

A Quartet of Contemporary Poetries · *Laurence Goldstein*

AT A TIME WHEN 50,000 titles a year roll off the presses, one can expect *any* category of books — weather almanacs, biographies of bridgebuilders, sex manuals — to increase in the general number: a rising tide lifts all boats. But even so, the proliferation of new books about contemporary poets and poetry is a remarkable phenomenon of modern publishing. Once it was a rarity for a living poet to have an entire book devoted to his or her oeuvre. No poet before Browning was so honored, and even throughout the first half of this century the rule was to memorialize authors posthumously with career studies rather than analyze their work while they continued to compose. Some of this decorum was simply tact, but caution played its part as well. No critic wants to experience firsthand what some have undergone in recent years — the spectacle of an eminent author rising up in indignation to announce that Professor X's boneheaded commentary on his or her work is flawed from beginning to end.

There are several reasons for the change in fashion, but two deserve special notice. First, the needs of the profession — succinctly summarized as “publish or perish” — have relentlessly opened up new areas of research, just at a time when university presses have become more competitive in attracting undergraduate and graduate readers likely to favor the twentieth century in general and contemporary literature in particular. Add to this the fact that postwar critical theory has helped to shape the themes and techniques of contemporary poetry (and vice versa), so that not only critics but anthropologists, historians, and philosophers find in new verse the aptest illustrations for their state-of-the-art conclusions about the relation of (abstract) language to (material) reality. Hayden White has remarked on

American Poetry: The Rhetoric of Its Forms. By Mutlu Konuk Blasing. Yale University Press, 1987. Pp. 248. \$24. *The Psycho-Political Muse: American Poetry since the Fifties.* By Paul Breslin. The University of Chicago Press, 1987. Pp. xvii + 261. \$27.50. *Coming to Light: American Women Poets in the Twentieth Century.* Edited by Diane Wood Middlebrook and Marilyn Yalom. University of Michigan Press, 1985. Pp. 270. \$27.50 hb; \$12.95 pb. *A Gift of Tongues: Critical Challenges in Contemporary American Poetry.* Edited by Marie Harris and Kathleen Aguero. University of Georgia Press, 1988. Pp. xii + 342. \$30 hb; \$15 pb.

the tendency of many intellectuals “to conceive the text as the very paradigm of experience, and to conceive the act of reading as a favored analogue of the way we make sense of everything.” In this logocentric spirit of the age, poetry, the most condensed and experimental use of the language, has become a privileged object of scrutiny. As English departments more actively recruit scholar-teachers specializing in postmodern poetics, the system increasingly rewards researchers in this field with promotion and more contracts from university presses.

The publicity department of a press will usually send a questionnaire to prospective authors with the daunting query, “In what way can this book claim to be the first of its kind?” If you have written on Shakespeare or Wordsworth, you’re likely to pause a long time over that question, but you *can* be the first ever to write on certain contemporaries, a heady feeling even if your book is doomed to be branded “premature” ever afterward. How then should one proceed? The books reviewed here choose not to concentrate on single authors but take a “field” approach to contemporary poetry, locating it in different contexts in order to articulate its quiddity, its whatness—and with the realization that such short views will very likely be scorned by the next generation of critics. In writing of authors in mid- or late-career we fancy ourselves more acute precisely because we share the same historical moment, but we can expect to be corrected and patronized in the future just as we shake our heads in disbelief when we read contemporary accounts of “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” or “The Waste Land.”

The first question we are likely to ask about contemporary American poetry is, Where does it come from? Does it derive from the English tradition, as some scholars contend? In this reading, the powerful example of Romantic verse, especially, persists in the “poetry of experience” that dominates our mainstream works. In such dramatic lyrics, a determinate subject undertakes a coherent meditative process and reaches some conclusion, realization, or understanding of a clearly-defined problem or situation. The exemplary works of High Modernism which subvert this tradition are seen as sports or aberrations from the Anglo-American norm. Probably nothing will ever displace the masterpieces of this “English” tradition from their favored spot in the anthologies and the academic curriculum, but the general shift in poetics from representational to reflexive,

readily to writerly, closed to open, has undermined their authority, even in Britain.

