

Poetry and the Age

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There was a time, quite long ago now, when a creature called the New Critic worked the classrooms of American colleges and universities and wrote articles that filled American periodicals with a rarefied strain of mandarin formalism. As we all know, this creature has vanished, and no miniature history of that tale is needed here. So long gone is he—and in point of historical fact, the New Critic was almost always a “he”—that when Frank Lentricchia wrote his pivotal *After the New Criticism* (1980) he was already addressing the *apparent* death of formalism, which, after its institutional eclipse, was in a second stage of subterranean resistance. Yes, Lentricchia argued, the reign of close reading to the exclusion of social echolalia or political lacunae had died, but the practice still operated on the lower frequencies. Lentricchia alerted readers to the fact that what they thought was ancient history was actually still at work, and dangerously so. New Criticism was still doing its shadowy job of waylaying the possibility of criticism’s larger stake in the world.

Perhaps Lentricchia’s idea that, while officially dead, the New Criticism is not really gone is still relevant today. For one thing, the heralding of a new age for American poetry criticism—one that is historicist, inter- and contextual, archival—seems to be ongoing, as if formalist ideology were not a historical fact but a contemporary threat. It was also made before Lentricchia wrote his book, by feminist “life writers” like Adrienne Rich, and it was made by Marxists and poststructuralists of all stripes, including the New Historicists and so-called language poet-critics. It is made today by figures as diverse as Jerome McGann, Juliana Spahr, and Maria Damon, three names plucked at random from among so many that it would be impossible to give even a hint of their legions. Despite the hegemony of postformalism—or, more simply, historicism—it has often been a ritualistic feature of academic writing to establish how formalism is not adequate to the

The Forms of Youth: 20th-Century Poetry and Adolescence, Stephen Burt. Columbia University Press, 2007.

Beautiful Enemies: Friendship and Postwar American Poetry, Andrew Epstein. Oxford University Press, 2006.

Reading the Middle Generation Anew: Culture, Community, and Form in Twentieth-Century American Poetry, Edited by Eric Haralson. University of Iowa Press, 2006.

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task of describing reading in the climates of twentieth- and twenty-first-century culture and criticism. Why is this?

One illuminating fact is that the discourse on formal criticism seems so fundamental to the writing about poetry that it has virtually come full-circle from earlier days, and the New Critical interest in certain issues of form—irony, paradox, and tension in particular—have been preserved in an exteriorized form, not as a sole property of well-wrought urns but tangled with their cultural roots and branches. For example, the poet and critic Barrett Watten has theorized that there exists a “constructivist moment,” begun with the early modernists and ongoing today, in which the focus of productive and discursive attention shifted from the text as “literature” to the text as “material” invested and enmeshed in what he calls “cultural poetics.” By seeing the text as a site for critical investigation of culture, “what had once been an unquestioned locus of critical value, literature” has become “the material forms of culture” itself (xxiii). What is interesting about Watten’s approach—one that could be linked with a boom in critical attention to the material text that took place in the criticism of the 1990s and is still with us today—is that a kind of formalism actually *reemerges*, though with a much wider scope. The poem is no longer an abstraction to be realized through the printed word; it is now the page itself, a bit of actual cultural flotsam, a real shard of the world tessellated with everything else. This “everything else,” according to Watten, is what might be called the “form” not of literature but of culture. Aesthetics, from this perspective, works within and as culture, its formal construction revealing the obscured and mystified construction of the world in which it circulates.

While this idea is most likely familiar ground for readers of contemporary poetics, it is crucial to grasp when assessing three recent and superb books of poetry criticism: Stephen Burt’s *The Forms of Youth: 20th-Century Poetry and Adolescence* (2007), Andrew Epstein’s *Beautiful Enemies: Friendship and Postwar American Poetry* (2006), and *Reading the Middle Generation Anew: Culture, Community, and Form in Twentieth-Century American Poetry* (2006), a volume of essays edited by Eric Haralson. All three books stage elaborate critical assessments of American poetry that take the establishment of context, what an orthodox formalist would call “extrinsic criticism,” to its furthest extent. The organizing principle of these works derives from the scenes from which they emerge, and illuminates what Epstein calls the “densely interwoven cultural, intertextual, interpersonal spaces” that surface in the overlap of writing and where and when writing happens. Yet oddly, one of the effects of this turn to

cultural formalism is that some of the tenets of the New Critics—notably that a poem contain the virtues of tension, irony, and ambiguity in the way it pits various bits and pieces of its own rhetoric against themselves—return as a more complicated interplay between poem, producer, and culture. The poem lives now in the interstices of a variety of discourses, the tensions and paradoxes alive and at play within and among them.

