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Issues of Form in Contemporary American Poetry

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From Walt Whitman to the present, American poets have steered a changeable course between form-based and content-based poetics. Poetic form is more than an extension of content (as Robert Creeley would have it) or a revelation of content (as Denise Levertov would argue later). My paper aims to analyze the formal diversity in the work of several contemporary American poets as a manifestation of the main developments in recent American poetry. The workshop lyric, the mainstream American poetic form of the last thirty years, will be contrasted with three recent challenges to the tradition – L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry, New Formalism, and multicultural poetry.

American poetry since the 1960s has been dominated by a form that David Dooley calls the “the workshop lyric” (Dooley 1990: 259-80). Typically it is a free verse lyric poem written in a single voice, with little or no stanzaic division. Its length is usually up to 100 lines, or 2-3 magazine pages, its impulse is narrative, its tone elegiac. Often, the poem uses a dramatic progression from a private evocation of an autobiographical memory towards an epiphany that universalizes such experience. The number of stresses per line usually varies, the importance of sound effects, rhythm, and meter is all but none. Therefore, scanning the lines is less useful than paying attention to the syntactic structure of the poem and its control of tone. In inept hands, the workshop lyric may read like a sentimental piece of prose that is arbitrarily chopped up into lines. If a poem in this mode succeeds, however, it brings the Romantic sensibility to another level of contemporary relevance.

An example of the workshop lyric is “Tagging the Stealer” by Greg Delanty. The poem enacts an autobiographical reminiscence that culminates in a nostalgic epiphany. The speaker changes his attitude to baseball from the condescension of an outsider to the enthusiasm of a fan who incorporates the slang of the game in his general meditation on life: “How often have we waited for the magic / in the hands of some flipper throwing a slider, / sinker, jug-handle, submarine, knuckle or screwball?” (Delanty 2001: lines 8-10) The poem

has most of the typical features of the workshop lyric – it is of readable length, rendered in one free verse stanza. From the rollercoaster ride through baseball terminology used by a novice to the game, the poem becomes a celebration of a moment witnessed during a Major League Baseball match:

Suddenly behind the pinch hitter's back he signalled
the pitcher, though no one copped until seconds later
as the catcher fireballed the potato to the first baseman,
tagging the stealer. It doesn't sound like much,
but everyone stood up round the house Ruth built
like hairs on the back of the neck, because the magic
was scary too. Jesus, give each of us just once
a poem the equal of that unknown man's talking hand.
(Delanty 2001: 54-55, lines 25-32)

The simple description of the fielding team catching the runner on first base and putting him out of play (due to a fast and precise throw by the catcher) rises to monumental, epiphanic importance for the speaker who compares the grace of a perfect play to a longing for a perfect poem. From a personal experience the poem transcends the egoistic confession of the speaker, making it of universal relevance and appeal.

The popularity and prevalence of the workshop lyric in recent and contemporary American poetry seems the outcome of several factors. One, it is the dominant verse form that has been taught in American creative writing programs that have, for decades, produced most of the new American poets (who in turn become writing teachers, perpetuating this poetic form). Two, such poetry is instantly likeable, because it is, as we have seen above, easy to understand, sympathize with, and relate to one's own experience. Three, this poem merges the several innovative trends that American poetry witnessed in the 1950s and 1960s as reactions to the overused poetics of the formalist modernists and New Critics that dominated the 1940s and early 1950s – namely it incorporates the best of confessional poetry (of which W.D. Snodgrass, Robert Lowell, Allen Ginsberg, John Berryman, Sylvia Plath, and Anne Sexton were among the most luminous practitioners), and deep image poetry (practised by Robert Bly, James Dickey, Charles Simic, and William Stafford). Yet there are drawbacks to this popular form. Unlike these former innovations of the American poetic tradition, the workshop lyric at its most widespread now represents formal and contentual novelty gone stale – too often it only imitates the poetics of showcased personality in a formally sloppy, and ultimately repetitious presentation of the poet's self and its private woes which are presumed, but fail, to assume public resonance.