The majority strategy is to posit an American tradition significantly distinct from the English line. Of course a revolutionary American tradition requires a founder, and Ralph Waldo Emerson has become the patriarch of choice for many critics. Emerson's essays constantly preached the need for an innovative poetics, a free-spirited verse appropriate to the new continent and the new order announced by the Revolution. Whitman responded directly to Emerson's appeal for some wild Genius or "liberating god," and, according to some evangelical critics, the "strong" poets who followed earned their wings by likewise remaining faithful to the Emersonian gospel. Harold Bloom's dogmatism on the matter of membership in the Emerson tradition, especially, has seemed prescriptive, and proscriptive, to an extreme. Louis Simpson remarked in a letter to the *New York Times Book Review* that "to Mr. Bloom, poetry is a meeting of the English Department to determine who shall be given tenure." Jerome Rothenberg, more harshly, has brought Bloom into figural association with Josef Mengele at Auschwitz, who selected from a line of worthy human beings who should live and who should die.* In addition, feminist scholars have noted that the Emerson tradition has a way of excluding daughters in favor of prodigal sons. It's fair to say that while no scholar denies the great importance of Emerson in our literature, the omnigenerative powers attributed to him now seem exaggerated.

Typical of the revisionist histories is Mutlu Konuk Blasing's *American Poetry: The Rhetoric of Its Forms*. Blasing begins not only by dislodging Emerson from the center of some putative tradition but asserting that "no one need stand in Emerson's place." Instead, Blasing devises a typology of four generic rhetorics of American poetry based on Aristotelian categories more recently put to use by Kenneth Burke and Northrop Frye. In each category Blasing places a nineteenth-century poet, a modernist poet, and a contemporary (post-1945) poet. Poe, Eliot, and Plath are "allegorical" poets who maintain an irreducible distinction between experience and rep-

* Simpson's letter appeared in *The New York Times Book Review*, 11 April 1976, Section VII, p. 41. Rothenberg's commentary, which is centrally concerned with Bloom's attitude toward Jewish poets, appeared in *Sulfur* 2 (1981). See "Harold Bloom: The Critic as Exterminating Angel," pp. 4-26.

resentation. Emerson, Stevens, and Bishop belong to the rhetorical strategy of "analogy" which exploits perceptions of correspondences between the mind and nature as a basis for composition. To Whitman, Pound, and O'Hara is attributed the mode of "anagogy," defined as "a coincidence of textual and existential experience, figurative and literal language, poetic and natural form." Finally, Dickinson, Hart Crane, and Ashbery exemplify the strategy of "literalism" in which irony serves to differentiate and dismantle familiar categories of experience, including linguistic codes themselves.

Such a scheme offers opportunities and problems. A chief advantage is the chance to shake loose some of the ossified historical connections that have become set in stone over the years. Emerson-Whitman, Whitman-Crane, Pound-Eliot, and O'Hara-Ashbery, these hyphenated identities have sponsored a critical literature devoted single-mindedly to canonizing resemblances rather than differences. In Blasing's view we require readings of poems that restore the radical uniqueness of each poet while indicating their customary fondness for certain tropes, voices, and attitudes toward language and experience. Blasing denies any interest in establishing four traditions to replace the Emerson tradition; she can and does make us think more flexibly about how Plath, Bishop, Ashbery, and O'Hara may be as "self-authorizing" as their forebears. The positing of alternative networks and stylistic crossings gives us fresh terminology not only for those poets but for others who have been neglected because frozen into some constraining historical classification. (For example, it has taken decades to pry loose from the "Imagist" label such remarkable poets as H. D., Marianne Moore, and Carl Sandburg.)

Northrop Frye has said of his scheme in *Anatomy of Criticism* that the system exists for the sake of the insights, not the reverse. Classification is of no use if it cannot help us read great poems with more understanding. The chief virtue of Blasing's method is the way she can mobilize the theoretical weight of her rhetorical analysis behind original readings of masterpieces. Plath's "Daddy," for example, often classified as a "confessional poem" along with such dissimilar works as Lowell's "Skunk Hour" and Snodgrass's "Heart's Needle," is here displaced into a line of dramatic poems that includes "The Raven" and "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." According to Blasing, each poem "emphasizes the conventional features of poetry and exaggerates metrical regularity and phonemic repetition in

order to stage the abysmal distance between the formal, expressionist language and the psyche, memory, or imagination." Blasing argues that Plath chooses formal constraints as a means of stimulating the uncontrolled states of mind her poetry displays, and thereby exhibits the same fragmentation of personality we identify with the haunted "voices" of Poe and Eliot. (That is, the stanza forms are enclosures, a prison-house of language that paradoxically enables the poets to reveal, in an appropriately histrionic manner, how they are victimized by the past.)

