

Who Keeps Killing Poetry?

by D.W. Fenza



*“Will the next Walt Whitman be an MFA graduate?
Somehow it seems hard to imagine.”*

—John Barr, President of the Poetry Foundation

Every few years, the experts decide that she is moribund, comatose, wounded, infected, deranged, or dead. The experts declare a state of emergency and the need for intervention to save her. Even when she is happily talking, laughing, and dining with her dearest friends—the

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paramedics barge in to drag Poetry away and force her into the ambulance. On a gurney, she is wheeled down corridors of the contagious hospital, where the experts apply defibrillators to her chest; then they apply scalpels and the device for cracking open her sternum so they may poke and prod her heart.

John Barr claims that Poetry needs a new heart, preferably one of an investment banker, like himself, or the heart of an insurance salesman, or an Irish rebel, or a doctor—any heart except that which belongs to a professor or any graduate with an MFA degree in creative writing.

Barr claims “poets today don’t seem even to be aware that what they write will be influenced by how they live.”¹ MFA graduates and poets working in academe, he gripes, are not really curious enough about their world to go venturing into it. Out of touch with the American people, MFA graduates are appa-

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ratchiks, lost in a paper-chase of credentials and grant-grubbing. They are technicians devoid of soul. "LIVE BROADLY, AND WRITE BOLDLY," Barr intones, wishing poets would take up more manly occupations, like Hemingway hunting on safari, or William Carlos Williams making house calls as a doctor, or Yeats politicking for Ireland, or Wallace Stevens piloting his desk at an insurance company, or T.S. Eliot working as a banker. Disconnected and remote, MFA graduates write, according to Barr, in a morose, modernist monotone that fails to reflect contemporary life. The audiences and book sales of poetry dwindle as a result.

Barr would have you believe that MFA programs are places where the fog of spiritual malaise is so thick that one's own self becomes the only reference point—a self misled by the disembodied discussions of technique and careerism that drift over the seminar table. Like countless detractors of academe, Barr fails

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to consider the possibility that many MFA students, graduates, and their teachers, willy-nilly, have led eventful lives. Graduates of writing programs have gone to war, sequestered themselves in monasteries, planted cannas and zinnias for hummingbirds and butterflies, sold drugs at both the retail and wholesale levels, worked in paper mills, reported as journalists, built latrines in the Peace Corps, inseminated cows, gone to prison, bred and raced horses, managed restaurants, hitchhiked across North America, raised children, lived in communes, caught marlins, wahoos, and mahi mahi, toured with rock bands, snorkeled through coral reefs, suffered rape, worked night shifts at hospitals, endured prejudices, launched new companies, practiced martial arts, acted in plays, sold antiques, cuckolded their best friends, developed screenplays, tended beehives, nursed their suicidal or damaged friends, sold their souls, saw the towers fall, deranged their senses, remarried, practiced law, stag-

gered out of casinos just after dawn, recovered from cancer, and worked as roustabouts, waiters, cooks, bartenders, and wine stewards and as every other kind of minion. My former classmates and teachers have done these things. I sometimes wish they were the staid apparatchiks Barr would have you believe they are. I once had a former classmate call me in the middle of the night; she said Lucifer was stalking her and she was pregnant with President Ronald Reagan's child. She was not joking.

For most of my former classmates and my acquaintances in the programs, their lives provide the coordinates for how they write and how they critique the work of others. Reading and research provide other coordinates. Little of the navigating among these latitudes and longitudes is merely technical, or a simple matter of craft. Neither the vigor with which they have led their lives nor the depth and breadth of their reading necessarily makes them lasting luminaries, of

course. The spirit that may lead you to an enduring literary accomplishment is an elusive, polymorphous spelunker, angel, flame, or leviathan. No one, of course, knows how to domesticate such a shape-shifter. I have seen talented people give up the writing of poetry, no matter how deeply and widely they read or how many adventures they enjoyed. One must develop both character and talent to succeed as a poet. Part of what you may gain from attending a good writing program is the introduction to a few strong characters among your fellow students and among your teachers. You gain models

of temperament, not just a curriculum, for the making of art.

Many teachers of creative writing would insist that it is *character* or soulfulness that the teacher needs to nurture in addition to erudition and techniques of craft. These teachers will insist on facing those issues of temperament and personality; it is often a risky, challenging, and unlikely way to teach—partly intuitive, partly rational. This pedagogy, of course, is not unique to creative writing. If you admire and cherish a few teachers or coaches from your past, chances are they took the time to know you well enough to provoke or challenge you personally.

