

Who Killed Poetry?

Joseph Epstein

There are certain things in which mediocrity is intolerable: poetry, music, painting, public eloquence.

—LA BRUYÈRE

I AM NOT about to say of poetry, as Marianne Moore once did, that “I, too, dislike it,” for not only has reading poetry brought me instruction and delight but I was taught to exalt it. Or, more precisely, I was taught that poetry was itself an exalted thing. No literary genre was closer to the divine than poetry; in no other craft could a writer soar as he could in a poem. When a novelist or a dramatist wrote with the flame of the highest inspiration, his work was said to be “touched by poetry”—as in the phrase “touched by God.” “The right reader of a good poem,” said Robert Frost, “can tell the moment it strikes him that he has taken an immortal wound—that he will never get over it.” Such quasi-religious language to describe poetry was not unusual; not so long ago, it was fairly common. “The function of poetry,” wrote Robert Graves, “is religious invocation of the Muse; its use is the experience of mixed exaltation and horror that her presence excites.”

Both these quotations and several others in the same spirit are to be found at the back of Oscar Williams’s *A Little Treasury of Modern Poetry* (revised edition), a small stout volume that has something of the look and heft of a missal or other religious tome. Even Delmore Schwartz, not a man noted for heightened rhetoric or empty ecstasy, referred to the poet as “a kind of priest.” To those for whom literature, and culture generally, came increasingly to stand in as a substitute for religion, poetry—and modern poetry specifically—was High Church.

The copyright date on my edition of Oscar Williams’s anthology is 1950, and it was during the 1950’s that poetry last had this religious aura. Many of the high priests of the cult—T. S. Eliot and Wallace Stevens, Robert Frost and William Carlos Williams, E. E. Cummings and W. H. Auden—were still alive and still writing, even if

the best of their work was already behind them. The audience for poetry was then less than vast; it had diminished greatly since the age of Browning and Tennyson. In part this was owing to the increased difficulty of poetry, of which T. S. Eliot, in 1921, had remarked: “It appears likely that poets in our civilization, as it exists, at present, must be *difficult*.” Eliot’s justification for this difficulty—and it has never seemed quite persuasive—is that poetry must be as complex as the civilization it describes, with the modern poet becoming “more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect.” All this served to make the modern poet more exclusive as well, which, for those of us who adored (a word chosen with care) modern poetry, was quite all right. Modern poetry, with the advance of modernism, had become an art for the happy few, and the happy few, it must be said, are rarely happier than when they are even fewer.

But such snobbish considerations aside, the generations of poets between W. B. Yeats (1865-1939) and W. H. Auden (1907-1973) produced an impressive body of poetry—of the kind that, in Frost’s phrase, really does make “an immortal wound”; once read, it never is quite forgotten. Nor were all of these poets imposingly difficult: Yeats isn’t, nor is Robert Frost. The most difficult poems of all, the *Cantos* of Ezra Pound, seem over the years to have slipped outside the canon of great modern poetry and to be thought instead the interesting fragments of a great cultural impresario—the Diaghilev of modernist poetry—who finally flipped, betraying both his country and himself. These poets did not, except occasionally, teach. Occupationally, they ranged from physician (William Carlos Williams) to editor (Marianne Moore) to insurance executive (Wallace Stevens); in personal style, from traditionally formal (T. S. Eliot) to bohemian (E. E. Cummings) to suicidally desperate (Hart Crane). But for all their variety, no one would ever think to describe them as academic.

They were, however, the first living poets to be given the full academic treatment. Their works were dissected in classrooms, the intellectual quarterlies ran solemn essays about them even while continuing to run their poems, book-length critical studies about them began to be written and continue to be written even now. Their fame was

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neither of the general nor of the wealth-producing kind that Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner knew—though T. S. Eliot was an international celebrity—but within the circumference of the university they were revered. No body of critical writing produced during this period was more efficacious than that of T. S. Eliot, whose essays could affect the reputation—“the place in the canon,” as academics now put it—of writers born three hundred years earlier. In the view of F. R. Leavis, Eliot, along with Samuel Johnson, Coleridge, and Matthew Arnold, is one of the four great English literary critics, yet without the authority lent his criticism by his poetry, it is plain that Eliot’s critical power would have been nowhere near so great.

