from the scholars and critics too. Just as there are legions of disaffected young artists (no, poets are not alone), there are legions of disaffected young scholars/critics, and we face the same problems really - we can help each other out. And the older generation of scholars/critics/poets can help us out to, by reaching out, guiding, sharing, exploring... But first we need to stop sucking in young poets, who would do well to get a practical education in addition to pursuing their art. They gain too little in the process, and their chance of getting published and getting a job afterwards is zero to minimal. I know that the young writers can do it - young artists always find new ways. We just need a little courage and understanding and support.

— *posted* 05/02/2012 at 16:27 by **Tien Tran**

28 | Beauty/Truth? What a Concept!

Ah, Henry Gould, I forgot about the INDEPENDENT POETS who still outnumber the pros ten to one. These 100,000 or so will publish a modest 5 million poems in the 21st century, bringing the grand total available to readers to 59 million (my estimates of course are everywhere conservative).

You're right! Only a computer will be able to assess this embarrassment of trinkets, selecting 50-some poems each year for Best American Poetry and 30-some to receive Pushcart Prizes. Lilly's, Pulitzers, MacArthurs will also be chosen by a far better critic than you or I (or Rita Dove) could ever hope to be.

The computer, of course, will need a program. If written by a Marjorie Perloff-type critic its first task will be to screen out poets who lack either an MFA degree or a teaching post in a creative writing program.

Once that's been accomplished, and all 100,000 of the independent poets excluded, the computer will search the remainder, screening out "uniform" poems that exhibit "moderation" and "safety" in favor of poems that are "mesostic," "verbivocovisual," and "conceptual."

The Johnny Keatses and Elizabeth Bishops of the future will be squashed like primitive bugs in favor of the "mesmerizing" Craig Dworkins and Uljana Wolfs of the future.

"Nent, trt, mys," and "fin" will replace "beauty" and "truth" as criteria for readability.

Hey, nonny, Nanny!

— *posted* 05/02/2012 at 16:28 by **David Alpaugh**

29 | Is Perloff paradoxically preaching to the poetically perverted ?

I enjoyed this article, I found it via a link from a Viennese publisher of born digital materials.. I enjoyed it throughout particularly to it's last line. As some here may know, in a recent communion rites powerpoint presentation in County Tyrone, Ireland, A catholic priest inadvertently plugged in a usb memory stick that immediately, without warning displayed pornographic images to the assembled congregation.. unfortunate for all.. the entire community was shocked, offended, dismayed, children were exposed to images that were wholly inappropriate..the priest had to be spirited away to another parish.. a review of rules.. accusations and apologies abounded all round.. how could such a thing happen.. what was the world coming to.. and all at the click of a button.. poetry can shock us like that.. or entirely delight us.. it can do either or both and sometimes it should, it should make us reevaluate our relationships.. our world,

including what we think we expect, what we do expect and what we end up getting.. from rules.. rule makers.. poets.. everywhere and everyone.. welcome to life.. it contains twists and turns.. even ones where you cannot go.. Should we focus on such cliques or clicks.. lines, allowances, learnings symbols, figures.. are we degenerating into a race of poor and poorly educated expensive poets or evolving into a collective expressive.. technologically amplified in austere times when all societies in general are suspected of being dumbed down from above.. brainwashed broadside by business, or dupped and doped by big pharma.. isn't poetry and the art, craft and practice of poetry (however it's interpreted) a positive personal critical activity.. something essential to be learned.. a way of seeing and questioning.. beyond some simplified mechanical analysis which utterly predominates western culture.. Somewhere ideas of and about poetry, like ideas concerning the human body, human relationships, about education, technology and the intersection of all five became perverted by commercial and exploitative interests.. Perloff appears to be pointing a light.. into that dim area of learning, into that potentially dark practice.. of our occasional firing of canonicity ? dismissing what is an erudite example of poetic scholarship is unfair to her and her deep and broad understanding of the subject..

