

Bruce Bawer/Poetry



ANOTHER VICTIM OF CREATIVE WRITING

In these United States in 1987, the paramount fact about poetry is that there are more poets—or at least would-be poets—than there are poetry readers. Editors routinely receive more poetry manuscript submissions than they sell copies of poetry books or magazines; even the most distinguished of contemporary poets cannot count on having their names recognized outside their own little world of readings, conferences, English departments, and literary parties. There is little reason to believe that things will be any different twenty years from now. (Indeed, such recent events as the decision of *Los Angeles Times Book Review* editors to discontinue poetry reviewing altogether suggest that things are growing steadily worse.)

Why is this so? It all goes back to the early part of the century—to the modernistic precept that poetry should be avant-garde and should *épater le bourgeois*, to T. S. Eliot's pronouncement that poetry must be difficult, to Ezra Pound's deliberate composition of poetry for an audience not of ordinary literate people but of poets. During the modern period, in short, poets effectively alienated themselves from the general public; no longer "the unacknowledged legislators of the world," they became Talmudic scholars of a sort, communing with themselves and with one another in a language that was often deliberately private, uninviting, exclusionary. Though, in the years since World War II, the language of a good many American poets has become more comprehensible, this change has arrived too late; Americans have grown used to the notion—young Americans nowadays seem to be *born* with it—that poetry

Bruce Bawer is The American Spectator's movie reviewer, a regular contributor to the New Criterion, and author of The Middle Generation: The Lives and Poetry of Delmore Schwartz, Randall Jarrell, John Berryman and Robert Lowell (Archon Books). His poetry has been published in Poetry, the Hudson Review, and other publications.

is confusing stuff, and that to read it is a peculiar, idle, self-indulgent, and radical activity.

If anything, the isolation of poets from the general public has intensified in recent decades. And yet many literate and self-absorbed young people, who take for granted the post-Beat anti-Modernist teaching that poetry is nothing but feeling poured onto a page, have continued to be interested in writing poetry (even though they may not have the patience to read much of it). This circumstance has provided more and more poets, over the past generation, with a great way of making money—namely, as full-time faculty members in university creative-writing programs, where students take several poetry workshops over a two- or three-year period and are awarded a graduate degree. As a result of the proliferation of these programs during the last decade or so, there are more American poets than ever before—hundreds, thousands more—most of them with some connection or other to the academy.

This state of affairs does not bode well for the future of American poetry. To be sure, many of the finer poets of our day—among them Donald Justice and Donald Peterson—are products of poetry workshops. But there are workshops and there are workshops. A small number of gifted poets meeting regularly with a dedicated, perceptive, selfless, and articulate teacher: certainly there can be some benefit in this sort of thing, for some poets, anyway. But during the past several years, the poetry workshop has become not just one optional element of a young poet's education, but rather the very center of most young poets' educations. In the last decade or so, as a matter of fact, many people in the poetry world have begun to take it for granted that the *only* serious way of preparing for a career as a poet is to enter a university creative-writing program.

Nowadays, therefore, the young col-

lege graduate who wants to be a poet usually goes straight into a program. Getting into one is no great trick; the hard part is paying the tuition. Indeed, because the tuition fees are so high and the admission standards so lax, many creative-writing programs—especially the most prestigious (i.e., most expen-

sive) ones—have become, in large part, playgrounds for the modestly talented children of the rich and well-to-do.