But the clearest evidence of the reverence in which these poets were held is found in the way they were worshipped by the generation of poets, or at least those in America, who followed them. Randall Jarrell, Robert Lowell, John Berryman, Delmore Schwartz not only wrote some of the most brilliant essays on their immediate poetic forebears, but in their lives they tended to be obsessed with them. The young Robert Lowell set up a tent on the lawn of the home of Allen Tate, to learn at the feet of one of his masters. Delmore Schwartz viewed T. S. Eliot as a culture hero, pure though not so simple, and his letters and conversation were filled with references to Eliot. Randall Jarrell, after writing about Wallace Stevens’s latter-day weaknesses, capped his criticism with the thought that Stevens was “one of the true poets of our century, someone whom the world will keep on reading just as it keeps on listening to Vivaldi or Scarlatti, looking at Tiepolo or Poussin.”

Jarrell, Lowell, Berryman, Schwartz, as anyone who has read much about them cannot mistake, were all immensely ambitious men. Had their ambitions been applied to business or politics or perhaps anything other than careers in poetry—and all four were the most careful caretakers of their careers—they might not have ended as sadly as they did: in repeated mental breakdown, alcoholism, early death, and suicide. I believe poetry was implicated in their disastrous lives in that they had set out to forge brilliant careers like those of their predecessors and knew that, for a complex of reasons, they could not make it. Jarrell wrote an essay entitled “The Obscurity of the Poet,” which he claimed had to be surmounted if civilization were to carry on, and another entitled “The Taste of the Age,” which he found trashy. Delmore Schwartz wrote essays on “The Isolation of Modern Poetry,” “The Vocation of the Poet,” “Views of a Second Violinist, Some Answers to Questions about Writing Poetry,” and “The Present State of Poetry,” a state that he thought, to put it gently, uninspiring. The main modernist poets had written with assurance in their bones, as if they knew their worth and knew that posterity

would one day know it, too. But the poets who came after them were less sure; they knew something had gone wrong. And they were right. It had.

BEFORE I attempt to get at what I believe has happened, perhaps I ought to describe what I think is the situation of contemporary poetry. Pressed to formulate this situation in a single sentence, I should write: contemporary poetry in the United States flourishes in a vacuum. Today there are more than 250 universities with creative-writing programs, and all of these have a poetry component, which means that they not only train aspiring poets but hire men and women who have published poetry to teach them. Many of these men and women go from being students in one writing program to being teachers in another—without, you might say, their feet, metrical or anatomical, having touched the floor. Many colleges and universities that do not have formal writing programs nonetheless hire poets to teach a creative-writing course or two; and the course in writing poetry has also become a staple of the community-college and adult-education menu. None of this puts poets up there with the Helmsleys and the Trumps, but it has made it possible for a large number of poets—and more than 6,300 poets and other writers are listed in the most recent edition of the *Directory of American Poets and Fiction Writers*—to earn their living in work closely connected with their craft. Such work, thirty or so years ago, was available only to a small handful of poets, and these of the highest stature.

Robert Frost, when in his eighties and a great draw on the poetry-reading circuit, thought it a good thing that poets had become teachers “in a thousand, two thousand colleges,” and added that colleges and universities gave poets “the best audiences poetry ever had in this world.” Writing in 1985, in an essay entitled “The Poetry Reading: Public Performance/Private Act,” the poet Donald Hall noted: “In the past thirty years, the poetry reading, which used to be rare, has become the chief form of publication for American poets. Annually, hundreds of thousands of listeners hear tens of thousands of readings.” The great majority of these take place on college campuses, but many others are given at such cultural centers as the 92nd Street Y in New York, the Poetry Center at the Art Institute in Chicago, the International Poetry Forum in Pittsburgh, not to mention various churches, synagogues, bars, art galleries, bookstores, and other public forums. Donald Hall reminds us that such poets as Vachel Lindsay, Carl Sandburg, and Robert Frost were giving readings in the 20’s and 30’s, but it was Dylan Thomas, in the late 40’s and early 50’s, who by providing quite beautiful performances and the added attraction of outrageous behavior really put poetry reading on the cultural map.

Poetry readings can draw anywhere from a pathetic handful of bedraggled students to a tony audience of several hundred. The fame of the poet is decisive. Fame, too, determines fees. Donald Hall, in 1985, claimed that a standard good fee for a reading was \$1,000, though most poets, I suspect, accept a good deal less, while others—Allen Ginsberg, Adrienne Rich, John Ashbery—can command more. James Dickey claimed to have received as much as \$4,500 for a reading. Sometimes two or three nearby colleges will invite a poet to read at each of their institutions, and the poet will pick up two or three fees while the colleges share the cost of a single airplane ticket. Intramurally, there are arguments about whether readings are corrupting to poets. Some claim that reading too frequently can make a poet tend to compose simpler, jokier poems that can be readily understood by an audience, whereas complex poems—imagine hearing Wallace Stevens's "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" without ever having read it—do not, so to say, play well at readings. Yet readings have helped many poets who do not have, or want, teaching jobs to keep going financially. Readings, too, are often the only payment in the coin of the realm of the ego that they ever receive, for the printed work of poets, sometimes including poets who have been at it a long while, often gets hardly any response at all in the way of reviews or even letters from readers.