As the arts become institutionalized they do run the risk of becoming clinical or systematic; but, so far, creative writing has resisted its rational reduction to systems, techniques, theories, and amalgamation into normative standards. As the veterans of MFA programs will tell you, many workshops are on the

verge of reenacting the whole repertoire of classical Greek drama—that strife between ambition and fate, between the workshop chorus and the individual poet—sometimes Oedipal, sometimes comical, sometimes tragic, and sometimes divine. Seminars in writing are seldom the clinical amphitheaters that Barr portrays. It's ironic that Barr argues MFA programs are so devoid of spirituality and character, because the utilitarian madness and soul-seeking of a writers' workshop often causes problems for the status of creative writing as an academic discipline. One critic, for instance, argues that creative writing will always be an academically misguided farce as long as its teachers insist on acting like artists and not like the serious, rational, systematic scholars of the department of English.² The professors of postmodernist, postcolonial literary theory, meanwhile, insist that writers who teach should behave more like professors of postmodernist, postcolonial theory.

Many poets who teach will find Barr's essay to be exasperating and trite. They will be eager to dismiss it, as it follows in a long lineage of obituaries for poetry. Nonetheless, Barr's generalizations are worth disassembling for their components, which provide clues about the unique pressures and dynamics of today's cultural epoch.

Perhaps you have read so many diatribes about the declining health of poetry that you consider Barr's essay a waste of time. Please consider that Barr is the steward of a foundation that, Barr says, will some day command \$175 million in assets for poetry—a gift from the estate of Ruth Lilly. The gift is being transferred to the foundation in periodic installments.³ Even in a lackluster year for the financial markets, these future assets will generate more than \$5 million for the art of poetry. How much is that? It is a lot more than the annual grant-making in literature from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). Typically, the NEA spends annually \$3 million on awards to authors, presses, and organizations working in all literary genres.

To discover that a writer as witty as Joseph Epstein dislikes contemporary poetry may be a sad and curious happenstance; but to see a philanthropic leader like Barr defame American universities while he maligns contemporary poetry and so many of its makers and teachers—that's a scandal and a crime-scene worth investigating.

SON OF OBITUARIES

In his essay, "American Poetry and the New Century," Barr echoes many others who made

similar arguments about contemporary literature: Edmund Wilson in "Is Verse a Dying Technique?" (1928); Nick Greene, the fictive character in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928); Karl Shapiro in "Creative Glut" (1979); Donald Hall in "Poetry and Ambition" (which he gave as a keynote address at the 1980 AWP conference in Boston and published in *AWP Newsletter*, 1987); Joseph Epstein by "Who Killed Poetry" (1988, published again with commentary in *AWP Chronicle*, 1989); Thomas Wolfe in "Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast" (1989); Edward Hoagland in "Shhh! Our Writers Are Sleeping!" (1990); David Dooley in "The Contemporary Workshop Aesthetic" (1990); Dana Gioia in "Can Poetry Matter?" (1991); Thomas M. Disch in "Castles of Indolence" (1994); B.R. Myers in "A Reader's Manifesto" (2001); and William Logan in general (from 1950 to the present).⁴⁷ Like others alarmed by the proliferation of writing programs, Barr writes:

...The effect of these programs on the art form is to increase the abundance of poetry, but to limit its variety. The result is a poetry that is neither robust, resonant, nor—and I stress this quality—entertaining; a poetry that both starves and flourishes on academic subsidies.

Not surprisingly, poetry has a morale problem. A few years ago I read a review, in the *Sunday Times*, of three books of poetry. One was about the agonies of old age, one about bombed-out Ireland, one about the poet's dead father. The question arises: how does one rouse an entire art form out of a bad mood? Of course the tragic has a place in poetry. Indeed one of poetry's jobs is to descant on the worst that life can hand us... But art should not be only about malfunction. Poetry need not come only from impairment. To the extent it does, it makes for a poetry that is monotonic—mono-moodic, if you will... Poetry's limitations today come not from failures of craft (the MFA programs attend to that) but from afflictions of spirit. American poetry has yet to produce its Mark Twain.

The combined effects of public neglect and careerism, then, are intellectual and spiritual stagnation in the art form.

As Donald Hall noted about the typical obituary for poetry, "...always the Giants grow old and die, leaving the Pygmies behind."⁵ In Barr's view, poetry has produced a huge litter of distempered runts with MFA degrees. Barr confounds a number of insights, impressions, facts, half-truths, assumptions, fallacies, and prejudices about the academic study of poetry, about poets who teach, about their relationship to modernism, about the politics of contemporary

poetry, about the humor of poetry, and about the spirituality of poetry. The essay has the traditional components in the genre of demagoguery about the health of poetry.

