

THE PUBLISHING SCENE



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I hear America singing.
—Walt Whitman

Poetry in the United States is flourishing and plentiful. There is more poetry being published in this country than at any other time in our history, and more poetry readings of all kinds. But many who care about the art ask if the new cornucopia of poetry publication—what some call a poetry renaissance—is the same thing as a poetry readership.

As Director of Poets House in New York City, which organizes the Poetry Publication Showcase, an annual exhibition of all new poetry books produced in the States, I have had the opportunity to study the tectonics of contemporary American poetry over the past ten years. To generalize: poetry publishing here has been dramatically changed by revolutions in computer technology. As the means of production have been democratized, the art has begun to reflect a more inclusive range of voices than Walt Whitman heard singing in this nation of nations. However, since the mechanisms of distribution are so fragile, many of these books never meet their intended readership.

Poetry publishing has become almost exclusively the province of small and independent presses. Last year, Poets House documented the publication of nearly 1,300 books of poetry—every variety of formalism and experimentalism, a large proportion from presses with names like Beehive, Big Kiss, Bottom Dog and Burning Deck. Only 13% of all these new poetry books came from commercial presses.

Since the 1960s, some 600 mergers and acquisitions have occurred in the American book industry. Random House, Little Brown and many other distinguished firms, independent through much of their history, are no longer freestanding. As in every other sector of the country's economic life, the trend towards conglomeration means the pond is to some extent dominated by one species. In fact, 80% of all trade titles come from the five largest conglomerates, including Time Warner, Viacom and Bertelsmann. Entertainment conglomerates control the world of commercial presses.

The commercial presses that do publish poetry rarely market or advertise it. Since the bottom line for a commercial house is the bottom line, and poetry print runs of 2,000 copies are considered small in comparison with frontlists, poetry at a commercial house tends to be seen as a rare cultural charity, or the genteel recreation of some particular editor. Or, worse, as a romantic nod to the bygone days of a business that now depresses many of the people who work in it.

These trends are compounded by the expansion of chain bookstores, which in the interest of efficiency have fewer people purchasing for more and more outlets. The chains rarely give books a shelf-life of more than three months, which works for a blockbuster but not for a book of poetry—poetry sells more slowly, over a longer period of time. While some chains do a better job with the genre than others, what we can expect once they obliterate their competition is an open and disturbing question. Independent bookstores, which historically sustained the smaller poetry publishers and maintained more diverse collections, are vanishing. Quite simply, in the retail sector of the commercial book trade, the taste of a few prevails.

While I feel grateful for W. W. Norton, one of the last independent trade houses, and Farrar Straus Giroux, the most Laureate-laden in this country, the true diversity in the American poetry scene comes from small and independent presses. By independent presses I mean, primarily, non-profit literary and university presses granted a special tax status, which makes them eligible to receive grants from the government and philanthropic foundations. Non-profit presses like Copper Canyon, Tia Chucha, Graywolf, Sun & Moon and BOA Editions, share with for-profit presses like City Lights a sense of mission rather than a dollar-driven perspective. Some university presses also produce excellent poetry series; here, the scholarly titles of the wider list help to subsidize overhead.

The very smallest independent presses are micropresses, which tend to be run by one person, publish only a few titles a year, and have hand-to-hand distribution. Since they are often kitchen-table ventures, which do not apply for ISBN numbers issued by the Library of Congress, there is no telling how many micropresses exist in the country. However, with the spread of desktop publishing, it's evident that micropresses represent a vast and ephemeral sector.

During the last thirty years, small press publishing of every kind has grown 500%, with a vertiginous effect on the decentralization of poetry publishing and on the number of books produced. While it is likely that more poetry is being read today, it is certain that most people are not reading the same books. American poetry-reading habits reflect a wide regionalism magnified by decentralized production. The poet Alfred Corn once

told me that he thought there couldn't be another Dylan Thomas. Corn wasn't referring to the respective artistic merits of our age; he was, I think, observing that the New York houses that once dominated the poetic taste of the nation could no longer do so—that the publishing world had grown too wide and diffuse.