No one keeps very precise records on such matters, but the general sense is that more poetry is currently being published than ever before. Poets are not being all that widely published by the major trade houses of New York and Boston, though almost all of them do publish some contemporary poets. Many university presses have begun to issue books of poetry, and some have been doing so for years. (Howard Nemerov, our new poet laureate, has been published by the University of Chicago Press for as long as I can remember.) What have come to be called the "small presses" also publish a fairly large amount of poetry. Some of these—David R. Godine of Boston, for example, or North Point Press of Berkeley—aren't as small as all that, but others, which carry such names as Dragon Gate or Aralia Press, truly are. The best general answer to the question of how well these books of poetry sell is probably "not very." It used to be said that the only serious poet in America who was ever able to live off the sale of his work was Robert Frost, but according to Donald Hall, even Frost was able to do so only at the end of his life.

Yet there is no shortage of outlets for poetry. The *New Yorker* publishes it, most of the literary monthlies and quarterlies do; *Poetry*, founded by Harriet Monroe in 1912, rolls along. And beyond such publications are the many little magazines that print vast quantities of poetry. The circulation of these magazines is often not in the thousands but in the hundreds. Almost all of them

would go under without subsidization. So numerous are the little magazines that there exists an organization—an "umbrella organization," in the bureaucratic phrase—called The Coordinating Council for Literary Magazines. It, too, is heavily subsidized, in good part by the National Endowment for the Arts. Sometimes it seems as if there isn't a poem written in this nation that isn't subsidized or underwritten by a grant either from a foundation or the government or a teaching salary or a fellowship of one kind or another.

And so, as the disc jockeys say, the beat goes on. The pretense is that nothing is wrong, that business is proceeding pretty much as usual. There are today, for example, prizes galore: Pulitzer and Lamonts and National Book Critics Circle and Yale Younger Poets and Rome Fellowships of the American Academy and Institute of Arts & Letters and Guggenheims and National Endowment for the Arts Fellowships and Library of Congress Consultantships and the Lilly Prize and now a national poet laureate and even—how he, most ambitious of poets, would have wryly smiled at the news—a Delmore Schwartz Memorial Award. Poets regularly parade as spokesmen and -women for their ethnic group or race or political tendency. Some few poets—Robert Penn Warren, perhaps Richard Wilbur is soon to arrive at this position—have more medals than Baron von Richthofen.

No shortage, then, of honors, emoluments, publication possibilities, opportunities to garner public adulation. In such ways may contemporary poetry be said to be flourishing.

BUT what of the vacuum? I should say that it consists generally of this: that however much contemporary poetry may be honored, it is, outside a very small circle, scarcely read. Contemporary poetry is no longer a part of the regular intellectual diet. People of general intellectual interests who feel that they ought to read or at least know about works on modern society or recent history or novels that attempt to convey something about the way we live now, no longer feel the same compunction about contemporary poetry. The crowds in London once stood on their toes to see Tennyson pass; today a figure like Tennyson probably would not write poetry and might not even read it. Poetry has been shifted—has shifted itself?—off center stage. Literarily, poetry no longer seems in any way where the action is. It begins to seem, in fact, a sideline activity, a little as chiropractic or acupuncture is to mainstream medicine—odd, strange, but with a small cult of followers who swear by it.

One might counter that poetry was in a similar state when the modernist poets set out on their ambitious artistic adventure. They published their work in magazines read only by hundreds; their names were not known by most members of the educated classes; their following, such as it was,

had a cultish character. But beyond this nothing else seems comparable. Propelling the modernist poets was a vision, and among some of them a program—a belief that the nature of life had changed fundamentally and that artists now had to change accordingly. Free verse, fragmented syntax, radical disjunctions, slangy diction, the use of subjects before then thought poetically impossible—these were among the techniques and methods employed by the modernist poets. New, too, was their attitude toward the reader, whom they, perhaps first among any writers in history, chose in a radical way to disregard. They weren't out to *épater*. If what they wrote was uncompromisingly difficult, they did not see this as their problem. They wrote as they wrote; as for their difficulty, the question was whether or not, in Henry James's phrase, theirs was "the difficulty that inspired." By that phrase I take James to have meant difficulty of a kind that inspires one to surmount it because one senses the reward to be eminently worthy of the struggle. Somehow, through the quality of their writing, the authority of the sacrifices they made for their art, the aura of adult seriousness conveyed in both work and life, the modernist poets won through. Theirs was the difficulty, ours the inspiration.