THE TEMPER & PLURALITY OF TODAY'S POETRY

Barr's portrait of contemporary poetry as a morose and impaired creature is bizarre, and so is his charge that poetry has become spiritually, politically, and intellectually stagnant. Contemporary American poetry became more various in the 1960s and 1970s, and it has become still more entertaining, interesting, and challenging since then. Some would say the scene is even fractured, atomized, or balkanized; others say the scene is a lovely plurality, or an unruly garden. The growing number of readily available translations provided some of the inspiration for this diversification. Translations of authors such as Akhmatova, Baudelaire, Borges, Breton, Brodsky, Cavalcanti, Cavafy, Dante, Herbert, Li Po, Lorca, Milosz, Neruda, Rumi, Sappho, Sefferis, and Szyborska woke many American poets to new possibilities for literature. The politics and aesthetics of race, sexuality, and gender also cultivated some wild blossoms, pollination, and fructifying. Creative writing programs furthered this diversity by providing democratic access to an apprenticeship in the arts, as public and private universities, colleges, and community colleges helped to educate young poets from all economic classes and ethnic backgrounds.

How can someone survey today's poetry and claim to hear a homogenous song of a single bad mood? That's astonishing. I worry that John Barr has chosen his books very badly. Approximately a thousand titles of poetry are published each year in North America, and it is hard for one to find one's way among them. Barr says that poets have been writing the same way for a long time, in the same tired, mostly lyrical mode. Although Barr suggests poetry lacks courage and the zeal for adventure, it is curious that he doesn't hazard to provide any specific examples of dreary, homogenous, modernist lyricism. There are many impersonations of John Ashbery and Lynn Hejinian, and sometimes these authors even seem to imitate themselves; but you can't point only to the imitations and impersonators and claim that they represent contemporary poetry. The scene is too wild a rumpus. Contemporary poetry is where the wild things are.

When I read *Bite Every Sorrow* by Barbara Ras, or *Dien Cai Dau* by Yusef Komunyakaa, or *Given Sugar, Given Salt* by Jane Hirschfield, or *Call Me Ishmael Tonight* by Agha Shahid Ali, or *The Wild Iris*

by Louise Glück, or *The Fields of Praise* by Marilyn Nelson, or *Tar* by C.K. Williams, or *Letters to Yeznin* by Jim Harrison, it appears clear to me that lyrical poetry is an infinitely elastic and inexhaustible genre, and it's thriving in this epoch. There's nothing "mono-moodic" about it. Barr asserts, however, that "the ubiquity of lyric poetry, to the exclusion of other modes of poetry, is another sign of the poverty of the art form." Really? Is the lyric crowding out the narrative poem, the epic, the dramatic monologue?

Perhaps it's true that, today, a period style takes hold faster and carries away more poets; but as the field grows more crowded, these period styles and mannerist modes burn themselves out more quickly, and they certainly provoke backlashes and rebellions more rapidly. Right now, the fragmentary, elliptical aria—the ontological lyric and free verse aporia—seem all the rage among younger poets; and a few of the younger poets seem to be trying to channel the voice of Jorie Graham or Michael Palmer. This is a recent development; it, too, will pass. Poetics rise, merge, break away, and fall. Various generations of writers have always competed to clear a space of attention for themselves. Today's period style soon becomes the barricade where the next generation of poets will protest. There are also scimmages among poetics by regions: West Coast, Southwest, Midwest, Northeast, South, British Columbia, etc. And there's sniping between so-called academic and nonacademic poets—a conflict Barr enjoys exacerbating. Even when there is a prevalent period style, the pluralism of North American poetry goes about its business. To report that there's a single bad mood in contemporary poetry, as Barr does, is either a hyperbolic provocation or a colossal misreading.

Many review copies cross our desks here at AWP, and I don't see a dearth of epic ambition or a lack of narrative storytelling or an absence of dramatic skill in contemporary poetry, though the arena is strewn with some awful books. I tried to read *The Alamo: An Epic* by Michael Lind, and I pray its kind may never come again. But other big poems of great ambitions have moved me: *Kyrie* by Ellen Bryant Voigt, *An Explanation of America* by Robert Pinsky, *Autobiography of Red* by Anne Carson, *After the War: A Narrative* by Andrew Hudgins, *The One Day* by Donald Hall, *Midquest* by Fred Chappell, *Freddy Neptune* by Les Murray, and *Iris* by Mark Jarman. A few of these books may be too happily situated in the modernist camp for Barr's liking (and Anne Carson is situated in her own camp, somewhere between Argos and Never-Never Land), but none of them are dull or specimens of poets "writing in same way for a long time." Along with poems in Lawrence

Joseph's *Into It*, the long poem in Louise Glück's new book, *Averno*, is, to my taste, among the finest poems in remembrance of September 11, 2001. Marilyn Nelson's crown of sonnets for Emmitt Till is a *tour de force*—it's a narrative poem, a lyrical elegy, and an indictment of America's hypocrisy.