The book's other sections likewise emphasize the problematic relationship of language and experience, showing how some poets lean toward a positive faith in the virtues of representation and others are tormented by the inability of words to say just what they mean. The chief problem of Blasing's categories is that resemblances intrude themselves when differences are her focus. Her excellent chapter on Ashbery, for example, cannot help but make us think of Plath in the way both poets subvert the customary function of poetic devices to create new effects. Both poets are fond of indeterminacy, as well as "tonal impurities," "wacky analogies," "non sequiturs" and other comic means of trashing the poetics of sincerity we associate with the Wordsworthian tradition. In an age when writers delight in crossing or fusing traditional rhetorical categories, no one can expect "analogy," "allegory," "anagogy," and "literalism" to be much more than heuristic opportunities for debunking critical orthodoxies.

Blasing provides cross-references within her four categories but very few across categories, so that it is difficult to get a grasp on the fundamental differences she posits between the rhetorical networks except by inference. The task is not made easier by the aphoristic, playful, and terminologically sophisticated prose she addresses to advanced students in the field. The book certainly repays the careful attention it demands, however. It offers a kind of liberation for the reader who feels constrained by the received formulations of literary history. Ever since Roy Harvey Pearce's *The Continuity of American Poetry* (1961) there has been an admirable attempt to canonize a coherent tradition equivalent to the English model. Blasing's corrective claim that "historical continuity has never been crucial to the development of American poetry" will help us to redraw the dynamic connections between past and present poetries.

In *The Psycho-Political Muse* Paul Breslin submits a different kind of cross-section to analysis. He focuses exclusively on the generation of the 1960s, loosely speaking, and pans across the field synchronically, highlighting common patterns in the work of the “Confessional,” “Beat,” “Black Mountain,” and “Deep Image” schools. Like Blasing he wants to unsettle our fixed categories, but his project is to reveal historical similarities where partisans have insisted on differences. Breslin discovers not just continuity in this poetry but a hypercoherence of alarming proportions. One feels in this book the same shock that must have come over the first commentators on the English poetry of 1790–1830 when they realized that poets as unlike as Wordsworth, Keats, and Byron—who formerly had been assigned to The Lake School, The Cockney School, and The Satanic School respectively—could be banded together under the rubric “Romantic” and deplored (or celebrated) for writing narcissistic literature. By freeing himself from historicism, Blasing’s or any other kind, Breslin has produced a capacious case study of the neoromantic poetry of the Self.

For Breslin the significant influences upon poets like Ginsberg, Lowell, Plath, Wright, or Merwin are not rhetoricians of previous generations but the psychologists and sociologists of the 1950s and 1960s who argued that authenticity of being demanded a retreat from the corrupt social realm into the uncompromised world of the unconscious. Whether the poets actually studied the works of C. Wright Mills, Norman O. Brown, Herbert Marcuse, or R. D. Laing is of less interest to Breslin than the resemblances in their attitudes toward experience, for these resemblances argue a *Zeitgeist* that informed the work of every writer in that era. Breslin finds “a common stock of ideas” and “a shared rhetoric” in the poets’ forceful rejection of the false consciousness imposed by a repressive society. The result across the board is what Wallace Stevens calls “a violence from within that protects us from a violence without.”

Breslin quotes Stevens’s remark in order to submit it to questioning. How does the poet know whether “the violence within” is a creative force originating from the pure unconscious, or an internalization of the disorder of the social world? Is the inner violence that nourished so much New Left rhetoric a divine frenzy that offers hope to readers captivated by social discourse, or is it an incapacitating madness that seals off the poet—and readers in turn—from the possibilities of redemptive relationship with the social realm, with others? Breslin, in short, approaches contemporary

poetry as a moralist for whom the “poetry of extremity,” in A. Alvarez’s flattering phrase, is a danger to the community. His suspicion of bardic enthusiasm constitutes another critique of the Emersonian doctrine of total imaginative liberation.

