

of *Literary Biography Yearbook*, first began in the early 1980s to chronicle the activities of a movement he called "neo-formalism." A wider readership for expansive poetry could not have come about without the support of editors like X. J. Kennedy (*Counter/Measures*), Frederick Morgan (*Hudson Review*), Donald Stanford (*Southern Review*), Frederick Turner and, later, Marilyn Hacker (*Kenyon Review*) who proved hospitable to their poets. Finally, there remains the steadfastness of older poets who never entirely forsook their first love and who were generous in their support of younger writers who likewise cherished the tradition. With their example in mind, it seems appropriate to conclude with some remarks that Richard Wilbur made in the *Mississippi Review* twenty years ago:

It will have to be said and proven, once more, that in art there is no joy without difficulty; that to be "natural" in art is not to blurt but to aim for perfection of utterance; that breadth and depth of vocabulary, good grammar and usage, the making of allusions, and the use of formal means are the ways of achieving fullness and precision; that it is impoverishing to be incurious about the art of the past; that artifice is not necessarily cold; that high art is not necessarily pretentious; that to commit oneself to a form is far more daring than to be "free"; and that Whitman, God love him, is not the only possible touchstone. Once we have come to embrace and apply such notions, it will be clear what force and elegance poetic language should have....

It is a hopeful sign that Wilbur's words, which sounded two decades ago like advice for a prophet who had not yet arrived, are now echoed in the voices of the younger poets and critics who have taken up his challenge as an aesthetic imperative and, perhaps, as a moral one as well.

## Notes on the New Formalism

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### 1.

Twenty years ago it was a truth universally acknowledged that a young poet in possession of a good ear would want to write free verse. Today one faces more complex and problematic choices. While the overwhelming majority of new poetry published in the U.S. continues to be in "open" forms, for the first time in two generations there is a major revival of formal verse among young poets. The first signs of this revival emerged at the tail end of the 'Seventies, long after the more knowing critics had declared rhyme and meter permanently defunct. First a few good formal books by young poets, like Charles Martin's *Room for Error* (1978) and Timothy Steele's *Uncertainties and Rest* (1979), appeared but went almost completely unreviewed. Then magazines, like *Paris Review* which hadn't published a rhyming poem in anyone's memory, suddenly began featuring sonnets, villanelles, and syllabics. Changes in literary taste make good copy, and the sharper reviewers quickly took note. Soon some of the most lavishly praised debuts, like Brad Leithauser's *Hundreds of Fireflies* (1983) and Vikram Seth's *The Golden Gate* (1986), were by poets working entirely in form.

Literature not only changes; it must change to keep its force and vitality. There will always be groups advocating new types of poetry, some of it genuine, just as there will always be conservative opposing forces trying to maintain the conventional models. The revival of rhyme and meter among some young poets creates an unprecedented situation in American poetry. The new formalists put free verse poets in the ironic and unprepared position of being the *status quo*. Free verse, the creation of an older literary

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revolution, is now the long-established, ruling orthodoxy; formal poetry the unexpected challenge.

There is currently a great deal of private controversy about these new formalists, some of which occasionally spills over into print. Significantly, these discussions often contain many odd misconceptions about poetic form, most of them threadbare clichés which somehow still survive from the 'Sixties. Form, we are told authoritatively, is artificial, elitist, retrogressive, right-wing, and (my favorite) un-American. None of these arguments can withstand critical scrutiny, but nevertheless, they continue to be made so regularly that one can only assume they provide some emotional comfort to their advocates. Obviously, for many writers the discussion of formal and free verse has become an encoded political debate.

When the language of poetic criticism has become so distorted, it becomes important to make some fundamental distinctions. Formal verse, like free verse, is neither bad nor good. The terms are strictly descriptive, not evaluative. They define distinct sets of techniques rather than rank the quality or nature of poetic performance. Nor do these techniques automatically carry with them social, political, or even, in most cases, aesthetic values. (It would, for example, be very easy for a poet to do automatic writing in meter. One might even argue that surrealism is best realized in formal verse since the regular rhythms of the words in meter hypnotically release the unconscious.) However obvious these distinctions should be, few poets or critics seem to be making them. Is it any wonder then that so much current writing on poetry is either opaque or irrelevant? What serious discussion can develop when such primary critical definitions fail to be made with accuracy?