The field has many expert practitioners of dramatic monologues. Consider *Inner Voices* by Richard Howard, *These Upraised Hands* and *We Didn't Come Here for This* by William Patrick, *Vice* by Ai, and *In the Western Night* by Frank Bidart. All these books contain dramatic monologues, many of which are as memorable, as moving, or as provocative as those of Robert Browning.

How can anyone read these books or the authors I just mentioned and seriously argue that poets who work in academe are monomaniacs sealed away in a remote ivory tower?

Although it's true that poetry is always crowded with confessional exhibitionists who fall upon the thorns of life and hemorrhage all over the place, contemporary poetry has a large number of tempers as sweet as Dickinson or Whitman. Today's poetry also includes a good number of jesters and satirists. I have laughed out loud while reading poems by Billy Collins, Andrei Codrescu, Stephen Dobyns, Lynn Emanuel, Russell Edson, Angie Estes, Amy Gerstler, Albert Goldbarth, Barbara Hamby, Bob Hicock, Tony Hoagland, David Kirby, Thomas Lux, William Matthews, Jack Myers, Barbara Ras, Liam Rector, Charles Simic, James Tate, Henry Taylor, Belle Waring, and Dean Young.

How can anyone who has read these authors argue that poetry is now dominated by humorless drones?

IMPRESSARIOS, CURATORS, AND REPRESENTATIVES OF POETRY

Literature, the visual arts, theater, dance, and music often evolve by hurling themselves toward one extreme, and then towards the opposite extreme. This extremism is usually cultivated and hyped by impresarios, gallery owners, choreographers, composers, and the artists themselves, all of whom must

advertise something new and daring in order to lure new audiences their way.

Many of the tenets of modernism are now almost a century old. Efforts to engineer new golden ages, new dawns, and new revolutions of the arts have become as ubiquitous as movie promotions. Salvatore Dali once collaborated with Walt Disney. The temper of consumerism has become the temper of the avant-garde, and vice-versa, with no little self-promotion and vice among the buyers, sellers, and artists. John Barr has joined the ranks of today's impresarios. It's fascinating, amid all these claims for what is supposedly new and improved, to investigate who and which institutions inspired the greatest changes and renewals in the reading of poetry, or in the audiences of poetry.

As Barr notes, academe has "provided a crucial sanctuary to poetry for the past half century." So it has been, and so it will ever be. But academe has also been a conservatory and a crucial PUBLIC venue of poetry, though Barr ignores these public aspects of

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writing workshops and universities, just as he seems oblivious to the serious political upheavals these universities have facilitated in our reading habits and in the production of literature. He argues, to the contrary, that poets who teach have been malfunctioning arbiters of taste; he argues that poets who teach are politically inert.

The concluding paragraph of Barr's essay contains a number of ironies. While celebrating his foundation as an engine for change in the cultivation of a new poetry and expanded audiences for that new poetry, he quotes from *Leaves of Grass*, *Fleurs du Mal*, and *Moby Dick*. He refers to Whitman, Baudelaire, and Melville as examples of authors who expanded the audiences for literature. It's true that these authors were far from being professional academics, but each of them owes a debt to universities. The world is

often too preoccupied or too staid to appreciate its artists during their lifetimes. Academe keeps their works and reputations alive until the world is ready for them.

Whitman famously self-published *Leaves of Grass* (and anonymously wrote rave reviews of his own poetry), and the book was something of a scandal at first—too strange, too audacious. The book, during Whitman's lifetime, did not sell enough copies to sustain him. Whitman, even at the end of his life, relied on the generosity of benefactors. Professors as well as editors and critics helped to elevate Whitman's stature. The publication of Baudelaire's book was another scandal, which led to the prosecution of himself, his publisher, and the printer for crimes of blasphemy and obscenity. The first edition of the

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book was a commercial disaster; four years later, *Fleurs du Mal* was published in a second edition of 1,500 copies. During his lifetime, Baudelaire was more infamous than popular. Again, academe had something to do with translating that work, disseminating it, and keeping the author's reputation alive until audiences became wise enough to appreciate this iconoclast. *Moby-Dick* broke Melville's heart as the novel sold fewer than a thousand copies the year it was published. The American reading public preferred Melville's earlier works, with their promises of cannibals, exotic locations, and half-naked islanders. And where would *Billy Budd* have been without scholars and professors?⁶ With Melville especially, academe and other writers were crucial in preserving the reputation of the author until America was ready for his greatest accomplishments. This, too, is audience development, or "outreach" or "capacity building"—to use the jargon of today's philanthropists and arts administrators. Nonetheless, academe's audience-building is underappreciated by most grant-makers and cultural critics. The supposed golden moments of the past were not so golden after all. Barr seems

to presume that Eliot, Stevens, and Williams simply appeared and became famous icons of poetry, as if classrooms, scholarship, and poets who teach had nothing to do with it. The publisher of *New Directions*, James Laughlin, said that his press did not become profitable until he developed a market for his books in universities—and Laughlin had Williams, Baudelaire, Borges, Rexroth, Ferlinghetti, H.D., and Pound on his backlist!