Whereas one tended to think of the modernist poet as an artist—even if he worked in a bank in London, or at an insurance company in Hartford, or in a physician's office in Rutherford, New Jersey—one tends to think of the contemporary poet as a professional: a poetry professional. Like a true professional, he is rather insulated within the world of his fellow-professionals. The great majority of poets today live in an atmosphere almost entirely academic, but it is academic with a difference: not the world of science and scholarship but that of the creative-writing program and the writing workshop. (Everything that has gone wrong with the world since World War II, Kingsley Amis once noted, can be summed up in the word "workshop.") The poets who have come out of this atmosphere are oddly positioned both in academic life and in the world at large; they are neither wholly academics nor wholly artists. They publish chiefly in journals sheltered by universities, they fly around the country giving readings and workshops at other colleges and universities. They live in jeans yet carry a curriculum vitae. I have seen scores of such curricula, and they tend to run along the following lines:

James Silken [a name I have made up] published his first book of poems, *Stoned Jupiter*, with the University Presses of Florida. His second book, *The Parched Garden*, will be published early next year by Black Bear Press. A chapbook, *Apaches and Parsley*, was brought out by Wainscotting Books in 1983. His poems and reviews have appeared in such journals as *Poetry Northwest*, *New Letters*, *The Arizona Review*, *TriQuarterly*, and *Worcester Review*.

He has given readings at Iowa State University, the University of Michigan, Drake University, and Bread Loaf. Next summer he will be a fellow at the Oregon Center for the Creative Arts. A native of Tennessee, he now lives in Tempe, where he directs the writing program at Arizona State University.

Well, it's a living.

In 1941 Delmore Schwartz, in an essay originally published in *Kenyon Review* and entitled "The Isolation of Modern Poetry," wrote that "It is not a simple matter of the poet lacking an audience, for that is an effect, rather than a cause, of the character of modern poetry." The character that Schwartz then had in mind was its difficulty (in the Henry James sense). In *Partisan Review*, in 1949, Schwartz added, "Anyone who wants to understand modern poetry can do so by working about half as hard as he must to learn a language, or acquire any new skill, or learn to play bridge well." But in fact, with an occasional exception (the obscurity of much of the poetry of John Ashbery comes to mind), contemporary poetry has not grown more but less difficult, and the audience still isn't there.

IF DELMORE SCHWARTZ blamed the obscurity of modern poetry on its difficulty, Randall Jarrell, in a lecture at Harvard called "The Obscurity of the Poet," blamed the national culture. "The poet," said Jarrell, "lives in a world whose newspapers and magazines and books and motion pictures and radio stations and television stations have destroyed, in a great many people, even the capacity for understanding real poetry, real art of any kind." In more recent years, poets have taken this a step further to blame America for an anti-intellectual and anti-artistic strain in our national life. "Pushkin could count on railway workers to know his poems," John Berryman told Eileen Simpson, his first wife. "Think of it! Who reads poetry in America?" Poetry, it is elsewhere claimed, is ill-taught in grammar and high schools. The neglect of poetry by major trade publishers is sometimes blamed. Capitalism generally comes in for its share of lumps, sometimes for encouraging supermarket bookselling techniques, sometimes for holding up the wrong models: What kind of country is it in which Lee Iacocca is better known than A.R. Ammons? Everything, in short, is blamed but the drinking water.

Some poets, attempting to swallow the hand that feeds them, even blame the university, arguing that, through the emergence of so many creative-writing programs, poets have created their own, largely inbred audience that simultaneously requires a great deal in the way of care and feeding and asks little of them, the poets, in the way of literary ambition. ("Within five years," wrote Greg Kuzma, a poet and teacher of poetry, "there will be a creative-writing program available for

anyone in America within safe driving distance of his home.") Creative-writing programs, this argument runs, are not only producing more people who think of themselves as poets than this or any other country needs, but, through the encouraging, the somewhat therapeutic, atmosphere of the workshop, are generally lowering the high standard of work which is poetry's only serious claim on anyone's attention.