## 2.

Meter is an ancient, indeed primitive, technique that marks the beginning of literature in virtually every culture. It dates back to a time, so different from our specialized modern era, when there was little, if any, distinction between poetry, religion, history, music, and magic. All were performed in a sacred, ritual language separated from everyday speech by its incantatory metrical form. Meter is also essentially a pre-literate technology, a way of making language memorable before the invention of writing.

Trained poet-singers took the events and ideas a culture wanted to preserve—be they tribal histories or magic ceremonies—formulated them in meter, and committed these formulas to memory. Before writing, the poet and the poem were inseparable, and both represented the collective memory of their culture.

Meter is therefore an aural technique. It assumes a speaker and a listener, who for the duration of the poem are intertwined. Even in later literary cultures meter has always insisted on the primacy of the physical sound of language. Unlike prose, which can be read silently with full enjoyment, poetry demands to be recited, heard, even memorized for its true appreciation. Shaping the words in one's mouth is as much a part of the pleasure as hearing the sounds in the air. Until recently education in poetry always emphasized memorization and recitation. This traditional method stressed the immediately communicable and communal pleasures of the art. Certainly a major reason for the decline in poetry's popular audience stems directly from the abandonment of this aural education for the joylessly intellectual approach of critical analysis.

Free verse is a much more modern technique that presupposes the existence of written texts. While it does not abandon the aural imagination—no real poetry can—most free verse plays with the way poetic language is arranged on a page and articulates the visual rhythm of a poem in a way earlier metrical verse rarely bothered to. Even the earliest known free verse, the Hebrew Psalms (which actually inhabit a middle ground between free and formal verse since they follow a principle of syntactic but not metrical symmetry) were created by "the people of the Book" in a culture uniquely concerned with limiting the improvisatory freedom of the bard for the fixed message of the text.

Most often one first notices the visual orientation of free verse in trivial ways (the lack of initial capitals at the beginning of lines, the use of typographical symbols like "&" and "7," the arbitrary use of upper or lower case letters). e. e. cummings spent his life exploiting these tricks, trying to create a visual vocabulary for modern poetry. Eventually, however, one sees how the visual field of the page is essential to the organization of sound in free verse. Printed as run-on lines of prose, a free verse poem reads radically differently from how it does printed as verse (whereas most metrical verse still retains its basic rhythmic design and symmetry). This visual artifice separates free verse from speech. Technological innovation affects art, and it is probably not accidental that the broad scale

development of free verse came from the first generation of writers trained from childhood on the shift-key typewriter introduced in 1878. This new device allowed writers to predict accurately for the first time the *look* of their words on the printed page rather than just their sound.

All free verse deals with the fundamental question of how and when to end lines of poetry when there is no regular meter to measure them out. The earliest free-verse matched the line with some syntactic unit of sense (in Hebrew poetry, for instance, the line was most often a double unit of parallel syntactic sense):

Except the Lord build the house, they labor in  
vain that build it:  
Except the Lord keep the city, the watchman  
waketh but in vain.

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It is vain for you to rise up early, to sit up late,  
To eat the bread of sorrows: for so he giveth his  
beloved sleep.

(*Psalm 127*)

Once free verse leaves the strict symmetry of sacred Hebrew poetry, there is no way for the ear to judge accurately from the sounds alone the metrical structure of a poem (unless the reader exaggerates the line breaks). Sometimes one wonders if even the poet hears the purely aural pattern of his words. Most critics do not. For instance, it has never been noted that the most famous American free verse poem of the twentieth century, William Carlos Williams' "The Red Wheelbarrow," is not only free verse but also two rather undistinguished lines of blank verse:

so much depends upon a red wheel barrow  
glazed with rain water beside the white chickens.

One reason that these lines have proved so memorable is that they are familiarly metrical—very similar in rhythm to another famous passage of blank verse, even down to the "feminine" endings of the lines:

To be or not to be, that is the question:  
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer...

