
Review

Title : **Poetic Culture: Contemporary American Poetry Between Community and Institution**
Author : Christopher Beach
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“Institution” and “Community” are two opposing key terms that are so significant that they are used in the subtitle of this book. These two terms are taken to represent the tension of (poetic) culture in the present-day United States, a tension which is also referred to throughout the book with numerous names between “the mainstream” and “the alternative or avant-garde,” “official” and “experimental,” “established culture” and “counterculture,” and “academic” and “non-academic” respectively.

In his book, Christopher Beach tries to address the never-ending question of the function of poetry and to provide a comprehensive analysis on how poetry culture still becomes a living force in the United States and that contemporary poetry needs redefinition. He admits that his analysis then can be understood as ‘defense’ of poetry, a proof that the elan vital of poetry, to use Bergson’s term, both as an “aesthetic form and as a site for the creation of community and value” is still operative. Beach uses the chance to make himself clear in the introduction by defining the terms ‘community’ and ‘institution.’ The (poetic) community is defined as “a group of poets with shared interests, goals, orientation, or background” (p.5). While it can be local, it also can be regional or even national, like the cowboy, slam, the Transcendentalists, the Imagists, the Beats, the San Francisco Renaissance, the Black Mountain, the New York School, and Language poetry. Whereas the term ‘institution’ is meant to be “a form of social organization structured by some force outside the immediate control or jurisdiction of the poets themselves, and usually in the service of something other than their own private ends.” This can be a university with its creative-writing programs, publishing houses, granting agencies, literary magazines, foundations, and literary organizations.

In the first chapter, Beach presents the ‘anthology wars’ between the established and the counter-cultural avant-garde of the 1950s and 1960s. The attack to the academic established poetry, however, was much severer in 1980s. While Friedrich Nietzsche declared the death of God in *Thus Spake Zarathustra* in 1883, some poets and critics did the same to poetry in a form of either essays or books in 1980s. Actually it was started by Edmund Wilson in 1934 but continued stridently only recently by Donald Hall in 1983 by criticizing the homogenized graduates of creative-writing programs as “McPoets” which resembled the mass-product of fast *junk food* like McDonald’s. Hall’s essay was followed by as diverse ones as from those of Greg Kuzma’s *The Catastrophe of Creative Writing* (1986), Joseph Epstein’s *Who Killed Poetry* (1988), Charles Bernstein’s *The Academy in Peril* (1986), Robert Peters’ *The Present State of Poetry* (1986), Dana Gioia’s *Can Poetry Matter?* (late 1990s), to recent books of Vernon Shetley’s *After the Death of Poetry*, Mary Kinzie’s *The Cure for Poetry*

in *An Age of Prose*, and Donald Hall's *Death to the Death of Poetry*. Those essays and books record only too well the latent dissatisfaction of some poets and readers with the current state of American poetry (p.19).

In the next chapter, the author portrays more profoundly the sharp critique of the poetry academy like AWP (Associated Writing Programs) which only "produced too much poetry too quickly" and "emphasized quantity at the expense of quality". For example, McClatchy's critique states that the creative writing programs and poetry workshops only impoverish poetry for "the workshop faculties and students' universe minds became the measure of all things" (p.37). According to McClatchy, such programs do not produce 'real poetry' but only careers or jobs no different from those of professionally trained workers.

Chapter three gives a concrete example of the two opposing camps between the mainstream or "workshop" and experimental counterculture poetry in Stephen Dobyns' and Lyn Hejinian's works respectively. The anthologies that publish the works of the two poets are also typically different. While Dobyns' works are included in *Morrow Anthology of Younger Poets* and *New American Poetry of the Nineties*, Hejinian's are published in *In the American Tree* and *From the Other Side of the Century*. The purpose of this chapter is to show that 'avant-garde' is still a salient term that continues to play an important role in the poetic culture of the 1990s. It is interesting to note the different characteristics in both. Dobyns' success is measured by his acceptance in poetry establishment like academic position, publication record, inclusion in anthologies, literary awards and prizes, while Hejinian's is by her reception and critical discussion of her works within certain academic setting or her inclusion in an esoteric intellectual milieu. Dobyn publishes his works in journals of large circulation like *American Poetry Review* (20,000) and *Poetry* (7,500), while Hejinian in "little mags" with circulation under a thousand such as those in SUNY Buffalo and the University of California, San Diego.