This would be perfectly unobjectionable—so what if a bunch of spoiled kids, who have nothing better to do anyway, pay poets to read and comment on their work?—if not for the

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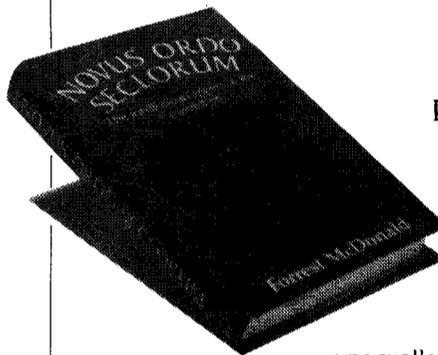
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fact that these programs have become enormously important in the making of poetic careers. For in return for their parents' cash, these kids receive exactly what they need to make it as poets in the 1980s. I'm not speaking of an education: many a creative-writing student receives his degree without ever having looked at a poem by Milton, say, or Wordsworth. Nor are most of these students helped to "find their own

voices." *Au contraire*. Most of their teachers are likely to be middling poets themselves, more interested in promoting their own careers and proselytizing for their own brand of poetry than in pursuing the painstaking task of helping someone else to discover himself as a writer. Besides, how can a teacher, even a well-meaning one, begin to have a clue of what most of his students' "own voices" might sound

like, when the majority of them enter the program with only the crudest idea of what a poem is anyway, when he's exposed to them (typically) for a relatively brief period, and when he has ten or twenty or fifty of them to "teach" at any given time?

No, what these lucky students get out of the creative-writing program is *connections*. That, in essence, is what makes the "better" creative-writing

programs better: the profs have superior connections. Study with the right person at the right university, and you'll stand a much better chance of getting your poems into the best magazines and journals, of having a book published, of receiving invitations to read, and of winning grants and awards. The teachers often help their students to find jobs, too—as (what else?) creative-writing teachers. Many of them will get hired even though they're not particularly good poets or teachers—for the main qualification to teach poetry-writing at most American universities is not that one's work be first-rate but that one have a creative-writing-program degree.

Given the way that the poetry world works, then, many of the students in today's creative-writing programs stand a frighteningly good chance of becoming the celebrated poets of twenty years from now. And this situation, of course, will make it all the more difficult, over the next twenty years, for truly valuable poets from outside the poetry bureaucracy to be published, read, and recognized.

What can we expect in the way of poetry from these program-bred poets? For one thing, we can expect quantity. These poets have been trained to *crank it out*—whether or not they feel like it, whether or not they're inspired, whether or not they have a fresh and compelling topic. When Eliot or Stevens didn't feel like writing a poem, they didn't—they had jobs. But these program poets *have* to write poems. When they're students, they have to write them for homework; when they become teachers, they have to write them in order to accumulate enough publications to secure tenure and promotions. Like scholars, in other words, poets in the academy are subject to that old academic dictum: publish or perish. And just as this dictum has led to the writing of innumerable volumes of gratuitous scholarly prose, so it has led, in recent years, to the creation of countless expendable poems. As with those volumes of scholarship, the problem with these poems is not that they're *terrible*, really; on the contrary, most of them are quite competently written. The problem, usually, is that they're *dead*—flat, arid, inert. And undistinctive, too: many a creative-writing-program poem is virtually interchangeable with dozens of other poems not only by its author but by any number of similar program poets.

This is not to say that all poets who have come out of programs sound alike. Some, of course, are highly distinctive. But there are armies of successful program poets out there who do sound almost like clones of one another.



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er. They write stolid, desultory free-verse poems that often seem to be haphazardly lineated and pointlessly descriptive or anecdotal. Frequently these poems concern personal topics—families, romances—but one sometimes has the impression, nevertheless, that their authors are trying desperately to avoid expressing a recognizable human feeling.

One reason why there are so many poems of this sort in circulation is that creative-writing teachers, aware of their inability to help most of their students to “find their voices,” opt instead for what they apparently consider to be the next best thing: they teach their students to write poems that *look professional*. Which means that these teachers—acting on the (probably correct) assumption that the inclination of most young amateurs is to write nauseatingly sentimental effusions about the torments of young love—drill their students in the avoidance of bathos and the accumulation of objective detail (e.g., obscure plant names and odd place names). The result: armies of poets who avoid sensitivity itself for fear of crossing the line into sentimentality.