Allen Ginsberg is Breslin’s first test case of the vatic poet as “Representative Man.” Breslin distinguishes between two images of madness in Ginsberg’s most famous poems. “Howl” seems to celebrate the anarchistic urban figures who resist acculturation by seeking ecstatic experience through sex and drugs, and so often pay for their transcendent moments with their sanity. (“I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked, / dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix.”) On the other hand, “Kaddish,” an elegiac poem about Ginsberg’s demented mother, is less romantic: “This is not madness as poetic vision or utopian ardor; it is *the real thing* in all its harshness. The poet tries to understand and forgive his mother’s madness rather than affirm it as political rebellion or higher sanity” [italics mine]. Breslin is always looking for poems about “the real thing,” an actual condition not an illusion or myth. The convulsive movement of 1960s poets away from the poetry of rational, objectively verified reality, and toward the conventions of private, visionary discourse, provides the stimulus for Breslin’s jeremiad.

Thus Sylvia Plath is criticized for constructing a myth of herself comparable to that of Ginsberg’s “Howl.” She cannot tolerate a reality that interferes with her relentless quest for “a vivid individuality,” a godlike uniqueness. Her poems, in Breslin’s view, are angry lashings-out at “real” figures (family, neighbors, even flowers) that constrain her imperial Self from completing its autonomous quest. Likewise, Robert Lowell is criticized—once again!—for his fantasies of power and aggression against a demonized social world most famously represented by the parents he belittled so effectively in *Life Studies* and elsewhere, and by the public officials who jailed him as a C.O. in World War II and later threatened prosecution for his resistance to the Vietnam War. No wonder then that he was so fascinated by manic figures like Alexander, Caligula, Napoleon, and Hitler: “Like Emerson’s poet, Lowell’s conqueror stands at the center. . . . [Lowell’s] temperament included a streak of fascist power-worship.” Lowell’s most authentic poetry, in other words, speaks with the violence of the author’s imperious desires.

One might think that the primitivism of poets like Robert Bly, James Wright, Galway Kinnell, and W. S. Merwin would appeal to Breslin as an antidote to the confrontational tactics of Ginsberg and Lowell, but his indictment extends to these poets as well. In what seems to me a caricature of their poems, Breslin lampoons their “stone” imagery as just another assault upon whatever is rational and civilized:

The stones have such pastoral charm because they are the furthest things from the human—the least conscious, the simplest, the most innocent. They have never discriminated against blacks or destroyed Vietnamese villages, never deceived themselves with a clever argument or capitulated to social convention.

If one had not actually read *The Book of Nightmares* one might think that Kinnell does nothing but celebrate stones in order to escape the burdens of human relationship. (Breslin neglects to mention that the book-length poem is centrally concerned with Kinnell’s relationship with his children.) Anyone’s love poetry is sure to be ignored in favor of caustic poems about the dreary limitations of social intercourse. And the social/political realms are stripped of their uniqueness by Breslin’s driving need to locate similarities. What is James Wright’s Ohio, he asks, but “a regional incarnation of Ginsberg’s Moloch”? As the book goes on, Breslin increasingly looks like a tourist who can recognize only one kind of failed poem in the literary landscape. Often he praises the craft of such poems, and he is unquestionably a careful reader of verse. But so was Yvor Winters, whose anti-romanticism disabled him, in ways that Breslin might take to heart, from seeing that there was more to poets like Whitman and Yeats than violence and visionary bluster.

The final chapter of Breslin’s “skeptical reappraisal” is devoted to John Ashbery, whom he calls “the next repository of the spirit of the age.” It is an odd choice, if only because Breslin has shown himself so ill at ease with humor in verse—and Ashbery is among other things a comic poet of the first order. Breslin makes use of Ashbery to characterize a poetry scene exhausted by the fierce debates over experience, especially political experience, sponsored by the psycho-political muse. Emersonians of our time have praised Ashbery for renewing the language, and Blasing appreciates his Dickinsonian talent at inventing “forms of autobiography . . . detached

from the ego." But Breslin, acknowledging the verbal artistry, chafes at Ashbery's tolerance of indeterminacy and even meaninglessness. Isn't this just another masquerade on behalf of a solipsistic inner world? he asks. In Ashbery's high status Breslin sees the revenge of the cool '70s and '80s upon the '60s, as "wraithlike insubstantiality and thematic single-mindedness" succeed upon a radical poetics of transcendence and compulsive self-exhibition.

