

## Introduction: *History, Lyricism, and “Avant-Gardism”*

*Not Ready*

**Wayne Miller, Focus Editor**

Since the mid-90s, interesting things have been happening in American poetry. Diverse writers have been overtly rejecting the easy romanticism, bald postconfessionalism, and relative anti-intellectualism of the worst of 80s poetry. A survey of recent first books reveals that many young writers are reincorporating aspects of modernist poetics—Dadaism, surrealism, fragmentation, collage—and are informed by (or have at least read) the Language poets to varying degrees. Critics and reviewers have been struggling to name this shift—in *American Letters & Commentary*, Stephen Burt uses the term “Elliptical Poetry”; in a recent book review in *Electronic Poetry Review*, Paul Stephens refers to what he calls “New Iowanism”; books on the subject have titles like *Writings from the New Coast* and *Telling It Slant: Avant-Garde Poetics of the 1990s*. Regardless of these labels, what strikes me is how often these days I hear terms like “avant-garde,” “new,” “experimental,” and “outside the mainstream” being used—and often being used as indicators of what’s good or interesting in today’s poetry, much as the modernists used “new” in response to Pound’s famous injunction.

But this focus on “newness” (which today generally indicates a leaning toward modernist poetics) presents a problem in the postmodern literary world. Is someone writing in what appears to be a neomodernist style actually avant-garde? Are today’s neomodernists composing pastiches of modernist techniques, or are they ironically appropriating them? If these writers are being ironic, should the strength of their writing be determined by *how* ironic their stance toward modernism is? Is a rejection of “workshop aesthetics” by writers who have attended and continue to attend workshops truly a rejection of them? Without a

manifesto for such a group (is it even a group?), complex questions begin to arise. But if today’s “avant-garde” drafts a manifesto, won’t they merely be imitating the modernists? Such is the quagmire of avant-gardism in the postmodern era, and, not surprisingly, many poets typically associated with this loose group are cautious about actually using the term “avant-garde.”

Nonetheless, it seems clear to me that the idea of avant-gardism has grown to have real cachet among today’s younger poets, perhaps because it indicates a sort of rock-and-roll rebellion against our predecessors and the workshops where the majority of us were educated. Just look at the popularity of *Fence*, *Conduit*, *Volt*, and many other magazines that are marketed (if often by word of mouth *within* writing programs) as “avant-garde” or “against the grain.” I’m not concerned about this broadening of poetry’s aesthetic palette—it seems to indicate a healthy push to reinvigorate the art. Rather, what concerns me is that the *marketability* of avant-gardism has begun to polarize the way we talk about poetry. Rather than discuss how poets are engaging a range of intellectual and aesthetic projects, we’re too often simply concerning ourselves with how poets can and can’t be described in terms of today’s neomodernist trend. For this reason, writers involved in similar projects can find themselves landing on different sides of an unpredictably shifting fence, largely because we keep describing the fence itself rather than investigating the topography beneath it.

Perhaps we need other ways to slice up the poetry pie. Perhaps a regular and various application of a range of critical lenses would be the healthiest thing for a continual reinvigoration of the art. Despite what one continually finds in American poetic battles, there are other ways to describe poetry besides in terms of its relative “newness.” For instance, I find myself fascinated by Marina Tsvetaeva’s essay, “Poets with History and Poets without History,” which divides poets into two loose camps: those that write a sort of “pure” lyric—generally detached from historical references in an effort to engage metaphysical questions—and those that write historically grounded poems—which engage both the self and the historical contexts in which the self must think and act. Of course, Tsvetaeva’s categories prove impossibly discrete (in the essay, Tsvetaeva claims that Akhmatova is a poet without history—this is before “Requiem”), but I think these labels give us another way to talk about contemporary poetry such that we begin to cut across America’s prevailing preoccupation with “newness.” Moreover, applying both the historical/pure-lyric split *and* the new/traditional split has the potential to help explain why certain of today’s poets—“avant-garde” or not—are successful and exciting, while others feel rehashed or rote.

After all, just as Derrida, Foucault, Said, and others have examined how sociopolitical hierarchies are constructed, the most outspoken poetic “avant-garde” in the last twenty years or so of America poetry—the Language school—has been poetically (and politically) engaged in exploring

and deconstructing hierarchies. Thus they seem to belong to the “poets with history” category. Without historical, political, and/or theoretical referents floating somewhere in the backdrop, their poems would seem unnecessarily opaque. Which is perhaps what happens with some of the younger poets who are stylistically inspired by the Language poets but don’t evince the same sort of historical or political engagement. What results seems to be what Cal Bedient has called a “soft-core avant-gardism”—a poetry in which what was once a serious project becomes the stylistic echo of that project.