Expansion of independent publishing has immeasurably broadened poets' access to print. People of color, women, gays and lesbians have had better access to print. With desktop publishing, it is also easier to start an imprint that grows out of a particular mission. Vietnam Generation/Burning Cities Press publishes work of Vietnam veterans, Kaya Productions a spectrum of Asian American writers, and so forth. Each builds audience opportunity for their artists. And because of the vagaries of the tax laws, only non-profit, tax-exempt presses consistently keep their writers in print.

This vibrant publishing environment has also fostered an enormous range of aesthetic temperament in American poetry. The metaphysical work of Brenda Hillman and Fanny Howe, the hip-hop lyrics of Tracie Morris, as well as the poetry of the so-called Language School, reaches us because of independent presses. What commercial house would have taken on Lois-Ann Yamanaka's poems in Hawaiian pidgin? What about Armand Schwerner's masterpiece, *The Tablets*, a mock translation of Sumero-Akkadian clay tablets, and a meditation on the fragmentary nature of language? So many literary risks, experiments and aesthetic challenges would never have seen the light of print without this surge in independent book publishing.

If most American poetry flourishes at the margins, like extravagant wildflowers at the edges of our corporate highways, then our literary journals have enriched the soil. It is estimated that there are upwards of 800 active literary journals in the country today. The little magazines offer emerging poets their first entrance into print. They forge literary identities and identify literary trends. They almost always form around a charismatic personality with a strong aesthetic viewpoint. But this sector is particularly fluid: many literary journals don't have the business acumen they need to survive. One feels grateful for *Calyx*, *Callaloo*, *Conjunctions*, *The Gettysburg Review*, *Poetry*, *Sulfur* and *Zyzzyva* both for their contributions to literary life and their endurance. Magazines like *Tin House*, *Fence* and *Volt* are exciting new arrivals.

So the decentralized U.S. poetry landscape is vast and diffuse; poetry sects and schools dot the terrain. Some of these corrals have to do with the nature of curatorship, with editors asserting particular tastes to build distinct artistic identities and audiences around their publications. But I have

found that American poets often do not read widely beyond the aesthetic with which they identify themselves. This is as true for poets of “the Academy” as for those of “the coffeehouse”. So much potential exchange is lost when poets ignore the spirit of Frank O’Hara’s comment that “the old guys are really quite great and everyone else is a useful thorn to have in your side.”

How aesthetic trends intersect and dovetail with the identity politics of a multicultural market place is another question. Nowadays it is easier to find an anthology of poetry by Italian-Americans, say, than a single anthology that attempts to survey the full aesthetic range of contemporary American poetry. This is because the latter can be marketed only as poetry, while the former can find a niche both as poetry and as the special interest of an ethnic group.

Even though this may be a golden age of poetry production, both in terms of diverse aesthetic experiment and numbers of volumes produced, most Americans do not, ironically, have access to a *range* of poetry. Only the most successful and entrepreneurial of the independent presses have a regular distributor like Consortium that gets the books into bookstores. Most independent presses are too small to be picked up by a distributor or a wholesaler. Small Press Distribution in Berkeley is the only exclusively literary wholesaler in the country, charged with the responsibility of carrying hundreds of presses too small to get help anywhere else. Since SPD is itself a non-profit, dependent on dwindling government and foundation subsidy, its viability is precarious.

Most books of poetry are never reviewed. Librarians, upon whom Americans rely for their physical contact with books, depend on reviews for their acquisition decisions, but often do not subscribe to the smaller literary journals that do review poetry. And there is still no substitute for bumping into books. In a diverse collection, at a community library or local bookstore, books talk to each other, or, from the merchandizing perspective, “sell” each other. People make discoveries when they pick up something original, spare or strange that they hadn’t been looking for. On-line buying may provide a new kind of access for many readers in this vast and sprawling country, but it works best as a tool for those readers who know what they are seeking.