That Williams wrote blank verse while thinking he was pioneering new trails in prosody doesn't necessarily invalidate his theories (though it

may lead one to examine them with a certain skepticism). This discrepancy, however, does suggest two points. First, even among its adversaries, metrical language exercises a primitive power, even if it is frequently an unconscious one. Second, the organizing principle of Williams' free verse is visual. What makes "The Red Wheelbarrow" free verse is not the sound alone, which is highly regular, but the visual placement of those sounds on the page.

so much depends  
upon

a red wheel  
barrow

glazed with rain  
water

beside the white  
chickens.

Here words achieve a new symmetry, alien to the ear, but no less genuine. The way Williams arranges the poem into brief lines and stanzas slows the language until every word acquires an unusual weight. This deliberate visual placement twists a lackluster blank verse couplet into a provocatively original free verse lyric which challenges the reader's definition of what constitutes a poem. Much of the poem's impact comes from catching the reader off guard and forcing him to reread it in search of what he has missed because nothing of what Williams has said comprises a satisfactory poem in a conventional sense. The element of surprise makes this type of poem a difficult trick to repeat and may explain why so much of the minimalist poetry written in the Williams tradition is so dull. The poetic experience comes in the rereading as the reader consciously revises his own superficial first impression and sees the real importance of Williams' seemingly mundane images. Just as Williams' imagery works by challenging the reader to see the despoiled modern world as charged with a new kind of beauty, so too does his prosody operate by making everyday words acquire a new weight by their unexpectedly bold placement on the page. No aural poem could work in this way.

## 3.

The current moment is a fortunate one for poets interested in traditional form. Two generations now of younger writers have largely ignored rhyme and meter, and most of the older poets, who worked originally in form (such as Louis Simpson and Adrienne Rich) have abandoned it entirely for more than a quarter of a century. Literary journalism has long declared it defunct, and most current anthologies present no work in traditional forms by Americans written after 1960. The British may have continued using rhyme and meter in their quaint, old-fashioned way and the Irish in their primitive, bardic manner, but for up-to-date Americans it becomes the province of the old, eccentric, and the Anglophilic. It was a style that dared not speak its name, except in light verse. Even the trinominate, blue-haired lady laureates now wrote in free verse.<sup>o</sup> By 1980 there had been such a decisive break with the literary past that in America for the first time in the history of modern English most published young poets could not write with minimal competence in traditional meters (not that this failing bothered anyone). Whether this was an unprecedented cultural catastrophe or a glorious revolution is immaterial to this discussion. What matters is that most of the craft of traditional English versification has been forgotten.

Since 1960 there has also been relatively little formal innovation done by the mainstream either in metrical or free verse. Radical experimentation like concrete poetry or language poetry has been pushed off to the fringes of the literary culture where it either has been ignored by the mainstream or declared irrelevant. At the same time most mainstream poets have done little of the more focused (and less radical) experimentation with meters or verse forms that open up new possibilities for poetic language. Since 1960 the only new verse forms to have entered the mainstream of American poetry have been two miniatures: the double dactyl

<sup>o</sup> The editors of *The Hudson Review* ask, as perhaps they should, if this statement is a sexist stereotype. I offer it rather as investigative journalism based on first-hand knowledge of the work of such contemporary poets as Sudie Stuart Hager, Winifred Hamrick Farrar, Maggie Culver Fry, Helen von Kolnitz Hyer, and the late Peggy Simpson Curry (the official poet laureates of Idaho, Mississippi, Oklahoma, South Carolina, and Wyoming respectively). When such rear-guard, middle-class poets write in free verse, how can that style not be said to belong to the establishment?

and the ghazal, the latter usually in a dilute unrhymed version of the Persian original.

Indeed, the most influential form in American poetry over this quarter-century has been the prose poem, which strictly speaking is not a verse form at all but a stylistic alternative to verse as the medium for poetry. In theory the prose poem is the most protean form of free verse in which all line breaks disappear as a highly-charged lyric poem achieves the ultimate organic form. In recent American practice, however, it has mostly become a kind of absurdist parable having more to do with the prose tradition of Kafka or Borges than the poetic tradition of Baudelaire or Rimbaud. As poetry literally became written in prose, was it any wonder that verse technique suffered?