Writing programs have been effective curators in building audiences for Elizabeth Bishop and Weldon Kees. When I was an English major in the 1970s, my professors, classmates, and I referred to Bishop as merely "pretty good for a woman poet." She was just one of the century's lesser lights amid the constellations of guys—Lowell, Berryman, Hugo, Roethke, Snodgrass, and others. In spite of her awards and critical acclaim, Bishop was widely trivialized in a manner that recalls the condescension that Emily Dickinson endured in her lifetime. The denizens of writing programs helped to show how pig-headed this condescension was. Contemporary poets and feminist scholars taught, anthologized, and elevated the status of Bishop's work, as they had done for Dickinson's. When I attended my graduate writing workshops, my peers and

teachers extolled Bishop's work; they chastened me. My constellations were mightily realigned; the sky improved. Donald Justice and his students at the University of Iowa did much the same for Weldon Kees. You could not take a seminar in poetic forms with Justice and not read a poem by Kees. There are countless examples of how writing programs provide an effective curatorship of poetry in helping to build audiences for working-class poets, African-American poets, gay and lesbian poets, Latino poets, and poets from many nations. Academe has helped to expand the horizons of literature by adding new experiences: what it is like to be a mother or sister, what it is like to be a factory worker, what it is like to be the descendant of slaves, what it is like to be a soldier in Viet Nam, what it is like to be Vietnamese, and so on.

For Barr to ask "when did you last read a poem whose political vision truly surprised or challenged you?" and then to claim that poetry is a stagnant monoculture where "Attitude has replaced intellect"—well, that seems to be the breathtaking example of a very peculiar kind of myopia or amnesia. In the academic study of poetry, in writing workshops

and seminars, in the writing of poems, in the new poets who have gained recent notoriety, the past fifty years have been all about challenging presumptions about the political ownership of literature—who the readers are, who literature’s authors are, what the content should be, what the forms should be, and who should choose the books that will be circulated forever within the ecology of our culture. Most of us who have been avid readers since the 1960s have frequently encountered poems with political visions that challenged us. Writing programs helped to make sure of that.

THE DEMAND-SIDE ECONOMICS OF POETRY

The majority of North America’s universities and colleges are public institutions; they do a good job in serving the public; they are an inseparable part of public life. One can only misrepresent the role of academe by misrepresenting it as a single remote place, when academe is really thousands of outposts, serving the rich, the middle-class, and the poor. Writing programs have helped to democratize the art of poetry; the audiences for poetry are larger for it, too.

Would there have been as many African-American readers of poetry, had African-Americans not gained a place in the study, making, editing, publishing, scholarship, teaching, and reviewing of poetry? Would there be as many women readers of poetry had writing programs and English departments not cleared a space of attention for Elizabeth Bishop, Eavan Boland, Sandra Cisneros, Lucille Clifton, Rita Dove, Mona Van Duyn, Marilyn Hacker, Carolyn Kizer, Sharon Olds, Mary Oliver, Adrinenne Rich, Muriel Rukeyser, May Swenson, and many others? Those who argue, like John Barr, Joseph Epstein, and William Logan, that poetry is being extravagantly over-produced tend to overlook the exertions that have made it possible for our literature to reflect—more accurately and more variously—our humanity.

Academe and writing programs have drastically expanded the demand and audience of poetry by expanding the supply and the diversity among the makers of poetry. I situate poetry in this quotient of supply and demand because, for a few decades now, many cultural critics, foundations, and philanthropists have been subjecting poetry and the arts to a market-model formula—the mathematics of “measurable outcomes” and surveys of consumers and producers, buyers and sellers. The supply is often found to exceed the demand. “The human mind is a marketplace,” Barr reminds us, “especially when it comes

to selecting one’s entertainment.” Evidently, Barr and his fellow trustees at the Poetry Foundation feel that academe, poets, university presses, small presses, and literary service organizations have performed poorly in tending to the mind’s marketplace. The trustees could have elected to make their new foundation a grant-making organization, which would have supported poetry’s long-time companions; instead the trustees chose to make the foundation a private foundation that would develop its own programming. They decided to concentrate upon the demand-side economics for poetry.