In a period when so much poetry criticism is wary and vague, Breslin's descriptions and judgments are crisply worded, precise, fully developed, and fearlessly direct. This is an important polemic that will attract a large audience for its Johnsonian pronouncements on specific works and reputations. Of course, when we read Johnson on Milton or the Metaphysical Poets, we may feel that he took more offense at their dazzling technique than we do, and that he would have disliked the Romantic poets who succeeded him even more intensely than poets he wrote about retrospectively. What sort of poems would Breslin recommend wholeheartedly as models of excellence? One would like to see from him a book like Thomas R. Edwards's *Imagination and Power* that judiciously contemplates the masterpieces of public poetry. Or would premodern works strike him as no less infirm than the twentieth-century mode? If he scorns the retreat into the pastoral and archetypal in James Wright, what would he say of Wordsworth's "Intimations Ode"? If he grows impatient with Ginsberg for writing so much about "the divine and the demonic," what would he make of *Paradise Lost*?

Whatever their differences in methodology, Blasing and Breslin agree on the canon of contemporary poets; and the same authors they feature are also the chief objects of study in most books on the postwar literary scene, for example, M. L. Rosenthal's *The New Poets*, David Kalstone's *Five Temperaments*, Cary Nelson's *Our Last First Poets*, Robert von Hallberg's *American Poetry and Culture 1945–1980*, Alan Williamson's *Introspection and Contemporary Poetry* and many many others. One sees the same dozen or so white male poets—Plath or Bishop or Adrienne Rich is the token woman—shuffled around into various groupings and contexts, though one critic's favorite may be banished altogether by another critic as embarrassing to his argument. (A psycho-political poet of the 1960s like James Dickey, for example, cannot be accommodated to Breslin's generalizations

and goes unmentioned in his book.) It seems distressingly early for the canon to be so firmly set. One is grateful when critics do leave the beaten path: when von Hallberg writes about Edward Dorn (as Donald Wesling has done splendidly at book-length), or Dave Smith about May Swenson and Louis Simpson in *Local Assays*, or Richard Howard, Robert Pinsky, Sherman Paul, and Helen Vendler on any number of very interesting poets in their assorted books on the contemporary scene.

Especially welcome after nearly a half-century of postmodern poetry is the kind of book represented by *Coming to Light* and *A Gift of Tongues*. These are texts that set out to explore counter-traditions pushed to the margins by the nearly unanimous critical attention to a standard corps of contemporary authors. The essayists in both books tend to argue that the canon is consciously constructed by a social elite that has selfish reasons for situating certain poets at the top. These are poets whose densely textured, allusive work is most amenable to exegesis by a professional company of interpreters. As Paul Lauter puts it, "The major project of criticism as it developed from patriarchs like [Allen] Tate was the confirmation of the authoritative position, at least with respect to culture, of the Man of Letters and his caste. And while the *forms* of criticism have changed—from New Criticism to Structuralism to Post-Structuralism—the *functions* of academic criticism . . . have remained constant, related primarily to the status, power, and careers of critics" (*Gift*, p. 70). The ideology of the critic is beside the point; Marxist and feminist critics can and do play this power game every bit as much as reactionary agrarians, solidifying their institutional authority by means of mystifying hermeneutical practice.

The pluralist task envisioned in these books, then, especially in *A Gift of Tongues*, is to resist the hegemony of professional criticism by calling attention to alternative poetics, and doing so in a critical discourse more democratic—less "dominative," to use Raymond Williams's term—than the mode now fashionable in academia. Some of the essays in these books are confrontational; others simply plead their case for a neglected or newly visible author, tradition, or movement. Implied in their strategies of presentation is a move away from interpretation as a critical method in favor of biographical and sociological analysis, so that the text becomes only one element in the complex circuits of production and consumption in a dynamic capitalist economy.