Criticism of the workshop lyric, after it had become something of an establishment at American writing programs in the 1970s, has been coming from poets and critics alike. Donald Hall, for example, laments the rise of mediocrity in American poetry that has increasingly made it possible for young to established poets to write poetry that is mass-produced, derivative, boring, and ultimately destructive to the overall quality of the literary genre in America:

We write and publish the McPoem—*ten billion* served—which becomes our contribution to the history of literature as the Model T [...] the McPoem waits on the steam shelf for us, wrapped and protected, indistinguishable, undistinguished, and reliable—the good old McPoem identical from coast to coast and in all the little towns between, subject to the quality control of the least common denominator. (Hall 1983: 95)

Although such criticism of the workshop lyric is to be taken seriously, American poetry since the 1960s has not been cast exclusively in the workshop lyric form. At any moment in the history of the genre, alternative poetics have tried to challenge the mainstream from the margins – either failing to do so, or, which happened in the case of the several alternative poetics that I will discuss next, the challenging poetic forms and ideologies became assimilated into the mainstream, thus refreshing what might otherwise have become a fossilized tradition.

The first major shift of the paradigm away from the workshop lyric came in the 1970s with the rise of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry, that is, the poetry of linguistic experimentation. In 1971, a new magazine called *This* was released, featuring poetry and criticism in this mode. In 1978, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E magazine followed. By the 1980s, poets like Charles Bernstein, Bruce Andrews, Ron Silliman, and Lyn Hejinian began to publish influential poetic statements, anthologies and book-length volumes of poetry in this mode. Their aim was to respond to the challenge of European post-structuralist thought of the 1960s by reviving and innovating the tradition of linguistic experiment in American poetry. This was not a novelty of the 1970s, for, in American poetry, poetic experimentation dates back to at least 1914 when Gertrude Stein published *Tender Buttons*, a collection prose poems of radically new sensibility that challenged the conventional notions of syntax, language, and meaning. The volume became a hallmark of American experimental writing and a rich formal resource for later generations of avant-garde poets.

From the early 1970s, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry has posed the most serious academic challenge to the workshop lyric. Unlike the poetics of the workshop lyric, which had by the 1970s fossilized into an idiom marked by mediocrity, dogma, and cliché, with little potential for innovation and development, a typical poem by a L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poet challenges the most basic assumptions about language, meaning, and poetic structure. What finally matters in the poem is language play rather than mimetic representation of the romantic sensibility. An example of a L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poem is “The Age of Correggio and the Carracci” by Charles Bernstein. The poem undermines the basic notions of how and what a lyric poem should mean. Its beginning reads like a letter with most of the information left out:

Thanks for your of already some
weeks ago. Things
very much back to having returned
to a life that
(regrettably) has very little in
common with, a
totally bright few or something like (Bernstein 2001: 44: lines 1-7)

The tradition of the letter-poem, which became overused by the mainstream poets of the 1970s (for example, Richard Hugo’s overly sentimental letter poems to his friends) is rewritten by Bernstein so that the very foundations of the epistolary poem point-of-view and theme are defied to the point of unintelligibility. Awareness of language as a political medium of communication that serves the needs of American consumer capitalism is likewise important as a means to mock (and thus rejuvenate) the poetic tradition.

From the early 1980s until the mid-1990s, American poetry witnessed the rise of New Formalism, another alternative poetics that was, unlike the leftist orientation of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets, conservative in terms of poetic form and ideology. Poets and critics like Dana Gioia, Brad Leithauser, Mark Jarman, and Vikram Seth attempted to revive

the importance of narrative, rhyme, meter, and conscious intelligence in American poetry. Their work was aimed at scholarly as well as popular readers. In a way, they tried to win back the large audience American poetry allegedly enjoyed before it was estranged from American culture by modernist poets, literary critics, and creative writing departments. By the mid to late 1990s, the New Formalist contribution had assimilated into the mainstream, although not without multiple voices of attack by mainstream poets like Ira Sadoff who angrily defended the post-confessional mode of the workshop lyric against the New Formalist challenge (Sadoff 1992: 189-206).

In 1986, Vikram Seth published *The Golden Gate*, a novel in verse which is set in California. This unlikely popular and critical success is a thirteen-chapter sequence of 590 sonnet-like poems of fourteen lines set in the iambic tetrameter and *ababccddeffegg* rhyme scheme:

To make a start more swift than weighty,
Hail Muse. Dear Reader, once upon
A time, say, circa 1980,
There lived a man. His name was John.
Successful in his field though only
Twenty-six, respected, lonely,
One evening as he walked across
Golden Gate Park, the ill-judged toss
Of a red Frisbee almost brained him.
He thought, "If I died, who'd be sad?
Who'd weep? Who'd gloat? Who would be glad?
Would anybody?" As it pained him,
He turned from this dispiriting theme
To ruminations less extreme. (Seth 1986: 3)