Likewise, although the past quarter-century has witnessed an explosion of poetic translation, this boom has almost exclusively produced translations of a formally vague and colorless sort. Compared to most earlier translation, these contemporary American versions make no effort whatsoever to reproduce the prosodic features of their originals. One can now read most of Dante or Villon, Rilke or Mandelstam, Lorca or even Petrarch in English without any sense of the poem's original form. Sometimes these versions brilliantly convey the theme or tone of the originals, but more often they sound stylistically impoverished and anonymous. All of the past blurs together into a familiar tune. Unrhymed, unmetred, and unshaped, Petrarch and Rilke sound misleadingly alike.

This method of translating foreign poetry into an already available contemporary style also brings less to the language than the more difficult attempt to recreate a foreign form in English (as Sir Thomas Wyatt did for the Italian sonnet or the anonymous translators of the King James Bible did for the Hebrew Psalms). New verse forms and meters can have a liberating effect on poetry. They allow writers to say things that have never worked in poetry before or else to restate familiar things in original ways. Many of the most important forms in our language were once exotic imports—the sonnet, sestina, ballade, villanelle, triolet, terza rima, pantoum, rubaiyt, haiku, ottava rima, free verse, even the prose poem. Recent translation has done little to expand the formal resources of American poetry. Ironically, it may have done more to deaden the native ear by translating all poetry of all ages into the same homogenous style. Studying great poetry in such neutralized versions, one gets little sense of how the forms adopted or invented by great writers are inseparable from their art. Not

only the subtleties are lost but even the general scheme.

This assessment does not maintain that metrical innovation is necessary to write good poetry, that successful poetic translation must always follow the verse forms of the original or that prose is an impossible medium for poetry. It merely examines some current literary trends and speculates on both their origins and consequences. It also suggests that the recent dearth of formal poetry opens interesting possibilities for young poets to match an unexploited contemporary idiom with traditional or experimental forms. Indeed the current movement may even offer poets an opportunity for formal innovation and expansion unprecedented in the language since the end of the eighteenth century, for no age since then has been so metrically narrow or formally orthodox as our own.

#### 4.

For the arts at least there truly is a *Zeitgeist*, especially at moments of decisive change when they move together with amazing synchronization. We are now living at one such moment to which critics have applied the epithet "postmodern," an attractive term the meaning of which no two writers can agree on precisely because it does not yet have one. The dialectic of history is still moving too fast, and events still unforeseen will probably define this moment in ways equally unexpected. One day cultural historians will elucidate the connections between the current revival of formal and narrative poetry with this broader shift of sensibility in the arts. The return to tonality in serious music, to representation in painting, to decorative detail and nonfunctional design in architecture will link with poetry's reaffirmation of song and story as the most pervasive development of the American arts towards the end of this century.

No one today can accurately judge all of the deeper social, economic, and cultural forces driving this revival, but at least one central motivation seems clear. All of these revivals of traditional technique (whether linked or not to traditional aesthetics) both reject the specialization and intellectualization of the arts in the academy over the past forty years and affirm the need for a broader popular audience. The modern movement, which began this century in bohemia, is now ending it in the university, an institution dedicated at least as much to the specialization of knowledge as to

its propagation. Ultimately the mission of the university has little to do with the mission of the arts, and this long cohabitation has had an enervating effect on all the arts but especially on poetry and music. With the best of intentions the university has intellectualized the arts to a point where they have been cut off from the vulgar vitality of popular traditions and, as a result, their public has shrunk to groups of academic specialists and a captive audience of students, both of whom refer to everything beyond the university as "the real world." Mainly poets read contemporary poetry, and only professional musicians and composers attend concerts of new music.

