

Introduction: *Contemporary Poets on Poetry*



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When, several months ago, I began planning this focus issue, I had hoped to do a focus on contemporary aesthetics, surveying the works of fiction writers, nonfictioneers, and poets and then attempting to find out if there were a common denominator in American aesthetic thought as presented by writers themselves. At the very least I'd hoped, based on current published works on the subject, to be able to divide that thought into a few discernable camps. The six books being reviewed in this issue are the only current writerly books published in America relating to aesthetics I could find (excepting John Ashbery's *Other Traditions*, already reviewed in *ABR*, 22.5). One of the books, Theodore Roethke's *On Poetry & Craft*, is by a dead man, and James Fenton is a Brit. But all the books are by writers primarily known for their work as poets.

Fiction writers produce books on aesthetics—William Gass, Ronald Sukenick, John Barth—but those books are written, more often than not, by fiction writers whose work is language-, not plot-, based, and these books are, for the most part, few. When scholars and writers cite what fiction writers have to say about fiction, what they cite is usually the rare essay on the subject the fiction writer has written or, as is more often the case, an interview (usually published in *The Paris Review*). It's poets who seem to be the examiners and assessors of the tradition.

I'd never really noticed this, and I was truly astonished when I went through my library and found that poets produced essays on art and literature at about a twenty-to-one ratio to fiction writers. I asked the poet William Logan why he thought this to be the case, and he wrote me, "Because they have more time on their hands." Funny, but not necessarily true—not judging by the harried, frantic poets I know. It's

fiction writers I see at the bars and casinos, not poets.

How about this: Poets, especially in America where they don't matter to the populace unless they've read at a presidential inauguration or talked to Oprah, feel compelled to justify not only their pursuit but their very existence. As a rule, Americans don't *like* English, and why should we? How many people of pure English blood are there in America? We don't revel in the English language because it's not ours—it has been handed down to us by the powers of the "original" Americans, and so we use it only as a tool for the basest levels of communication. The only people who truly enjoy and love a language are the people who invent it, and as far as I can see, the large groups of people who love language the most in this country are children (before they've been forced to adhere to the rules) and rap singers, precisely because both groups invent and structure the language as they see fit.

And so, the poet: Marginalized in a country in which most people speak a language that is not the language of their forbears, mistrusted in an ideologically Protestant-based and therefore art-despising country, the poet is not only neglected, but, if considered at all, feared, despised, or seen simply as ridiculous.

I had the good fortune to study with Harold Bloom, and after I read his *The Western Canon* (1994), in which Bloom sings the swan song of what he considers our dying literature, I asked him if he hadn't been a bit hasty in pronouncing the American literary enterprise dead. I rattled off a list of who I consider to be great younger writers—Charlie Smith, Chris Offutt, Laurie Foos, Jeffrey Eugenides, William Vollmann. I told him that there's a generation of younger writers out there—myself among them—who are quite literally writing for their lives, making

the economic and domestic sacrifices necessary to create art. He shook his head sadly and spoke in a tone that betrayed a kind of pity for my naïveté. “Dear,” he said, “it’s done for.”

I don’t buy it. And the writers of the six books under review in this focus don’t either. They don’t seem to have a lot in common, their stances and ideologies ranging from Roethke’s practical and workmanlike approach to Major’s personal views to Rich’s attempt to sound egalitarian and intelligent. As vastly as they differ, though, they all have a true and not feigned love of the art of poetry.

Harold Bloom, splendid, frail, and broken idealist Professor Bloom, these six books, written by the dying and retiring generation of poets, demonstrate that poetry and literature still matter, perhaps even more than during any period in American history since the 1850s, as those who would write books of poetry and books about poetry are these days whispers in the storm.

In addition to being an editor of American Book Review, Eric Miles Williamson is a contributing editor of Literal Latte. He reviews regularly for the Houston Chronicle, and his novel, East Bay Grease, was a 1999 PEN/Hemingway Finalist. He teaches at Central Missouri State University.