Coming to Light arranges its seventeen essays on twentieth century

women's poetry in chronological order, beginning with Mina Loy, Gertrude Stein, and H. D. as new-century poets, moving forward to Louise Bogan, Elizabeth Bishop, and Marianne Moore, and finally into the post-war period of Denise Levertov, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Lucille Clifton, Adrienne Rich, and American Indian Women's poetry. In so constructing the volume, the editors and essayists have the difficult task of proceeding on two fronts. Facing the patriarchal pantheon of poets and critics they "challenge the very category of 'greatness' as a social construct" so as not to be overawed or overwhelmed by the canonized achievements of Eliot-Pound-Frost-Stevens-Crane-Williams-Roethke-Lowell-Ginsberg-Ashbery and company. On the other hand, they want to persuade the reader that the women poets they discuss are indeed "great," every bit as "great" as their male counterparts but neglected because they bring unwelcome news of female experience to the establishment. Because their critical task is to hallow an alternative "great tradition" rivaling that of the pre-1960s canon, the essayists must often employ, in spite of conflicting loyalties, the same rigorous exegetical methods that legitimized their forefathers. Explication of difficult works by Gertrude Stein, or H. D.'s *Helen in Egypt*, or some of Plath's lyrics, requires formidable erudition and a postgraduate audience. Other feminists, like Paula Gunn Allen, pull toward the more "democratic" process of defending a poetics that centers on the limpid song, the humorous folk tale, the plain speech from the heart, or the social protest poem, in an entirely recreated canon.

The latter process is more programmatically undertaken in *A Gift of Tongues*. Among the sixteen essays are studies of writings by women of color, working-class authors, Blacks, Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, Native Americans, Asian-Americans, Gays, prisoners, and Appalachian poets. Aside from being a multitudinous *salon de refusé*, these writers do not fit comfortably under any single generalization, but June Jordan's remark applies to a majority:

In the poetry of The New World, you meet with a reverence for the material world that begins with a reverence for human life, an intellectual trust in sensuality as a means of knowledge and of unity, an easily deciphered system of reference, aspiration to a believable, collective voice and, consequently, emphatic preference for broadly accessible language and/or "spoken" use of language. (p. 14)

Most of these poets are engaged in “stealing the language” from their oppressors (to cite a phrase Alicia Ostriker has popularized) and their first Promethean use of it, as documented repeatedly in these essays, is to protest their oppression. The urgency of their need to declare home truths has necessarily simplified their speech acts. Rather than prepare what Robert Lowell called a “cooked” poem — “marvelously expert and remote . . . constructed as a sort of mechanical or catnip mouse for graduate seminars” — these poets veer to the opposite pole, a reportorial plain style. The role of the critic in these essays, then, is scarcely ever to explicate in the New Critical way, but more to gather and introduce, signal the presence of, poems that arise from social conditions hidden from most readers of poetry.

What links the poets featured in both volumes is a determination to *survive* in a more or less hostile world. (“More” hostile, for example, to the Chicana figure known as “La Chingada,” the raped or screwed, who is vulnerable to physical violence on a daily basis.) The first requisite of survival or regeneration is the ability to speak and be heard. Many of the essays document the effort of women poets to achieve self-definition in a male-dominated literary tradition. Often, according to Ostriker, “the poet simultaneously deconstructs a prior ‘myth’ or ‘story’ and constructs a new one which includes, instead of excluding, herself” (*Light*, p. 12). This may be a historical or personal myth or both at once. Some essays document how a woman poet falls first under the powerful influence of a male poet, and then locates a female figure (author or not) strong enough to redirect the poet toward a new, specifically female consciousness. In the same way, Black poets, according to Sherley Anne Williams, have achieved breakthroughs by turning to the slave narrative as a primal text and modeling both lyric and narrative poems according to the structure of captivity-leading-to-emancipation in these sourcebooks. Likewise, Native Americans may write in English but draw their chief inspiration from tribal songs, chants, and legends unknown to the common reader. Especially for poets of “bisensibility” who lead a “bilingual existence,” the texts they produce will be double-voiced as a means of speaking to both native and non-native communities. Identifying such validating traditions, and thereby comprehending the full richness and complexity of new texts written in response to them, remains an obligatory task for most professors of American literature.