The meter allows Seth to be both comic and serious, colloquial and literary. This style was perfected by Pushkin in *Eugene Onegin* – a book which provided Seth with a formal and thematic model. Widely hailed as a tour de force, *The Golden Gate* focuses on the story of several young San Francisco yuppies whose lives are brought together against the Whitmanian symbol of the bridge. The emptiness of suburban life, limits of sexual prudishness, and workaholicism are exposed to complement the traditional quest for love in which the main character, John Brown, as well as his friends participate. Included are trendy social topics such as anti-nuclear activism, a critique of Silicon Valley and its corporate culture, and the avant-garde art scene. Some of the formal pleasures of the book (as seen in the previous passage) are the original rhymes, pacing, and the fabulous experience of reading some of the sections aloud. Mixing the public and private, high and pop culture, Seth tells a moving and memorable story which resonates beyond its immediate milieu. By reviving narrative verse with humanism, wit, and complexity, Seth's book cuts against the grain of mainstream American poetry. Still, he proves that traditional form, and meter can suit well even the most contemporary of stories and idioms.

For all the hype that the New Formalists (also called sometimes called "Expansive Poets" or "Expansivists") enjoyed in the 1980s and 1990s, their formal rejuvenation of American poetry, which was to win back a lost larger audience for poetry, has failed to do so. As David Bergman points out, the Expansivists have held "a limited view of literary history," leading to "an incomplete analysis of American culture"; moreover, they lack serious self-criticism, and they underappreciate the role of genius which makes any great poetry difficult to write and read, thus discouraging large masses of readers (Bergman 2000: 214-22).

The third major challenge to the mainstream American poem of the last thirty-plus years has been the proliferation of multicultural poetry. By this I mean the poetry of various ethnic groups like Native Americans, Asian Americans, African Americans, Americans of Latin and/or Hispanic origin, and other groups and subgroups. What writers of these ethnicities have in common is a central theme of cultural deprivation. As breaking the silence of many ethnic groups and correcting their historical underrepresentation in the arts, these poetries have held a vital function. However, Justin Quinn notes that the typical multicultural poem, which holds for most postwar poetry selections featured in the *Heath Anthology of American Literature* (1990), is “largely autobiographical anecdote in unstanzaic free-verse whose lines contain between two and five feet”. The tone is usually elegiac, the structure goes from narrating a particular event to focusing upon an image or detail to end the poem with. Clearly, this poem resembles the workshop lyric minus the ethnic angle. What many of the multicultural poets like to explore as themes in their work is nostalgia for a lost cultural heritage and emphasis on the family histories and their problems with cultural assimilation. Quinn quotes poems by diverse writers of “Japanese, Mexican, African, Japanese, Hawaiian, Oneida, and Hopi” origin, and comes to the conclusion that their style is the same, indistinguishable from the mainstream workshop lyric. A good case in point is “I Ask My Mother To Sing” by Li-Young Lee, here quoted in its entirety:

She begins, and my grandmother joins her.
Mother and daughter sing like young girls.
If my father were alive, he would play
His accordion and sway like a boat.

I’ve never been in Peking, or the Summer Palace,
nor stood on the great Stone Boat to watch
the rain begin on Kuen Ming Lake, the picnickers
running away in the grass.

But I love to hear it sung;
how the waterlilies fill with rain until
they overturn, spilling water into water,
then rock back, and fill with more.

Both women have begun to cry.
But neither stops her song. (Lee 1986: 50)

The poem is a lyric, its tone is sentimental. The multicultural theme and angle do not salvage it from being emotionally overwritten. It would be wrong, however, to dismiss multicultural poetry such as Lee’s as second-rate workshop lyricism. It has had a vital, if at times only sociological, function to correct the gender and ethnocentric biases of previous traditions in American poetry.

Conclusion

There have been several other formal challenges to the mainstream workshop lyric that has dominated American poetry of the last thirty plus years – for example, the rise of the prose poem (both serious and absurdist) as a poem that disregards the linebreak and mimetic representation of reality, the introduction of the talk poem by David Antin in the early 1970s,

the rise of performance-oriented poetry (promoted by the Nuyorican Poets Café and jazz poets), the vistas opened by multimedia poetry, and so forth. Many critics and poets alike have argued that contemporary American poetry is full of mediocre writing alongside a few gems and memorables, yet, it is a subject of considerable agreement that the genre is, thanks to its dynamic evolution, as healthy and diverse as ever. The three major challenges to the mainstream poetry of the last decades which I have tried to discuss at some length – L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry, New Formalism, and multicultural poetry – may have illustrated that recent and contemporary American poetry is a fascinating stage where constant innovation and evaluation of the role of form and content are the order of the day.

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