It will be curious to see what philanthropic policies and projects the Poetry Foundation adopts next. With their market-models and their social engineering, our philanthropic, cultural, and political leaders have been exerting peculiar pressures on artists and the arts.

Philanthropies of the political left prefer to use the arts as Band-Aids to dress social ills such as failing schools, illiteracy, battered wives, teen pregnancy, gang violence, drug addiction, etc. As state and federal social programs wobble or fail in an era of tax cuts, deficits, and welfare for the richest one percent of the population, the suffering of the poor compels many philanthropies to enter the arena of social services. Poets are okay, so long as they work as activists and volunteers in these social services. Foundations on the left find this to be a good way to expand the audiences for the arts, though it is not purely art their new programs convey to inner cities and poor rural areas. As foundations grow older, they often reduce their support for artists and arts programming. After all, it’s easier to form a consensus about feeding hungry children than about choosing a poet as an award recipient. Meanwhile, on the right, congressmen, media pundits, and think-tanks have portrayed artists as vandals of God and country, especially since the 1990s. The ideal of art for art’s sake does not have much currency. In today’s political climate, it’s safer and seemingly more noble to promote old masterpieces and to develop audiences; it’s risky and troublesome to support artists. Knowingly and unknowingly, many leaders in the arts have been influenced by this trickle-down belligerence towards artists. No wonder, as a percentage of all charitable giving, donations to the arts have declined from 8.4 percent in the 1990s to 5.6 percent today.⁷ When Barr claims that today’s poets are spiritually stagnant, mono-moodic, out of touch, impaired, malfunctioning, etc., he exhibits the symptoms of this national trickle-down belligerence towards artists.

Writing programs support artists for who they are and what they do. AWP and its many colleges and

universities have created the largest system of literary patronage the world has ever seen. This system of education and patronage spends, each year, hundreds of millions of dollars on salaries for poets; on reading series; on conferences and classes; and on university presses and little magazines. This support benefits poets, students, and general readers. Probably the sum total of academe's support for contemporary literary authors exceeds half a billion dollars annually—that's a conservative guess. That sum is four or more times larger than the entire budget of the NEA. Perhaps this support is tremendous enough that the Poetry Foundation would be justified to concentrate mainly on the demand-side economics of poetry. But whatever policies the Poetry Foundation adopts, it should not belittle American universities. Writing programs and their writers also build audiences for poetry and support the innovation of new work as well as the conservation of past accomplishments. Academe is not merely "a crucial sanctuary," a remote retreat, or the purveyor of bad moods.

EMERSONIAN CIRCLES & THE GIFT OF POETRY

I cringe when I read about the market-models of business being applied to the arts. The art of poetry is part of a wonderful chain of gift-giving among the dead, the living, and the unborn. Poets often allude to other poets, not because they like to show off or generate footnotes, but because they love to enter that mysterious communal place where the dead, the living, and future generations exchange their gifts with one another. Poetry is the loveliest of all conversations, for it seeks to belong to no one person but to overlapping and concentric circles of self, friends, family, tribes, communities, and humanity. Subjecting poetry to economic laws and new marketing campaigns seems like a crass intrusion into the valleys of its saying where executives should never want to tamper. I cringe when I read about efforts to subject poetry to demand-side economics because the dichotomy between literary producers and consumers is not as neat or simple as the philanthropic leaders and cultural critics sometimes presume them to be. Improving, increasing, and diversifying the supply of poetry can improve demand, and this has happened in the past fifty years.⁸

There is also something un-American and unfair about policies that divide consumers of the arts from makers of the arts—that divide the spectators from the performers, and the takers from the givers—as if one side did not sometimes become the other. Often, the most engaging poems to read, memorize,

and recite are the ones that give you the feeling that you are living and breathing through the poem's gestation and delivery into the world. A great poem seduces each reader to imagine one's self as the poet. In America, we believe in democratic access to high places, including the cafés where the muses play. As Americans, we believe we should have direct access to most anything we want, as long as we apply ourselves diligently enough in that direction. Why should we not try our hand at writing poetry? Why should we not try becoming a poet especially when poetry, by its nature, encourages us to do so? Why should one not seek to claim one's own first-hand experience of inspiration? Why should we rely only on the second-hand or inherited inspirations of books from the past? The deepest experience of an art is often a participatory experience. The taker identifies with the maker and giver in a profound circle of sympathy and identity-swapping. The typical buyer does not identify with the typical seller in this way. The most successful education in the arts is the one that lets the student try his or her hand at making art. Often, the best fans of poetry have put themselves in the places of poets, at least for a while. To cultivate this kind of participation in poetry, from grade school to graduate school, is to cultivate audiences for poetry—audiences that include readers as well as poets.

