

heterogeneity of a world society which, if anything, is growing more (rather than less) complex, and that these realities will be reflected through differences in dialect, language, or the experiences that will be recounted through the text. *Writing meets the needs of different communities differently.* Those groups which have been the subject (the *I* and *we*) of history are apt, for good reason, to tend toward a poetics which is, in practice, a critique of subjectivity ("we need to hear our stories told"). Likewise, the persistence of dramatic monologue in the work of some sectors (white, educated, usually male) can itself be read as an attempt to keep the wheel of history from turning, to render their own fragile hegemony permanent. The work of Robert Lowell suggests that even this can be an occasion for fine writing.

The concept of *an* American poetry (even if we don't extend it to all the Americas, north, south and offshore) inevitably must rank these writings, and thus these communities, hierarchically. As such, it is a fundamentally political idea, as aggressive as it is reactionary, a vision of writing as social control. The more critical question is: how learn to read so that we might open all the various literatures at hand to that which is alive and useful within them? One place to start would be to throw out concepts like this which, propagated by institutions such as the MLA, whose investment in social hierarchies is not coincidental, foster illiteracy within us all.

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## William Stafford

Poets everywhere have two moves before them when they write. They can use their skills, calculate effects, and bring about a poem that derives from the cultivating of a tradition. Or they can venture all over again, like the young and the reckless, like original explorers, into something that invites them with its little, teasing glimpse, its unexpected opening into new areas.

An assessment of any part of the world in its art activity will reveal that first kind of product: all of us derive from the experiences that we encounter in the environment we inhabit; and writers, of course, share in this human tendency to react prevalently to common trends in their area. American poets do share a style, a moving current of topics and

feelings, and ways of discoursing in the climate of their place and time. The process of writing will bring about these clusters of poems that link to each other. One doesn't attempt to be part of that trend, nor does one try to avoid it. The distinction of art is that it accepts—and goes beyond—the near influence.

The going beyond is crucial: the writer on the alert is ready to be rolling into new, emerging territory. And alert readers live by the thrill of that discovery, each time a surprise, that comes to venturers beyond the established.

So—in America today we have tendencies, and those who study trends do, in my opinion, find identifiable American characteristics. Writers here share in the pursuit of topics that show up in the nation—it is common these days for an American poet to deal in human rights (a phrase that is itself a creation), in dread of war and atrocity, in analysis of intricate social processes. And it is also common for American poetry to live off the language itself as a coiled spring of implication. We live in a time of introspection; we are fascinated with the inner contradictions and complexities that used to be passed over as people gave full credit to their conscious aims and proclamations.

This cluster of identifiable characteristics of American poetry is not crucial, though, for American poetry, or for any poetry. The alive part of being a poet, here as elsewhere, is located in the innumerable touches that derive from lending the self to what turns over every time an individual encounters a new instant. Writers who deserve worthy readers are continually leaning outside the given and the established. They are afraid of becoming too sure of where they are, or at least of being too sure of where they "ought" to be.

*Please, may I never learn how to be a successful American poet; let me wander farther than any line, and find myself outside any category established an instant ago.*

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## Nathaniel Tarn

For another while, yes—but we may be close to blowing it.

Despite the easy assertion that we have passed beyond the "fad" of structuralism(1), there is still a good structuralist principle: either you exchange relatives with others or you marry them yourself. In the first case: reciprocity in marriage; in the second: incest.

When we lost the Whitmanian notion that there should be marriage between poet and people, poet and public, or poet and "reader," if you will, we entered incest. And the great nuclear breeder of incest has been the university.

Universities were originally designed for scholarship. At some point, contemporary literature was taken out of marriage into the academy and locked into incest. This has four main aspects. 1) You are no longer concerned with people, public, or "reader." 2) You no longer study past masters in order to learn the marital tradition, but you concentrate on craft in the products of contemporary masters, if such can be recognized; or you study your own products for the most part. 3) You give up the process of what is known as "canon formation" (read: university syllabus construction) into the hands of critics and transform potential poets—since everyone has to make a living—into [teacher-critic. (poet)] or [teacher-critic-burrocrast-(poet)]. 4) You then breed thousands of replicas of this animal per year and send them out into the world to preach a gospel of easily resolvable problems and abject conformity.