And yet, for all this, poems that are fresh, affecting, and intelligently crafted continue to be written. There are poets in their middle years—such as C. K. Williams (*Flesh and Blood*, Random House), Robert Phillips (*Personal Accounts*, Ontario Review Press), and Tom Disch—who have distinctive and alluring voices, and who may well be among the art’s gray eminences twenty years from now. And there are promising young poets. Every month one of the journals or magazines will contain a poem, perhaps by someone the reader has never heard of, that offers a glimmer of hope for the future of the art.

Among the younger poets who have produced promising work, and from whose ranks some of the major voices of two decades hence may well be drawn, are David Lehman, Peter Balakian, Katha Pollitt, Michael Ryan, David Baker, Barbara Elovic, Daniel Mark Epstein, Phillis Levin, Gjertrud Schnackenberg, and Elizabeth Spires. What’s more, such poets as Alfred Corn, Daryl Hine, Robert McDowell, and Frederick Turner (as well as Vikram Seth, an Indian who has written a very exciting, and a very American, book called *The Golden Gate*) have successfully explored different sectors of the vast abandoned territory of narrative verse—raising the pleasant possibility that, in the next few years, more poets will venture into non-lyric forms.

Finally, one of the more encourag-

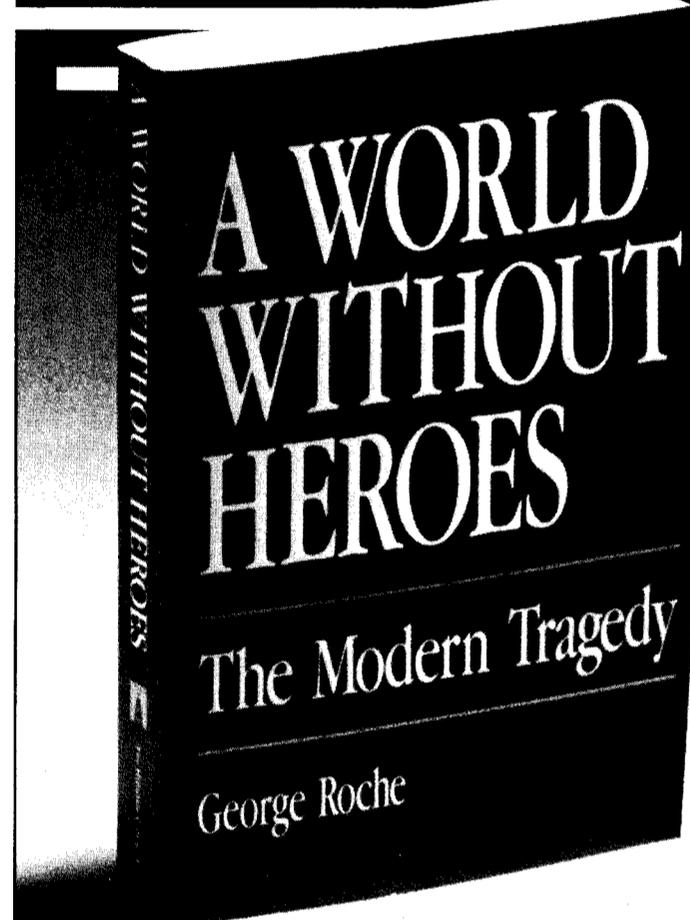
ing signs of recent years is the rise of a movement known as the “New Formalism.” Such younger poets as Dana Gioia (*Daily Horoscope*, Graywolf Press), Charles Martin (*Steal the Bacon*, Johns Hopkins University Press), Timothy Steele (*Sapphics Against Anger*, Random House), William Logan (*Difficulty*, David R. Godine), and Molly Peacock (*Raw*

Heaven, Random House) have written wonderfully sensitive and thoughtful poems that reveal an impressive—and, in this Age of Creative Writing, a well-nigh astonishing—awareness of tradition and command of form. (Significantly, most of these poets are not products of creative-writing programs.) Their poems remind us of the passion, the intensity, and the in-

telligence of which poetry is capable.