Like the new tonal composers, the young poets now working in form reject the split between their art and its traditional audience. They seek to reaffirm poetry's broader cultural role and restore its parity with fiction and drama. The poet Wade Newman has already linked the revival of form with the return to narrative and grouped these new writers as an "expansive movement" dedicated to reversing poetry's declining importance to the culture. These young poets, Newman claims, seek to engage their audience not by simplifying their work but by making it more relevant and accessible. They are also "expansive" in that they have expanded their technical and thematic concerns beyond the confines of the short, autobiographical free verse lyric which so dominates contemporary poetry. Obviously, the return to form and narrative are not the only possible ways of establishing the connection between the poet and the broader public, but it does represent one means of renewal, and if this particular "expansive movement" works, American poetry will end this, its most distinguished century, with more promise to its future than one sees today.

#### 5.

One of the more interesting developments of the last five years has been the emergence of pseudo-formal verse. This sort of writing began appearing broadly a few years ago shortly after critics started advertising the revival of form. Pseudo-formal verse bears the same relationship to formal poetry as the storefronts on a Hollywood backlot do to a real city street. They both look vaguely the same from a distance. In pseudo-formal verse the lines run to more or less the same length on the page. Stanzas are

neatly symmetrical. The syllable count is roughly regular line by line, and there may even be a few rhymes thrown in, usually in an irregular pattern.

Trying to open the window on a Hollywood facade, one soon discovers it won't budge. The architectural design has no structural function. Pseudo-formal verse operates on the same principle. It displays no firm concept of how meters operate in English to shape the rhythm of a poem. Though arranged in neat visual patterns, the words jump between incompatible rhythmic systems from line to line. The rhythms lack the spontaneity of free verse without ever achieving the focused energy of formal poetry. They grope towards a regular rhythmic shape but never reach it. Ultimately, there is little, if any, structural connection between the look and the sound of the poem.

There are two kinds of pseudo-formal poems. The first type is more sophisticated. It appears regularly metrical. The first line usually scans according to some common meter, but thereafter problems occur. The poet cannot sustain the pattern of sounds he or she has chosen and soon begins to make substitutions line by line, which may look consistent with the underlying form but actually organize the rhythms in incompatible ways. What results technically is usually neither good free verse nor formal verse. Here, for example, is the opening of a poem by a young writer widely praised as an accomplished formalist. (Most poetry reviewers call any poem which looks vaguely regular "formal.") This passage wants to be blank verse, but despite a few regular lines, it never sustains a consistent rhythm long enough to establish a metrical base:

From this unpardoned perch, a kitchen table  
In a sunless walk-up in a city  
Of tangled boulevards, he tested  
The old, unwieldy nemesis — namelessness.  
Forgetting (he knew) couldn't be remedied  
But these gestures of identity (he liked to think)  
Rankled the equanimities of time:  
A conceit, of course, but preferable to  
The quarrels of the ego, the canter of  
Description or discoveries of the avant-garde.

At first glance this passage appears to be in blank verse. The poem's first line unfolds as regular iambic pentameter (with a feminine ending). The second line has ten syllables, too, but it scans metrically either as awkward trochees or pure syllabics. A regular iambic rhythm appears again in line three, but now it falls decisively one foot short. Line four begins as

regular blank verse but then abruptly loses its rhythm in word play between "nemesis" and "namelessness." Line five can only be construed as free verse. After a vague start line six plays with a regular iambic movement but dissipates itself over thirteen syllables. And so it continues awkwardly till the end. Good blank verse can be full of substitutions, but the variations always play off of a clearly established pattern. They help the overall meter build a syntactic intensity. Here the poem never establishes a clear rhythmic direction. The lines never quite become blank verse. They only allude to it.

The second type of pseudo-formal poem is more common because it is easier to write. It doesn't even try to make a regular pattern of sound, however awkwardly. It only wants to look regular. The lines have no auditory integrity, as free or formal verse. Their integrity is merely visual—in a gross and uninteresting sense. The same issue of *The Agni Review*, which published the previous example, also contains a poem in quatrains which has these representative stanzas:

When at odd moments, business and pleasure  
pale, and I think I'm staring into space,  
I catch myself gazing at a notecard propped  
on my desk, "The Waves at Matsushima."

...

and wider than the impossible journey  
from island to island so sheerly  
undercut by waves that no boat could find  
a landing, nor a shipwrecked couple

rest beneath those scrubby pines at the top  
that could be overgrown heads of broccoli,  
even if they could survive the surf, tall  
combers, more like a field plowed by a maniac...