Since universities are constitutively addicted to complicating matters rather than simplifying them (mostly excellent in scholarship; mostly catastrophic in creativity), the rise of the individual designed to deal with complications is inevitable. This is the burrocrast. As a matter of statistics, the "pure" burrocrast is now outnumbering the professor, so that professors may be extinct in another few decades. In the arts, we have the proliferation of a vast burrocrastic personnel all the way from government on top to cultural-center and poetry-fest organizers at the bottom, all destined to oil the workings of the incest machine. Let me ask one question by way of example: Does the fact that the burrocrassy has devised more and more pigeonholes into which to fit different categories of minorities for grants, awards, and suchlike translate itself into any rise in concern in one subgroup of poets for the work of any other subgroup? No: incest breeds more incest all down the line.

Entering burrocrassy means keeping hours—nine to five, or worse. MFAs become slaves to the work ethic like everyone else. "I haven't written a poem today! I might as well die!" Keep it coming. Eat More Bran!

Incest begets hermeticism. When you talk only to sibling spouses, you can talk in code. The massive critical vocabulary engendered by academic "new criticism" on the belly of "modernism" has led, in the MFA writer, to "wordsmithing" for its own sake, a frenzied concentration on word games without any of the impetus of modernist content or concern. The MFA writer, however, is no longer the only hermeticist. Those who, for worse rather than better, have gotten

baptized as "language poets" are in every way as divorced from a "readership," as I understand it here, as the MFA writer—indeed, many of them may be MFA writers, for all I know. Granted that the language poets have imbibed, and are using in every sort of creative and interesting way, the intellectual stances of Europe in the last fifty years, their product is as unavailable to the "reader" considered here as is the better product of the MFA. (I stress *better* because the average MFA poem is a fearsomely dull dilution of that most elegant and most assimilatable aspect of modernism: Objectivism.)

The fact is that both the MFA and the language poet now speak and write only for other poets and, above all, for the incestuous critic busy with his or her canon formation. The prevailing incest leaves very little room for individual voices outside the burrocrassies. An incestuous critic perpetrating mass murder on everything alive in American poetry (so that it is a matter of pride and survival to be unnamed and unconsidered by her or him) is not all that distinguishable from another, apparently opposed, incestuous critic jumping onto every available movement at the drop of a hat and serially. Only our national passion for changing fashions and fads every three years obscures the comedy in this process. Individual voices and bandwagons are totally unrelated.

(I should perhaps, in parenthesis, elaborate on my particular sense that we require, in poetry, what is *understandable* rather than what is merely *readable* or *listenable*. In almost every way, any and every text is readable or listenable in some dimension, or to some extent. It is characteristic of incestuous criticism today (and very noticeable in the visual arts, especially) that it comments on that which is there as being there rather than on any of the reasons for the necessity of its being there: its readability instead of its understandability. Such criticism is relentlessly descriptive. In our present formalisms, a great deal of hermeticism is generated by one form or another of the concept that anything voiced or sounded can legitimately aspire to the untranslatability of music. I do not see this as true: even a solitary letter of the alphabet or human vocal sound signifies in a way that no other medium does and therefore begs the question of understandability. The "reader" will continue to suffer—unless we merely mean by "reader" yet another fellow poet steeped in the same *marasmus* as we ourselves.)

At a critical junction in the self-recognition of American poetry, we had, in Williams, a move away from the over-writerly and over-hermeticist (read here also, in many cases, *fascist*) components of modernism. The stress on the oral and the speakerly enabled the question to be raised of marriage with a reader through a shared national idiom. Whatever the difficulties with this praxis (in the matter of the

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definition of "nation"), it did for a time allow of the thought of an "America of Love," as consistently marital critics like Sherman Paul and Paul Christensen have pointed out. The scramble to return to the writerly, consistent with the political hues of the passage in time from the 1960s to the 1970s and 1980s, has once again obscured this praxis. Much of the speakerly has degenerated into the kind of cabaret that "performance poetry" all too easily becomes. The spectacle of one-time poets now dashing about the festivals of the world being entertainers is not particularly edifying, especially as the people they entertain are yet once again other poets.

