

What recent trends in American poetry do you find troubling or worrisome?

A Survey

By Ray González

Aliki Barnstone: I find poetry wars troublesome. These particular issues of aesthetics should not divide poets. I find the polarization simplistic and limiting to anyone who takes on the label “formalist” or “experimentalist.” The imagination must be free to go anywhere and should not be compelled to follow someone else’s dictates. Furthermore, I find that American poetry wars are American in the worst possible way, and repeat the puritan history of demonizing those who prefer not to conform. The notion, which I’ve heard laid down as a prescription, that the self and identity should be abolished in favor of collectivism is extremely alarming to me, since the implication is that any kind of ethnic, racial, gender, or national identity is suspect.

John Bradley: The appointment of Dana Gioia to head the National Endowment of the Arts signals that, once again, artists will be under pressure to purge their work of all social commentary.

Nick Carbo: The backlash against ethnic poets and the complaint that some poems are “too ethnic.”

Brian Clements: Trends among the poems themselves are never worrisome to me. We’re all going to follow our individual obsessions anyway, so why bother worrying about it? Don’t get me started on what bugs me about the businesses of publishing, awards, and academic hiring. But that doesn’t really have anything to do with poetry, or does it?

Jon Davis: The ongoing wheezing and creaking that once called itself language poetry is troubling, as is the postmodern shrug in all of its guises—irony, flippancy, loss of self, etc. But the most troubling ongoing trend is the slam, bout, performance nexus, particularly when it marches the young onto the stage with nothing but venom, broad gestures, and a head full of hackneyed abstractions and then rewards them with applause. The pleasure of such instantaneous acclaim so easily bought is piping our talented youth into the hills away from the village of study, hard work, and accomplishment. It strikes me as a new species of child abuse.

Annie Finch: The swallowing of respected trade publishers by megapublishers with no commitment to literary books, and the resulting neglect of poetry reviews in mainstream publications available to general audiences.

Sam Hamill: Too much solipsism, too much fragmented work of mere sensibility, too much safely comfortable apolitical poetry that accepts no serious consequence or responsibility.

Paul Hoover: I don’t find much that is worrisome in poetry; it’s the political life of the country that scares me.

John Hoppenthaler: What troubles me the most is the wave of generally young (but not always) poets who feel compelled to continue a petty and gratuitous argument for some “experimental” mode of poetry over what they insist is a dull period-style poetics formed in academic workshops. This strikes me as the worst sort of

antidemocratic (not to mention simpleminded and arrogant) argument to demonize a style that doesn’t suit one in order to valorize another that does. And this does cut both ways, with promoters of a more direct style belittling those who are trying something different. We need to think in terms of “poetries” rather than poetry, which will make the neighborhood a better, richer place to live.

Peter Johnson: The continuing saga of the poet-as-celebrity; superficial pleasantness driven by fear and careerism; the triumph of the prose poem.

George Kalamaras: I find troubling a continuing distrust of imaginative and surrealist poetries, as well as a seemingly strict adherence to more strictly defined genres in which genre-bending forms like the prose poem are often suspect.

Christine Boyka Kluge: Although entertaining, the growing number of poems using excessive wordplay and cleverness as a substitute for ideas seem shallow to me.

Martin Lammon: Although it’s not such a recent trend anymore, I’m still troubled by poets who call for a “return to verse,” or other such slogans. The “New Formalism,” or whatever other term one wants to use, essentially describes a reactionary impulse, a desire to return to a “golden age” of poetry that never was. There are poems by Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens, and Elizabeth Bishop that I love, but their poems do not represent some poetic principle or aesthetic that contemporary poets should emulate, as some would propose. If a poet today chooses to write so-called formal “verse,” that’s fine. There’s room enough for aesthetic choices. But one choice cannot preclude all the other paths that poets may follow.

Dana Levin: A focus on language-making and virtuoso vocabulary at the expense of having something to say, along with “confessional” being a dirty word, especially as “confessional” seems to have become a synonym for “emotional.”

Morton Marcus: I’m still deeply disturbed by the solipsistic trends in American poetry, where the poet writes, it seems, to tickle and entertain his mind. Video games for the literati. Where’s the earthiness, the visionary, the need to speak of the deep winds, both dark and light, that roar around the heart with the voices of our ancestors?

Jim Moore: Poems that seem to have no purpose other than to demonstrate their own ingenuity.

Richard Robbins: The exaggerated “centrality” of language poetry created by the Iowa/Harvard critical axis. Most of that stuff is what Richard Hugo used to call “a lot of over-worrying about the obvious.” The ever-expanding gulf created between community reading series (reasonably affordable means of allowing the public to access the literary arts) and the celebrity tours (with restricted public access and skyrocketing fees sent even higher by celebrity literary agents). The growing assumption that poetry publishing is not an enterprise supported by entities that take economic risks on manuscripts they believe in, but rather that poetry publishing is more like the NCAA basketball tourney pool, where all with manuscripts will enter with a \$10 fee and one will come away with the prize.

Katharine Soniat: How many of the “contests” and presses are focusing on incoherent language or experimental poetry. There

seems to be the same judge (of this persuasion) for many national contests.

Virgil Suarez: The elitists are still elitists.

Thom Ward: How to get other human beings who are, in William Stafford's phrase, "awake people" to wake up to reading and listening to more contemporary American poetry and poetry in translation. The good folks who attend local theater, art museums, and jazz clubs, who take that occasional pottery class at the YMCA—how do we get more of these people (who have no ambition to become poets) more interested in buying contemporary poetry books and literary journals and attending poetry readings, especially by "emerging" or "unknown" poets? Why do so few of these "awake people," who speak intelligently about contemporary music and the visual arts, know and care so little about poetry?

Matthew Zapruder: A period style that consists of requisite ambiguity, complexity, genuflection to tired principles of post-modernism, and mystification, all of which cover up a lack of genuine commitment to an idea or emotion; a creeping professionalization, especially among younger poets. ■

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