These line lengths seem determined mainly by their typographic width. Why else does the author break the lines between "pleasure" and "pale" or "tall" and "combers"? The apparently regular line breaks fall without any real rhythmic relation either to the meter or the syntax. As Truman Capote once said, "That's not writing—it's typing." There is no rhythmic integrity, only incompatible, provisional judgements shifting pointlessly line by line. The resulting poems remind me of a standard gag in improvisational comedy where the performers pretend to speak a foreign language by imitating

its approximate sound. Making noises that resemble Swedish, Russian, Italian or French, they hold impassioned conversations on the stage. What makes it all so funny is that the actors, as everyone in the audience knows, are only mouthing nonsense.

The metrical incompetence of pseudo-formal verse is the most cogent evidence of our literature's break with tradition and the lingering consequences. These poets are not without talent. Aside from its rhythmic ineptitude, their verse often exhibits many of the other qualities that distinguish good poetry. Even their desire to try traditional forms speaks well of their ambition and artistic curiosity. How then do these promising authors, most of whom not only have graduate training in writing or literature but also work as professional teachers of writing, not hear the confusing rhythms of their own verse? How can they believe their expertise in a style whose basic principles they so obviously misunderstand? That these writers by virtue of their training and position represent America's poetic intelligentsia makes their performance deeply unnerving—rather like hearing a conservatory trained pianist rapturously play the notes of a Chopin waltz in 2/4 time.

These young poets have grown up in a literary culture so removed from the predominantly oral traditions of metrical verse that they can no longer hear it accurately. Their training in reading and writing has been overwhelmingly visual not aural, and they have never learned to hear the musical design a poem executes. For them poems exist as words on a page rather than sounds in the mouth and ear. While they have often analyzed poems, they have rarely memorized and recited them. Nor have they studied and learned poems by heart in foreign languages where sound patterns are more obvious to nonnative speakers. Their often extensive critical training in textual analysis never included scansion, and their knowledge of even the fundamentals of prosody is haphazard (though theory is less important than practice in mastering the craft of versification). Consequently, they have neither much practical nor theoretical training in the way sounds are organized in poetry. Ironically this very lack of training makes them deaf to their own ineptitude. Full of confidence, they rely on instincts they have never developed. Magisterially they take liberties with forms whose rudimentary principles they misconstrue. Every poem reveals some basic confusion about its own medium. Some misconceptions ultimately prove profitable for art. Not this one.

## 6.

In my own poetry I have always worked in both fixed and open forms. Each mode opened up possibilities of style, subject, music, and development the other did not suggest, at least at that moment. Likewise, experience in each mode provided an illuminating perspective on the other. Working in free verse helped keep the language of my formal poems varied and contemporary, just as writing in form helped keep my free verse more focused and precise. I find it puzzling therefore that so many poets see these modes as opposing aesthetics rather than as complementary techniques. Why shouldn't a poet explore the full resources the English language offers?

I suspect that ten years from now the real debate among poets and concerned critics will not be about poetic form in the narrow technical sense of metrical versus non-metrical verse. That is already a tired argument, and only the uninformed or biased can fail to recognize that genuine poetry can be created in both modes. How obvious it should be that no technique precludes poetic achievement just as none automatically assures it (though admittedly some techniques may be more difficult to use at certain moments in history). Soon, I believe, the central debate will focus on form in the wider, more elusive sense of poetic structure. How does a poet best shape words, images, and ideas into meaning? How much compression is needed to transform versified lines—be they metrical or free—into genuine poetry? The important arguments will not be about technique in isolation but about the fundamental aesthetic assumptions of writing and judging poetry.

At that point the real issues presented by recent American poetry will become clearer: the debasement of poetic language; the prolixity of the lyric; the bankruptcy of the confessional mode; the inability to establish a meaningful aesthetic for new poetic narrative; and the denial of musical texture in the contemporary poem. The revival of traditional forms will be seen then as only one response to this troubling situation. There will undoubtedly be others. Only time will prove which responses were the most persuasive.