Of course, the poets being reviewed in this focus are not first-book poets. With all the attention on first books and young writers these days, I think it’s important to spend some time looking at the work our predecessors are doing, because none of these more mature poets are directly indebted to the “hipness” of the younger generation, and all have forged paths into their own intellectual and poetic projects—now in various stages of investigation and development. Their books tend to reveal a deepening or redirecting of their respective poetics—which I think is important, because despite the range of aesthetics presented in this focus, none of these writers is really considering (either rejecting or adhering to) the problems of workshop experiences. Nor are they overtly rebelling against their teachers or immediate predecessors. As a result, their poems have the potential to feel more full—to simply be wiser—and therefore to engage issues that concern a larger range of potential readers.

That said, it’s not hard to describe these writers in the stylistic terms of “new” or “mainstream”: Cal Bedient and Peter Sacks are clearly the most experimental poets here, with perhaps Harriet Zinnes and Carl Phillips moving a bit closer to the mainstream. Then Eamon Grennan and Dzvinia Orłowsky occupy a middle-ish ground (at least in terms of this group), with Ruth Stone and the late Deep Imagist Anthony Piccione finally landing in what today would be considered the most mainstream territory. But what does this actually offer us in terms of understanding their work? Other than mere surface, not a lot.

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However, when we start grouping these poets according to their relationships to history, they begin to explode interestingly through the surfaces of their respective idioms. Though Bedient and Sacks are both linguistically experimental, their projects differ dramatically. Bedient’s project is ultimately a romantic one, engaging the relationship between loss and art’s limited ability to mediate the effects of loss. Zinnes, also stylistically indebted to the modernists (though perhaps more directly to the objectivists), is an often lyrical poet investigating the epistemological riddling of language; and Phillips, Grennan, and Orłowsky are all lyrically tangling with questions of eros and the body—albeit in dramatically different ways. In contrast to these primarily “pure lyric” poets, Sacks constantly questions how consciousness intertwines with national/cultural identity and history. Piccione (perhaps on the middle line here) wrestles with the press of both the spiritual and the historical on the phenomenological, and Stone often engages the individual’s place in the overarching narratives of history.

Of course, this little exercise isn’t perfect, and perhaps this is its value—its imperfection forces us to talk beneath the surfaces of poems and thereby cut against the simple distinction between “new” and “old.” Especially considering that the descriptors “new” and “old” (or “avant-garde” and “mainstream,” etc.) can prove substantively problematic and have the potential to operate merely as marketing tools, it wouldn’t hurt to remember that poetry exists in a web of multiple trajectories. Also, there don’t seem to be that many American poets thinking deeply about history in their poems—perhaps because of the perceived difficulty of experimental historical poets, or perhaps because of the romantic impulse of watered-down postconfessional poetry. Charles Simic has posited that the difference between Czesław Miłosz and American poets is that, “When Miłosz sees a tree, he knows it can also be used to hang people.” And yet so many Americans have been hung from trees (or incarcerated unjustly, or persecuted for their beliefs, or simply exterminated in the course of the country’s expansion) that perhaps an awareness of history (or its lack) in poetry would broaden our ability to talk about America’s (and all nations’) propensity for

violence and abuse of power.

But more broadly, I find polarization between aesthetic schools troubling, because good writers, no matter their aesthetic affiliations, are attempting in one way or another to engage “reality,” which Milosz wisely said in his Nobel lecture is “so often misused but always deserving of esteem.” Perhaps examining how two seemingly different poets as Peter Sacks and Ruth Stone end up engaged in similar intellectual projects will allow us to undermine this polarization in a way that will let us more greatly appreciate the range of what poetry can do. Given the political climate (I’m thinking for instance about the White House’s immediate shutting down of a potential dialogue with Sam Hamill and the “Poets against the War”), we could do worse than think of ourselves in a less divisive way. After all, regardless of our internecine bickering, in the present we have very little power over which of us will actually be remembered beyond our lifetimes. All we can do is engage our world and the world of language as we are able and as we see fit. Simply entering into poetic language can, in our present moment, cut against the problematic linguistic streamlining of the political powers that be. The rest, of course, will be determined by history.

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