Much of the marginalized poetry will inevitably sound strident and thin to ears trained by the traditional canon. It relies heavily on gut statements for its didactic purpose. What Michael Hogan says about poetry by prisoners applies to many similar works: "I see these poems primarily as weapons of psychic survival and only incidentally as good literature." The result is the kind of rhetoric we find in Pedro Pietri's "Puerto Rican Obituary," a poem referred to as a "classic" by critic Martin Espada:

They worked
They were always on time
They never spoke back
when they were insulted
They worked
They never took days off
that were not on the calendar
They never went on strike
without permission
They worked
ten days a week
and were only paid for five
They worked
They worked
They worked
and they died

This passage is cited in an essay titled "Documentaries and Declamadores" for good reason. Like much Puerto Rican poetry, Pietri's obituary originates in a place of shadows, a graveyard of immigrant hopes and dreams, off-road from the main-traveled contours of the American cultural landscape. It has the cold despair of an epitaph, and the anger of stump speeches that likewise make their points in short-breathed phrases. (Most of the "minority" poetry surveyed in *A Gift of Tongues* uses short free verse lines to achieve what Louis Reyes Rivera calls "a cutting-edge, staccato-like.") The speech is clearly aimed at the majority culture, for it has none of the blended Spanish/English idioms sometimes called "Nuyorican." Indeed, this dependence on the proprieties of standard English makes it less interesting than the witty locutions of Luz Maria Umpierre:

I b-e-g yul paldon, escuismi
am sorri pero yo soy latina
yo no sopolto su RUBBISH.

or Jose Montoya in “El Louie”:

And those
times of the forties
and early fifties
lost un vato de atolle
.....
48 Fleetline, two-tone—
buenas garras and always
rucas—como la Mary y
la Helen . . .

Whether Pietri’s civility will make his poem, or others like it, palatable to critics like Blasing and Breslin is doubtful.

Of course, whatever is palatable is consumed, introjected into the body of taste it seeks perpetually to attract. Some critics warn that marginalized poetry can perform its work more efficiently from the margins, that is, nourished by the nurturing attention of its native community and overheard only at a distance by outsiders willing to engage the work on its own terms. “It’s good that the poetry has been excluded,” remarks Efrain Barradas. “It would have otherwise been completely absorbed, assimilated” (*Gift*, 264–5). The dilemma of poets like Pietri, or more “mainstream” writers like Wendy Rose, Gary Soto, Lorna Dee Cervantes, or Lawson Fusao Inada, is how to move between two worlds, or several worlds, without losing their original voice in the process. I say “several worlds” because the rhetoric of poets surveyed in this volume has attracted different audiences, more or less “popular.” There is really no such thing as a monolithic “mainstream” taste, but rather an overlapping set of audiences for distinctly different modes of poetry. A poet speaks to a more specific audience than is commonly acknowledged, a conglomeration of ideal readers imagined as an enlarged circle of friends. The function of criticism in a multicultural society is to expand the sympathy, or at least the tolerance, of discrete audiences within boundaries that are ultimately impermeable. If this

were not our constrained situation, books of instructional or “documentary” criticism like *A Gift of Tongues* would be unnecessary.

The future of a “people’s poetry” will depend to a considerable degree on the kind of American society shaped in the future by forces beyond the control of poets. In the academy there is now a greater diversity of poetries studied than ever before, and the trend seems to be irreversible in this generation. A favored metaphor for this process is “moving the center of gravity” in literary studies away from the cult of genius and toward a generous intertextuality that emphasizes the sentiments and perspectives shared by definable groups within the national community. Of course poets within such (mainly) ethnic groups will vary considerably in technique and talent. Critics must learn how to distinguish genuine invention from clichés and derivative language. Congratulating ethnic poets for writing simple poems is a patronizing and prejudicial critical habit, merely reinforcing the critic’s patrician status by acts of *noblesse oblige*.

Arguments about the aims and quality of marginalized poetry are sure to be plentiful, with advocates and fault-finders alike offering taxonomies and manifestoes to support their beliefs. Whatever place on the spectrum of opinion one takes, however, at least this is a controversy worth engaging with full intellectual passion. (As opposed, say, to the arid question of whether one should prefer “free” or “formal” verse.) If we can avoid the oversimplifications of some (not all) critics of the 1930s, who turned the same debate into a forum on Marxist ideology, we can begin to reshape the canon in ways that will make it more ecumenical, more relevant to our cultural concerns, and, most important, more nourishing to our alert consciousness of language and reality alike.