From a higher, more historical point of view, there are those who claim that the game was up for poetry with the advent of romanticism, which retained great themes for poetry but saw them through a filter of the self—whereas now, this argument holds, the great themes are gone and all that remains to poetry is a pallid subjectivity. "With the development of romantic theory in the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries," the eminent critic Yvor Winters wrote, "there has been an increasing tendency to suppress the rational in poetry and as far as it may be to isolate the emotional." A grave mistake this, at least for those who tended to view poetry as a vehicle for truth and a repository as useful as any ever invented for ideas and insights. Christopher Clausen, author of an excellent little book entitled *The Place of Poetry, Two Centuries of an Art in Crisis*, underscores this point when he writes: "Since the rise of science to intellectual preeminence, poets have been less able either to show equal claim with scientists to clarify the problems Western civilization has (perhaps wrongly) seen as most important, or to incorporate and epitomize the conclusions of their rivals."

Romanticism, science; even modernism itself has been put in the dock, for draining the joyousness out of poetry or, with the introduction of free verse, depriving poetry of the delights of meter and rhyme. Philip Larkin, for one, laid the blame for the broken connection between poets and readers on what he called "the aberration of modernism, that blighted all the arts." He meant in particular the modernist tendency to deify the artistic vocation, to separate it from any obligation on the part of a writer to instruct or entertain an audience. In a three-page essay entitled "The Pleasure Principle," Larkin wrote that "at bottom poetry, like all art, is inextricably bound up with giving pleasure, and if a poet loses his pleasure-seeking audience he has lost the only audience worth having, for which the dutiful mob that signs on every September is no substitute."

To screw things yet one notch higher, there are those who believe that the decline of poetry in our day is an inevitable accompaniment of the disintegration of language generally. Wendell Berry, a poet and essayist, writes: "My impression is that we have seen, for perhaps 150 years, a gradual increase in language that is either meaningless or destructive of meaning. And I believe that this increasing unreliability of language parallels the increasing disintegration, over the same period, of

persons and communities"—and, one gathers, by extension, of the power of poetry to recover much of value from the wreckage. At a slightly lower level of generality, others believe that the use poetry has traditionally made of rhythm and meter, of image and metaphor, to bring its readers to a condition of susceptibility to the emotion and thought it wishes to convey simply no longer finds an adequate response in any but a minuscule handful of trained readers. It is as if an old human skill, like following a trail or scenting game, had atrophied and died. Still others appeal to the mysteries of history. Might we not just be going through a bad patch in the history of poetry, as the country did between, say, 1870, when Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman were still at the height of their powers, and 1910, when the modernist poets exploded upon the scene?

NO DOUBT romanticism, modernism, and other literary ideas and ideological movements have all had their effect in landing poetry in the position it finds itself in toward the close of the 20th century. Institutional, linguistic, historical factors have also doubtless exerted their influence in pushing poetry into the dark corner it now inhabits. Yet nearly every explanation of the situation of poetry in our time—attempting to account for its isolation, its seeming irrelevance to the general culture, the depressing sense that this once most elevated of human activities is now rather second-rate—seems to let the poets themselves off the hook. There may be something to Walt Whitman's remark that "to have great poets, there must be great audiences too," but, as Delmore Schwartz once rejoined, "To have great poetry it is necessary to have great poets. . . ."

Not that anyone has been claiming that ours is a great age of poetry. Literary forms, or genres, after all, have their own, odd, often indecipherable rises and falls. English drama never again reached the heights attained in the Elizabethan Age. Who could have predicted the great burgeoning brilliance of the novel in mid-19th-century Russia? It may well be that sixty or seventy years ago, in our Eliots and Yeateses and Stevenses and Hardys and Frosts, we had our Donnes and Marvell's and are now living through our Wallaces and Lovelaces. Another view, one straightforwardly formulated by Karl Shapiro, holds that there is precious little poetic talent around even at the best of times. As Shapiro notes:

I have for a long time come to the conclusion that at any one time the production of true works of art is even rarer than we think. I even devised a rule-of-thumb dogma which I call the B-S-K theory of poetry: Byron, Shelley, and Keats. According to this dogma, there can only be three poets at any one time. In periods of resplendent renaissance, the number increases slightly but not much, perhaps up to half a dozen. Around the points of these stars, there

are a certain number of satellites, and so on. Actually, this is a historically realistic way of looking at art.