The next section gives a long list of different canons and anthologies from both camps. While the academic poetic mainstream has *Harvard Book of Contemporary American Poetry* (1985), *Generation of 2000* (1987), *Vintage Book of Contemporary American Poetry* (1990), *New American Poets of the Nineties* (1991), *The Longman Anthology of Contemporary American Poetry* (2d ed., 1989), *Contemporary American Poetry* (5d ed., 1991), and *the Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry* (2d ed., 1988), the publications of the avant-garde are no less impressive such as *Language Poetries: An Introduction* (1985), *From the Other Side of the Century* (1994), *Up late: American Poetry since 1970* (2d ed., 1991), *Out of This World: an Anthology of the St. Marks Poetry Project, 1966-1991* (1992), *American Poetry since 1950: Innovators and Outsiders* (1993), *Postmodern American Poetry* (1993), *The Art of Practice: forty-five Contemporary Poets* (1994), *Primary Trouble: An Anthology of Contemporary American Poetry* (1996).

While the previous chapters are focused on the study of poetry in its printed form, chapters five to seven are devoted to that outside the printed page. Poetry is no longer limited in paper-based publications, but it goes further to electronic ones such as the internet and television. The author focuses his discussion on Bill Moyer's television series and the accompanying book entitled *The Language of Life* (first aired in 1995). Besides the aim of making poetry accessible both to the average reader or listener, the series seem to function as a proclamation that there is "a renaissance of poetry here in America" (p.101). Another interesting aim of the series is to celebrate multiculturalism. The list of poets included in the series proved this. There are the

Alaskan poet Linda McCarriston, the Bronx-born performance artist Sekou Sundiata, Jimmy Santiago Baca, lesbian social activist Adrienne Rich, Nicaraguan Daisy Zamora, and the Japanese American David Mura.

Despite of the weaknesses of the series as have been pinpointed by Vendler in his review, they did challenge the consensus of what “canon” is. This is because according to the estimates of PBS, far more people see and hear the poets (six million), thus leaving the ‘judgment’ to the audience rather than to the poets or academic critics.

Another challenging movement against the ‘established’ poetry culture is the Nuyorican Cafe and Spoken-Word Culture. Nuyorican Cafe is located in a section of New York’s Lower East Side known as “Alphabet City” where ‘slam events’ are held. “Slam night” or “open slam” is an event for judging ‘poets’ from any background (mostly those from marginalized and subcultures), who read their poems in a very non-conventional way. They might ‘perform’ while reading. There will be five poets, each of whom will read twice, and five judges, chosen at random from the audience. This phenomenon has become a national and even international event.

There are some important effects of the slam poetry that must be mentioned here. First, it has increased the visibility of oral poetry in general. Second, success in slamming can boost up a poet to be a ‘superstar’ as the result of a publishing opportunity, like CD recordings or even being aired on MTV; a phenomenon that might make poetry more ‘popular’ and thus play a role in the popular culture. This possibility has increased the poets’ desire for some kind of fame or commercial success. Third, slam poetry is a hybrid of high culture (cultivated, intellectual, abstract, and formal) and low or ‘folk’ culture (visceral, formulaic, unreflectively pleasurable) that can be seen in the ambiguous interaction of audience and performers (poets) in which the audience may be a potential poet, a ‘fan’, and an ‘expert.’ Lastly, a slam event from its mode of presentation and topics can be said as of “venting social and political frustrations” (p.132), thus a “poetic revolution that will bring poetry to the center of our lives for the first time since Plato kicked the poets out of the Republic.”

The last chapter of this book ends with a question: *Poetry on Television?: The United States of Poetry (USOP) as Video-Poetry Revolution*. This is an example of what has been done to bring poetry to electronic media to its fullest possibility by Bob Holman in 1995. USOP demonstrated “that the presentation of poetry in the mass media need not be confined to a traditional format;” it also brought poetry to “a more general audience;” and it broke new ground by “aligning the poetry culture with the very different cultural spheres of film production and MTV.” At the bottom line, USOP has portrayed “a new spirit in American poetry” from printed “pages to airwaves;” from the academic circle into “the cafe, the bar, and the street” (p.150).

In conclusion, Beach does not presume to give judgment for the state of contemporary poetry. Nor does he offer “a set of prescriptions for how to cure poetry--in an ‘age of prose.” He only tries his best to delineate the “trends that are most likely to shape the trajectory of North American poetry over the coming decades” (p.173). First, New Formalism will disappear since its peak of “notoriety and influence in the late 1980s.” Second, the official academic poetry still has its power to continue its existence, and so does its rival of Language mode of experimentalist subculture.

In general, this book has been successful in supporting its assumption stated in the very beginning in the introduction that “poetry still plays a significant role in American culture” by presenting the “existence of poets who write and believe that in one way or another, poetry can make a difference in the world” (p.5). This is done by

carefully showing the long lists of publication of poems in canons, anthologies, and even on televisions and videos from different demographic, ethnic, socio-economic, and political backgrounds. It also has succeeded in answering the question on “What contribution does the contemporary American poetry make to contemporary American culture?” that is also posed in the introduction.

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