Audiences for televised games of soccer are growing in the U.S. Why? Because more Americans now play soccer themselves, in school, in college, and in community leagues. The more people play a sport, the more popular it becomes among spectators. But few critics call these soccer enthusiasts malfunctioning pretenders and accuse them of ruining the game. If you go to the ballet, chances are a large portion of the audience are women and men who at one time stood at the barre, and that these former dancers are the best and most reliable dance fans, spending more than the average American on tickets to dance performances. If you go to a performance of classical music, the most avid fans will be those who sang or played an instrument. Only the most churlish cynics would complain that school recitals, marching bands, and graduate music schools are damaging the art; but parallel complaints are typical among critics of poetry.

At least John Barr, unlike Nick Greene and Joseph Epstein, assures us that poetry's best days are ahead of us, rather than behind us, although Barr seems to assume that poetry in Shakespeare's time was in much better shape than in ours, as if Shakespeare didn't need a benefactor to publish his sonnets, as if it was no matter that most of the population of England, especially most of the female population, could not read.⁹

Let's hope that the Poetry Foundation succeeds in developing bigger and hungrier audiences for poetry. The challenges are prodigious. I find it hard to be as sanguine about poetry's place in our culture as John Barr seems to be. It's not just poetry alone that is facing challenges, but books in general and the fine arts in general. The audiences for theater, classical music, and opera are becoming grayer and grayer. Sales of serious contemporary fiction are also in decline; it seems that only Oprah can lift a novel of artistic merit to sell over 500,000 copies. Many teachers of freshmen composition feel that each year's new class shows more limited abilities in reading and writing. In spite of the growth in our population, avid literary readers, magazine subscribers, and newspaper readers become fewer and fewer. Barr says he has a survey that indicates America is ready for a golden age of poetry. Let us hope that is true. There have been many studies that indicate the vast majority of Americans love the arts and that they believe the arts are essential to a good education.¹⁰ Most Americans are glad the arts are there; but for some reason, they just don't find their way to the theater, or to symphony hall, or to the polling booth where they might elect representatives more supportive of arts education. Americans tend to love the arts in theory, but not in action. They are distracted from distractions by distraction—by amusements and spectacles rather than by the finer arts.

When I read *Amusing Ourselves to Death* or *Technopoly* by Neil Postman or *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in An Electronic Age* by Sven Birkerts, I recognize the culture they describe as here and now. We have become a nation of image-surfers rather than readers; we prefer ricocheting off the surface of things rather than concentrating, in solitude and quiet, upon our complex place within the world, nature, and history. We have accelerated the passage of time by making it crowded, hyperkinetic, noisy, discontinuous, and shallow. To quote Birkerts, "No deep time, no resonance; no resonance, no wisdom." Poetry is a wise medium; it requires a slow, continuous duration of quiet and the depth of solitude.¹¹

Perhaps, only if our nation had two or three hours of electricity a day (like the villages and cities of Iraq) would we all slow down enough to read—without

the enticements of TV, movies, Xboxes, stereos, computers, Playstations, DVD players, satellite radios, iPods, PDAs, and cell phones—only then might we quiet down enough to become a nation of readers. Can new philanthropic policies and the exertions of the Poetry Foundation have the same powerful effect as turning off the nation's electricity? It seems unlikely, but let's hope it is so.

In the meanwhile, academe and writing programs will continue to serve as the conservatories where the art of poetry is preserved, distributed, studied, and created for another generation—for those few individuals contemplative enough and unplugged enough to enjoy it. We understand that the supply of today's poetry is not just addressed to today's

As the arts become institutionalized they do run
the risk of becoming clinical or systematic; but, so far,
creative writing has successfully resisted its rational
reduction to systems, techniques, theories,
and amalgamation into normative standards.

demand. Future readers will look back and take what is useful and pleasing to them; they will be grateful for the abundance and variety.

Poetry's circle will not be as small as it may seem at first. The chain of thinking and thanking will still be there—the underscore to poetry's music—linking readers and makers of the present, linking readers and makers of the past, linking readers and makers of the future. The dead, the living, and those not yet born. These linking circles will not be found in any "measurable outcomes," marketing surveys, or demographic maps, dividing us as youngsters and oldsters, buyers and sellers, academics and non-academics, red states and blue. Poetry is never so destructive that she seeks to divide and conquer. Poetry will continue talking among her dearest friends, even among those of us who will no longer be there, and even among those of us who have not yet arrived. She will remember and speak for us. This is not as sad as it seems, because the art of poetry is a vast, communal gift. Humanity's gift to itself. The most profound and charitable gift of all.