But even if there were any B's or S's or K's about nowadays, it is not certain we would know who they were. Poetry is published in such plenitude that last year the Los Angeles *Times* announced it would no longer review books of poems, on the grounds that it was impossible to tell which were important. The same, by extension, applies to poets. There is nothing resembling a consensus on who might be the important poets of our day. The most lauded must be Robert Penn Warren, but one does not hear him often spoken of, or see him written about, as the kind of poet whose work is central to the lives of his readers. Richard Wilbur, the past poet laureate, is everywhere taken for eminent, and everyone for whom poetry matters reveres him for his craftsmanship, yet Wilbur does not seem to stir passionate advocacy in his readers, except when held up as a model of the literary decorum that has been lost to poetry in its confessional, sexier, Visigothic aspects. Seamus Heaney, the Irish poet who currently teaches at Harvard, is generally written about as if he were a major figure, yet his poetry, too, has failed to break out of the tight, claustrophobic little circle of professionals. Doubtless the most famous poet in America is Allen Ginsberg, but poetry isn't really what he is famous for: politics and homosexuality and a talent for the outrageous and a small genius for publicity are the four cornerstones on which his fame rests. John Ashbery is also publicly honored and written about with critical reverence; yet, though he is not himself an academic, his poetry—about which he has said, "Poetry does not have subject matter because it is the subject. We are the subject matter of poetry, not vice versa"—is perfect for academic treatment, being allusive, desultory, and nicely self-deconstructive, which also means that it is most unlikely to hold any interest outside the academy.

Other names of equal weight are on the scene. Of the senior generation, there are Stanley Kunitz, Karl Shapiro, David Ignatow, and (in England) Stephen Spender. Of the generation of poets now in or almost in its sixties, there are Howard Nemerov, James Merrill, John Hollander, Anthony Hecht, Donald Davie, Hayden Carruth, Donald Hall, W.S. Merwin, Galway Kinnell, Richard Howard, Mona Van Duyn, Philip Levine, Maxine Kumin, Derek Walcott, Adrienne Rich, William Meredith. "When I find myself among those who don't know my name," said Virgil Thomson, "I know I'm in the real world." But the poets mentioned in this paragraph, though large names in the small world in which they operate, are again for the most part unknown outside universities or the pages of *Poetry*, *American Poetry Review*, and *Parnassus*.

I not long ago had occasion to hear two poets read and talk about their craft. Both were men, both in their thirties, both had regular teaching jobs at large universities, both had published two books and had their share of grants and awards. One of the two was a Hawaiian of Japanese ancestry, the other was middle-class Jewish. Both were zealous about poetry, which they took to be insufficiently appreciated in an essentially philistine country. The first poet viewed himself as a spokesman for his people, the truth of whose past he saw it as his task to keep alive in his own poetry. The second poet did not announce himself as a spokesman for the Jews, but he came across in the style one thinks of as tough but sensitive, the champion of a beleaguered art. His father, he disclosed, is a salesman, and it had been no easy thing to get him to understand his son's need to be a poet. (A salesman, evidently, can die deaths unknown even to Arthur Miller.) In their discussions after they read, both poets were full of quotations from Pound and Eliot and Kant and Rilke, giving off a strong whiff of the classroom.

As for the works themselves, the first read a lengthy poem about a visit to a strip of land in Hawaii that had once been the site of the cemetery where his grandfather was buried but which had since been plowed up by a developer. His was a poem, in short, about victimization, with a bit of anti-capitalism thrown in at no extra charge. The second read a poem entitled "Proustian" about the brief happy moments when, as a child, his grandmother fed him cookies and milk and he had no knowledge of time, and another poem about a visit to his former high-school football coach, who had always preached the powers of the body, but was now sadly powerless in a body racked by cancer. A poem, the New Critics held, cannot be paraphrased, but in paraphrasing—summarizing, really—these poems I do not think I am doing them a grave injustice. I bring them up only because they seemed so characteristic, so much like a great deal of contemporary poetry: slightly political, heavily preening, and not distinguished enough in language or subtlety of thought to be memorable.

IS IT all up with poetry, then? As early as the 1940's, Edmund Wilson wrote an essay carrying the questioning title, "Is Verse a Dying Technique?" Wilson's answer was, essentially, yes, it is. Prose, in Wilson's view, had overwhelmed poetry. By Flaubert's time, he notes, "the Dantes present their vision in terms of prose dramas or fiction rather than epics in verse." Wilson mentions Flaubert because he is the first novelist to lavish the kind of care on his prose that poets did on their verse; James Joyce would be another. Yeats was the last great poet to write convincingly in iambic pentameters, which, Wilson noted, "no longer [have] any relation whatever to the tempo and language of our lives." Anti-

quoted forms can only render an antiquated point of view, and "you cannot deal with contemporary events in an idiom which was already growing trite in Tennyson's and Arnold's day. . . ."