— *posted* 05/02/2012 at 16:51 by **clevercelt**

30 | I'd rather read Levis

I'd rather read any four lines of Levis' poetry than any four lines of this elitist claptrap.

Perhaps Professor Perloff would have us return to the pre Lyrical Ballads days, or before Whitman exhorted us to "unscrew the doors themselves from the jambs!"

— *posted* 05/02/2012 at 17:37 by **David Stevenson**

31 | My Two

Miss Perloff has written half a good essay, which is half more than most can manage. Then she goes off the rails a bit, but to the ultimate purpose of quoting some quite fine poems which I and many might not have bumped into otherwise.

It was unkind of her to gut "Hot Combs" for its "wisps/ at her temples," but few of us will find "wisps/ at her temples" enough provocation to justify dumping original composition altogether.

Such objection to "wisps/ at her temples" does not mark a refined, avant-garde sensibility so much as mere hipster ennui.

Hipster ennui has its purposes, but it's always best not to take it quite as seriously as it must take itself.

— *posted* 05/02/2012 at 17:45 by **Todd Jackson**

32 |

I want you to tell me something
or tell me nothing
just tell me.

— *posted* 05/02/2012 at 17:59 by **Mike Michaels**

33 | whose poetry in english?

perloff's jab at the all-too-obvious shortcomings of dove's anthology seems defensible enough (even as it's a tad too mean, in parts), but her reductionism and dismissal of mimetic writing as institutional and

formulaic (cut-up prose, narrative, and epiphanous) in order to champion iconoclastic conceptualism (unparaphrasable, cutting-edge, interesting) is predictable (coming from her, on one hand), and not quite accurate or rigorous on the other. in the first place, why make such an exorbitant claim about this anthology (which isn't any more an attempt at canon-making than vendler's or even perloff's own similar efforts at a "magisterial" selection)? secondly, picking up from her own assertions, the democratization of publishing (via the internet), as well as the proliferation of writing programs and the professionalization of creative writing in the us have precisely confounded (if not mooted) the project of universal canon-making, and she must admit that a number of "avant-garde" champions are already quite institutional in their own right (cornering certain "prestigious" writing programs and commanding their own cabals of loyal followers and generating their own frothy-mouthed epigones, in fact). and then, she essentializes the poetries she sacralizes here and abominates there, neglecting their many possible "contact zones." i don't know, but her readings of the conceptual pieces she quotes sound like vertiginous epiphanies to me, even as they are arguably repetitive (just how often can you make the poetic point that all experience is textual, or that textual meaning is necessarily inter-subjective and relational, for example, especially given the fact that critical theory has already said this--and so many other supposedly new "conceptual" insights--over and again?), and she reduces the question of (un)paraphrasability to the simple issue of lineation (when what's "unparaphrasable," even or precisely in mimetic writing, aren't the enjambments and stanza breaks, but the actual words chosen and used). finally, the question of multiculturalism (which dove's anthology was keen on addressing, to be fair to her, even as she didn't quite problematize it enough in her less-than-critical introduction) should trouble perloff's theorizing on the subject, for her assumption that all the poets writing in america approach or even "experience" english in the same way--monoculturally, without needing to translate, without compunction or shame, linguistically unbridled, without the onus of a difficult cultural memory--casts the ideological limits of her project in stark relief, and betrays her ethnocentrism. in other words: why dismiss "epiphanous" narrative writing in english as formulaic, when as practiced by different writers--especially minority poets in the us (and elswhere)--it doesn't and indeed cannot mean the same thing?

— *posted* 05/02/2012 at 18:13 by **j n c garcia**

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The centering device no more makes a poem than disjunctive syntax. An audience determines what is a poem, ideally by repeating it until it becomes part of their memory, carrying it around with them everywhere they go. \"Forsan et haec olim meminisse iuvabit.\" Each audience has different requirements, embracing different poetic styles. Let\'s celebrate the diversity of poetic voices in this world, and relegate Matthew Arnold\'s touchstones to the cliche-tbin of history.

— *posted* 05/02/2012 at 18:21 by **Michael Karl (Ritchie)**

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