AWP

Notes

1. John Barr, "American Poetry in the New Century," *POETRY*, September, 2006; Vol. 188, No. 5. Pages 433–441. The essay is also available online www.poetrymagazine.org.
2. D.G. Myers, *The Elephants Teach: Creative Writing since the 1880s*, University of Chicago Press, 2006; pages 169–179. Myers also upholds Ted Swenson, a character in Francine Prose's novel, *Blue Angel*, as the iconic poster-boy of creative writing—a teacher bewitched, bothered, and bewildered in a morass of subjectivity and desire.
3. The market value of the Poetry Foundation's assets in 2005 was \$44.7 million, whereas the market value of its assets was \$29.4 million in 2004. The endowments earned a 6% return for 2005, and the foundation's annual operating budget grew to \$5.3 million. Source: *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*, June 1-2, 2006; Section B; pages 8–9.
4. "Contemporary Workshop Aesthetic" by David Dooley is especially interesting to compare to Barr's essay because Dooley complains that all of today's MFA-degreed poets are writing—not in a modernist style—but in an anti-modernist "plain style." Other arguments with components similar to Barr's arguments also appear in *Diary* by Witold Gombrowicz (1988); "The Writer and the University" by Cynthia Ozick (1991); "The Skinny" by August Kleinzahler (1991); "Literary Life in the 1990s" by Bruce Bawer (1991).
5. *Death to the Death of Poetry: Essays, Reviews, Notes, Interviews* by Donald Hall. University of Michigan Press; 1995. The essay also appears in Hall's excellent collection *Breakfast Served Any Time All Day: Essays on Poetry New and Selected*. University of Michigan Press; 2004.
6. *Billy Budd* was not published during Melville's lifetime. It was published first published in 1924, after the manuscript was discovered among Melville's papers. The development of the literary reputations of Whitman, Baudelaire, and Melville share similar stages: writers of mainstream reputations praise them; general readers, scholars, and other writers make note of the lines of literary influence; and the following generations of writers and academic professionals elevate the reputation of the books for future generations. Whitman had Emerson and Thoreau for advocates; Baudelaire had a cadre of painters, poets, and fellow journalists for boosters, plus the publicity of scandal; and Melville had Hawthorne's highest praise.
7. This is according to Americans for the Arts. Americans for the Arts publishes on the Web numerous reports, which provide statistical analysis of the arts and their social, economic, cultural impact. Go to www.artsusa.org.
8. Those who write obituaries for poetry often argue that the annual publication of 1,000 titles of poetry is far too many. But who can really say how much new art is too much art for a nation of 300 million souls? The computer gaming industry recently surpassed Hollywood in gross sales this past year. This nascent industry expanded its audience by vastly increasing and diversifying the supply of its products; it created more different kinds of games for all age groups and all kinds of people. The computer gaming industry now produces more than 2,000 new titles annually. Meanwhile, 33,000 new musical CD titles and 4,000 new DVD titles are also produced each year.
9. Many scholars peg the literacy rates of England in 1600 as low as 30% for men and 10% for women. Others peg the literacy rate for women at 15% to 20% in 1600 and 30% in 1675. Literacy rates were higher in the cities, perhaps twice the nation's average rate. See David Cressy, *Literacy and the Social Order: Reading and Writing in Tudor and Stuart England* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1980) 128 and 176. Also: J. Paul Hunter, *Before Novels: The Cultural Contexts of Eighteenth-Century English Fiction* (New York: Norton, 1990), 72-73. Frances E. Dolan, "Reading, Writing, and Other Crimes," *Feminist Readings of Early Modern Culture: Emerging Subjects*, ed. Valerie Traub, M. Lindsey Kaplan, and Dymphna Callaghan (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996) 143-144.
10. See Kevin F. McCarthy, Elizabeth H. Ondaatje, Laura Zakaras, Arthur Brooks, *Gifts of the Muse: Reframing the Debate About the Benefits of the Arts*, commissioned by the Wallace Foundation, 2004. It is a PDF document available from the foundation's website, www.wallacefoundation.org. The report refers to polling that has measured America's regard for the arts, pages 71–72: "A Harris poll reports that a majority of parents think the arts are as important as reading, math, science, history, or geography (Harris, 1992). Close to 90 percent of American parents believe the arts should be taught in school, over 90 percent believe the arts are an important part of a well-rounded education, and 95 percent believe that the arts are important in preparing children for the future (Americans for the Arts, 2001)."
11. According to the survey firm NDP Group, in 1991, more than half of all Americans read printed material a half-hour or more every day. By 1999, that had dropped to 45 percent. This was in reference to reading any printed material among any books, magazine, or newspapers. The NEA's *Reading at Risk* report also contains alarming figures on reading habits, though that is focused on literary reading. The report is available from the NEA's website www.nea.gov.