Wilson does allow that our lyric poets may be compared with any who have ever written, but he adds: "We have had no imaginations of the stature of Shakespeare or Dante who have done their major work in verse." Edgar Allan Poe had anticipated much of this a century earlier. In "The Poetic Principle," his essay of 1848, Poe wrote: "If, at any time, any very long poems *were* popular in reality—which I doubt—it is at least clear that no very long poem will ever be popular again." We shall continue to read Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, perhaps Byron and Browning, to cherish and derive great pleasure from them, but with the understanding that what they did—specifically telling magnificent stories in poetic form—can never be done again.

Not that writers haven't tried. Philip Toynbee published a novel in verse in the 1960's. Clive James has written lengthy travesties of contemporary London literary life in heroic couplets. The most recent effort, a 307-page novel entitled *The Golden Gate*, composed in a Pushkinian rhyme scheme by a young writer named Vikram Seth, appeared in 1986 to much acclaim. But it was acclaim of the odd kind that Samuel Johnson felt was owed to women preachers and dogs walking on their hind legs: "You are surprised to find it done at all." So swept away were readers by the sheer freakiness of Vikram Seth's accomplishment that they overlooked its rather clichéd Berkeleyan (California not Bishop) message about making love not war.

Poets have not altogether given up on telling stories. Some of Robert Frost's best poems are narratives. Although fragmented and disjunctive, even "The Waste Land" tells a story; so, too, in a very different way, does Wallace Stevens's "Sunday Morning." In *Life Studies* (1957), Robert Lowell conveyed portions of his autobiography in verse. Among contemporary poets, Herbert Morris, in finely controlled blank verse, has written dramatic monologues and accounts of his childhood that are essentially narrative in character and quite successfully so. But for the vast most part contemporary poetry has gone off in the direction of the lyric. In practice, this means a shortish poem, usually fewer than forty lines, generally describing an incident or event or phenomenon of nature or work of art or relationship or emotion, in more or less distinguished language, the description often, though not always, yielding a slightly oblique insight.

SAMUEL JOHNSON, who said of *Paradise Lost* that "None ever wished it longer than it is," said in the same essay on Milton that "All that short compositions can commonly attain is neatness and elegance." There are various rea-

sons why so many contemporary poems are, in Johnson's phrase, "short compositions," and not the least among them is that most magazines do not provide space for long poems. They choose not to do so on the assumption, probably correct, that few even quite serious readers wish to read a poem that runs ten or more pages. (Let us not speak of the talent that it takes to sustain an extended poetic performance.) But in taking up the lyric as its chief form, contemporary poetry has seriously delimited itself. It thereby gives away much that has always made literature an activity of primary significance; it gives away the power to tell stories, to report on how people live and have lived, to struggle for those larger truths about life the discovery of which is the final justification for reading. Thus has poetry in our day become, in the words of the intelligent young poet and critic Brad Leithauser, "a sadly peripheral art form."

Even here on the periphery, though, it would help to be able to make a few distinctions. Although it hardly guarantees the production of great poets, a start might be made by deciding who are the greatly overrated ones. This, however, is not likely to happen soon. Contemporary poetry, in the cumbersome new usage of the academic literary criticism of the moment, has been "privileged"—that is, in our day it has been given a special dispensation, set apart, released from the burden of undergoing tough criticism. Helen Vendler, the most talented critic of contemporary poetry now at work, almost exclusively writes elucidary appreciations; one can only infer which poets Professor Vendler doesn't care for by her neglecting to write about them. Randall Jarrell, the most talented critic of contemporary poetry in his day, felt no such compunction; he kissed and slapped with equal exuberance. But then poetry in Jarrell's time may not have seemed as sickly as it does now. Now, for so many poets, critics, editors, small-press publishers, creative-writing programs, the chief thing seems to be keeping the patient alive.