Of course, the moment you generalize, you begin to lose touch in some ways. The fascination of work like Beverly Dahlen's or Clark Coolidge's is that it is both writerly *and* speakerly. The most recent issue of *Cultural Anthropology* suggests that, in fact, you can never truly separate these two dimensions in any written text.

The speakerly, at its inception, gave us the opportunity of questioning the role of various voices in our poetries. If it has degenerated into the primitivistic, we all suffer from the loss. Let's talk broadly of an "American Poetry" and a "Poetry of the United States." American Poetry is or should be the concerted voice of a continent, going from Alaska to Tierra del Fuego—this because America is *young* and the dream of union should still be able to remain alive. In effect, what happens? The United States behaves as if there were two empires. The external empire is everything in the Americas that is not ourselves. The internal empire is the minorities which we burrocassize for token grantsmanship, but totally fail to support in any genuine sense. Do Anglo poets and publications pay any real attention to Black, Hispanic, or Native American poems when they get down to poetics? And is it not quite normal that Blacks, Hispanics, Native Americans et al. should pay no attention to Anglos? Which is why the efforts of a Rothenberg or an Ishmael Reed, or a periodical like Nathaniel Mackey's *Hambone*, are pretty solitary miracles.

There is no divorcing the poetry of the United States from United States imperialism. Yet, if we look at matters this darkly, there is perhaps a ray of hope. Maybe first we can remember that a genuinely political stance involves marriage and not incest—the creation of genuine relations between poets and publics, not the creation of incestual communities of poets who read, publish review (etc., etc.) other poets. Second: that the dream of subverting bourgeois literature—as old as Mallarmé and Rimbaud—by what we might call a language-priority mode can no longer truly function in a world entirely taken over by wall-to-wall television blabbery and cultural pollution simply because, as we learned in the sixties and continue to learn with all of information technology, such a mode has lost its power to *shock*. Either

our poets repossess a *common language* or we enter an age of post-poetry.

It seems to me that, right now, we often lose sight of a basic requirement of all "subversions of the bourgeoisie"—namely that it be a subversion *for*, or *on behalf of*, someone or something: usually, wouldn't you say, an *underprivileged* class?

Next, historically language-bound as poetry is, we can at least try to defuse the imperial issue by re-opening communion with all the different brands of English there are in the world and keeping alive our interest in defining exactly what *our* English is and can be in relation to all others. Together with this, we can do far, far more than pay lip service to poetries in other languages with the occasional festival and the occasional translation. The salvation of the poet as an *endangered species* everywhere could become a primal task of all national communities of poets striving to overcome the negative weight of national boundaries, external or internal, toward the survival of the *species* as such. It is in this sense that the internationalism of the language poets is a hopeful sign of what we may yet do.

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## Linda W. Wagner-Martin

A current American poetry exists, but it exists at war with itself. It has little direction. It has trouble dissociating itself from the pervasive critical milieu—which will not accept the poem for itself, as a discrete art object, but continues to insist that it is only a construct of perhaps meaningless words, an artifact that grows from the poet's mind but has no real response in the reader's. Time was when we all could accept the validity of the poem as art object. In the 1980s, one is less sure of the ground rules.

During the 1970s, the variety of American poetry was healthy, energetic, and energizing. One could see traces of Gertrude Stein, of Williams, of Stevens, of Frost, even of Pound. Today, scarcely a decade later, the variety is less obvious. Poem after poem limps tiredly around circumlocutions, exhausted sighs of self-reflexive angst—whether written by aggressively macho male poets or aggressively complacent lesbian poets. Language has become only a means for self-revelation, rather than the entry to art; and the self-revelation is no longer cap-