So why exactly is there such a buzz about the “poetry renaissance” in the United States if most poetry books are hard to find? Perhaps the most significant factor in the perception that poetry is experiencing a rebirth has to do with the flowering of reading series everywhere. In New York City, within the last five years, *Poetry Calendar* has expanded from a broadside to a full magazine documenting an average of fifteen readings a

night. Multicultural urban audiences, ostensibly due to the influence of rap music, were attracted to “poetry performance” as a means of cultural empowerment and community. Venues like the Nuyorican Poets Cafe in New York City and the Green Mill Tavern in Chicago have drawn in new polyglot audiences.

This effusive burst of energy has been infectious. Like micropresses, reading series need little or no start-up capital, and hundreds have started. There is an obvious pleasure in the human voice, in an environment of face-to-face gathering. And it’s probably not coincidental that this has taken place during the concomitant boom in computer technology. Perhaps the screen does leave people feeling unconnected. Perhaps the new technology has compounded interest. Either way, readings have now become the single-most important means of selling poetry books in this country.

Since, for most volumes, ad campaigns and reviews are non-existent, publishers assume poets will take a more active role in creating an audience for their work. Many independent publishers sponsor their own reading series to create loyal local audiences for their poets. I have heard publishers of all stripes say that a poetry book did especially well because the poet was a gifted reader. Others lament that the book has become the souvenir of the reading.

Because readings have become fashionable, the media thinks poetry is hip again, a fact that has fueled much of the hype about a poetry renaissance. MTV features spoken word spots with young poets and backup bands. *Poetic* has become a popular adjective in headlines to describe basketball lay-ups as well as real estate deals. Major newspapers cover the same story about poetry slams again and again. But they’ve gotten something right: there is a new source of energy in American poetry, and it lies outside the universities.

The poet Cornelius Eady thinks that the cycle of media interest has less to do with poetry than a rehashed idea of “the bohemian” which poets have always had to struggle against: “too hip to notice, too wasted to care, a non-translatable whiner who lives somewhere else at a disconnected distance to the rest of the neighborhood and world...” The question to parse is whether the media’s interest demonstrates that poetry is again becoming part of the American cultural consciousness. True, the media isn’t actually covering poetry *per se*; nonetheless, I believe media attention has helped to create a new receptiveness to poetry in the culture at large. More Americans are getting their first exposure through public television series on the genre. There are poems on buses and subways. Poet Laureates are invited to speak on TV and radio. The whole hoopla, including National

Poetry Month in April, has helped to create, if not a new cultural prominence, then an energetic visibility.

In a country where poetry is barely taught in elementary schools, this is important. The late Audré Lorde held that poetry is no luxury; yet in most schools it is not in the curriculum at all, not even as “enrichment.” Because of this return to poetry as highly oral art, many people are feeling invited in and discovering the relevance of poetry to their own lives. Claiming that this is a renaissance, however, implies that poetry has been wrenched from a Dark Age. It is preferable, I think, to acknowledge a certain periodicity in literary activity—one which, of late, has been highly responsive to the new technology and its systems of distribution or delivery.

I have a friend, a classicist, who likes to remind me that Homer was the first literary trailblazer of Western civilization. This is because Homer, my friend says, lived at the edge of two worlds—those of orality and the written word. The new technology of the Homeric era—the invention of alphabetic writing—brought him to us. It’s an interesting lens though which to look at our own burgeoning moment in American poetry. Not only do we not know what tomorrow’s masterpieces are: we are unsure how they will find the ear of future generations. We’re on the edge of a new kind of literacy which will lead—well, we don’t know where.

Meanwhile, there are new expectations that the poem will have many paths to its audience: text on paper, on-line, CD-Rom, and a variety of live performance contexts. Notions of “reading” and “readership” are expanding as talking books become more popular. Volumes of poetry are accompanied by CDs in their back flap. And we are only at the very beginning of what poetry might do on-line.

One of poetry’s great appeals is that it is an essentially radical act: the single voice speaking against monoculture. Right now, intimate and idiosyncratic voices are finding us through many “reading” mechanisms, from margin to margin, if not from sea to shining sea. Walt Whitman wrote that he heard American singing. And, more than ever, we can too, if we listen in. As Marilyn Hacker puts it, “There is a huge though fragmented actual audience and a huge potential audience for a wider range of poetries than any interested party might originally recognize.”