Yet if survival is genuinely at stake, it won't do to ignore symptoms. For an account of symptoms, of what is wrong with so much contemporary poetry, one does well to consider an extraordinary essay by Witold Gombrowicz, the Polish novelist who died in Paris in exile in 1969. The essay is entitled, straight out, "Against Poets." In his second paragraph Gombrowicz states, if not his case against contemporary poetry, his condition when reading it:

The thesis of the following essay, that almost no one likes poems and that the world of verse is a fiction and a falsehood, will seem, I assume, as bold as it is frivolous. Yet here I stand before you and declare that I don't like poems at all and that they even bore me. Maybe you will say I am an impoverished ignoramus. Yet I have labored in art for a long time and its language

is not completely alien to me. Nor can you use your favorite argument against me, claiming that I do not possess a poetic sensibility, because I do possess it and to a great degree. When poetry appears to me not in poems but mixed with other, more prosaic, elements, for example, in Shakespeare's dramas, in the prose of Pascal and Dostoevsky, or simply as a very ordinary sunset, I tremble as do other mortals. Why does rhythm and rhyme put me to sleep, why does the language of poets seem to me to be the least interesting language conceivable, why is this Beauty so unattractive to me and why is it that I don't know anything worse as style, anything more ridiculous than the manner in which poets speak about themselves and their poetry?

When Gombrowicz gets down to his bill of particular complaint, it turns out that he is put off by the professionalization of poetry—"today one is a Poet, the way one is an engineer or a doctor"—which has robbed poetry of its spontaneity, made poetry itself seem artificial, and rendered the poet a less than complete human being. Poetry has been surrounded by altogether too much piety, so that poets have begun to think themselves priestly in their exclusivity. Poets tend to keep the company of other poets, which not only fortifies them in "their ostrich politics in relation to reality," but protects them from seeing their own weaknesses. Poets create chiefly for other poets—for people like themselves, which, in Gombrowicz's view, is another weakness. Here, he notes, "I am not demanding that they write 'in a way comprehensible to everyone.'" He merely wishes that they would not so insistently pose as artists and neglect the fact that beyond their enclosed private world exist other, quite as interesting worlds. He mentions the way poets honor and praise and generally suck up to one another, writing about their fellow poets in a "bombastic gibberish so naive and childish that it is difficult to believe that the people wielding the pen did not feel the ridiculousness of this publicism." But enough.

IF GOMBROWICZ'S condition seems slightly self-exacerbated, his case more than slightly exaggerated, nevertheless anyone who has followed contemporary poetry will have shared some of his irritation with it and will recognize a general truth to his charges. No world I have ever peered in upon can seem simultaneously so smug and so hopeless as that of the world of contemporary poets, especially in its creative-writing program phase. All too often contemporary poets comport themselves as if they were self-

appointed to E.M. Forster's little aristocracy of the sensitive, the considerate, and the plucky. ("When what they really are," a wag I know has said, "is the insensate, the outrageous, and the lucky.") The last thing they wish to hear is that they are producing something not many people outside the classroom want; and instead they act as if those who do not appreciate what they do are, on the face of it, spiritually crippled.

But among serious poets, and people serious about poetry, there is a stabbing recognition that something has happened. It is as if poetry has lost its weight, and hence its reality, and hence its value. Speaking for myself, there have been contemporary poets I have much admired—to mention only the recently dead, Elizabeth Bishop, L.E. Sissman, Philip Larkin—but none has been able to plant language in my head the way that poets of an earlier generation could: "The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas"; "Complacencies of the peignoir, and late/Coffee and oranges in a sunny chair"; "But I have promises to keep/And miles to go before I sleep"; "In the room the women come and go/Talking of Michelangelo"; "All in green went my love riding"; "Like a patient etherised upon a table"; "a low dishonest decade"; "Something there is that doesn't love a wall"; "imaginary gardens with real toads in them."

Where did all that elegant, potent, lovely language go; or, more precisely, where went the power to create such language? Perhaps, like W. B. Yeats in Auden's poem, it "disappeared in the dead of winter."

To return to Marianne Moore, whence we set out:

I, too, dislike it.

Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt
for it, one discovers in
it, after all, a place for the genuine.

And more than the genuine, I should say, though just now the entire enterprise of poetic creation seems threatened by having been taken out of the world, chilled in the classroom, and vastly overproduced by men and women who are licensed to write it by degree if not necessarily by talent or spirit. It was Wallace Stevens who once described poetry as "a pheasant disappearing in the brush." One gets a darting glint of it every once in a while in the work of the better contemporary poets, but to pretend that that meaty and delectable bird freely walks the land isn't going to get him out of hiding, not soon, and maybe not ever.

"Who Killed Cock Robin" is an English nursery rhyme, which has been much used as a murder archetype in world culture. It has a Roud Folk Song Index number of 494. The earliest record of the rhyme is in Tommy Thumb's Pretty Song Book, published c. 1744, which noted only the first four verses. The extended version given below was not printed until c. 1770. Who killed Cock Robin?