The best one can hope for that poor battered craft known as American poetry is that, twenty years from now, at least some of these younger writers will have fulfilled their present promise, and that America’s small community of poetry readers will have the sense to recognize them as being among the art’s finest living practitioners. □

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A NEW SENSE OF PROFESSIONALISM

It's been a banner decade for international terrorism, but some people just aren't satisfied. You'd think both

Michael Ledeen, TAS's regular "Press-watch" columnist, is a senior fellow in international affairs at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C.

the terrorists and the experts would be content with an achievement list that would make any CEO proud:

- Driving the Western world (United States, France, Great Britain, Italy, Israel) out of Lebanon with a few well-placed, well-timed, and well-publicized bombs.

- Keeping the money flowing from

the suckers in Saudi Arabia and Mexico, along with the more friendly funding from the Soviet bloc, and the "insurance" payers from Western Europe, Latin America, and the Gulf.

- Destroying half the cabinet of South Korea.

- Murdering Bashir Gemayel for President Assad of Syria, thus ensuring that Lebanon could not have a strong and stable government.

- Murdering various Americans (from military officers in Germany to Robert Stethem on TWA flight 847).

- Seriously disrupting life in several NATO countries (Italy, France, Greece, and Spain are the most notable).

- Barely failing to assassinate Margaret Thatcher.

- Barely failing to blow up an El Al jumbo jet from London to Tel Aviv.

All of this has been accomplished at very little cost, with traditional equipment, and relatively low-level labor. True, the life of a terrorist is not what it once was; once, there were real terrorist movements that emerged from the fires of social indignation. Today there are virtually none of those, and the terrorist movements that afflict the world nowadays are, with very rare exceptions, state-sponsored. That is why it is harder to infiltrate the terrorist organizations, and why their activities are more efficient than in the bad old days. The terrorists have become professionals; terrorism is now a career choice.

Still, there is unhappiness in the rank-and-file. Some of the terrorists are unhappy because there is too much discipline inside the movements (they liked the old spontaneity better, and who can blame them?), and some of the analysts of terrorism, having predicted a technological escalation for the past decade, continue to foresee a new terrorist era replete with bioterrorism, chemoterrorism, and bignuclearbombterrorism.

While there was some small chance of such breakthroughs so long as there was still a modicum of independence

among the terrorist groups, now that the intelligence services of Soviet-bloc and radical Arab states, along with the occasional maverick like Iran, are more solidly in the driver's seat, I expect that we will not see such a melodramatic escalation. In the first place, who needs it? Terrorism is doing just fine as it is, and a sharp increase in the stakes might finally produce a serious reaction from the American government (assuming that we get one of those in the coming years).

The school of thought that holds that terrorism will shortly go higher-tech rests its predictions on the notion that the basic goal of terrorist activity is to grab the attention of the media, and thereby terrorize the populace at large. The prophets of even worse gloom and doom in the terrorist business argue that, since the public adjusts relatively quickly to "conventional terrorism," such acts lose their ability to terrorize, thus the need for escalation.

These self-proclaimed experts have never lived in a country afflicted by conventional terrorism, for if they had, they would not produce this silly argument. Conventional terrorism subverted democratic governments in Uruguay, Argentina, and Turkey, and led Italy, Great Britain, and Germany to adopt harsh legal measures that would have been unthinkable in normal times. These drastic changes took place only after years of bombings and assassinations, which shows, I think, that the publics in those countries did not become indifferent to terror; their rage and frustration grew to the point where they demanded action from their governments. They were even willing to sacrifice their own civil liberties in exchange for security.

Furthermore, the sponsors of terrorism know that there is a point beyond which no government, even the laid-back administrations in the Western world these days, will tolerate the continued existence of terrorist networks in their countries. Look at France, which for centuries proclaimed itself the haven of the politically oppressed, even of "political refugees" who in-

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Editor, *The World and I*

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