So if Lentricchia's idea that formalist attitudes are still with us is more contemporary than it sounds at first, *Beautiful Enemies* is a case in point. Epstein's book is part of a growing number of studies on the New York School of poets, a group that includes Frank O'Hara, John Ashbery, James Schuyler, Kenneth Koch, and Barbara Guest—though this latter figure typically gets little critical attention. (Epstein also sneaks Amiri Baraka into this group, and some of his best chapters result from this original and apt inclusion.) Epstein's argument is, in brief, that while other critics have recognized the crucial importance of supportive and encouraging friendship to this avant-garde poetry scene, none has really understood the fundamental struggle between the individual poets and their communities, however friendly, in which they lived, worked, and wrote. Furthermore, the friendships Epstein discusses were created within the twin contexts of the Cold War culture of "containment"—which bred uniformity, sterility, and conformity—and the American pragmatist philosophy of William James, John Dewey, Emerson, and others—which calls for an interpersonal form of self described by Epstein as "experimental individualism." Experimental individualism is, essentially, a form of selfhood that recognizes the dialectic of autonomy and community as the basis of its being. It is "individualism shot through with contradictions and complexities," as Epstein says, "in the ubiquitous eruptions of a fierce nonconformist impulse, a belief in the multiplicity and mobility of identity, and a conviction nonetheless that the self is an inevitably social creature" (9). By examining how the work of O'Hara, Ashbery, and Baraka relies on a like-minded avant-garde writing community, Epstein maintains that this fruitful community is also, on closer examination, a source of enormous tension for writers as covetous of their individuality as they were fearful of a fixed form of subjectivity. Community offers creative encouragement and opportunities for aesthetic development to those who fear both Cold War conformity, on the one hand, and the procreant urge described by pragmatists as ongoing self-construction, what critic Jonathan Levin calls the pragmatist "poetics of transition," on the other hand.

Epstein's argument is immensely satisfying in the way it constellates a number of related contexts, including postwar America,

Emersonian pragmatism, and theories of the avant-garde. He also challenges some of the easygoing assumptions about literary friendship and community evident in previous writing on the New York School, most notably by David Lehman in his book *The Last Avant-Garde* (1998). In doing so, Epstein disrupts what he calls some “rather idealistic depictions of avant-garde collaboration” (35), namely that the collaborative act is, as Hazel Smith argues, “a major challenge to the American cult of individuality” (36). Writing in the era of containment culture—of William Whyte’s “organization man” and Herbert Marcuse’s “one-dimensional man”—and inflected by a philosophical tradition skeptical of both full autonomy and total intersubjectivity, the New York School poets emerge as complex individuals, enamored of each other and driven on by mutual influence, yet also fiercely protective and fearful of uniformity and sameness. It is this “mixture of pleasure and anxiety at work in literary friendships” (36) that fills Epstein’s book with critical tension, paradox, and (perhaps unintentionally) productive irony.

Yet if we pause for a moment over a few terms from that previous sentence—tension, paradox, irony—we can hear the very terms instantiated by the New Critics. For Epstein, they are not functions of the poems themselves (though they certainly arise there) but spokes in the cultural wheel, projected centrifugally outward onto a literary scene. Cleanth Brooks’s argument for “irony as a principle of structure”—which claims that unresolved tension in “the relationship between part and part” of an organic whole animates the lyric poem—relies on just such an argument. Epstein points again and again, and rightly so, to such “tensions” in the attraction and repulsion New York School poets had for each other and their work, where paradox reigns. “But for all its ebullience,” Epstein writes, O’Hara’s poem “Meditations in an Emergency,” “exposes the troubling underside of O’Hara’s constant celebration of mutability” (96). Epstein considers Ashbery’s focus on “the contradictions inherent in the postwar veneration of movement, rather than unequivocally embracing the exultant ‘go!’ of the bohemian hipster” as “a central paradox” of his work (136). Baraka’s work is likewise characterized by a “painful combination of attraction and repulsion” for his white friends (195). This is what Epstein is after, namely “the incessant doubleness that characterizes the literary friendships and communities out of which American poetry arises” (8). It is hard to miss here the ways in which terms fundamental to New Criticism are still at play. (Even Epstein’s title, “Beautiful Enemies,” echoes the title of W. K. Wimsatt’s 1965 book *Hateful Contraries: Studies in Literature and Criticism*, a work that launches a similar argument

about the aesthetic, rather than interpersonal, effects of contrary forces in a literary text.)

Epstein's argument about individual poets in productive friction with their friends and collaborators is masterful. He produces strong readings of major works of these writers, including O'Hara's "Poem Read at Joan Mitchell's" and his mock-manifesto "Personism," Ashbery's "The System" and "The Skaters," and Baraka's "Betancourt" and "The Toilet." Of special interest to those versed in the writing of the New York School is Epstein's use of archival poems that are crucially related to his argument. One of Epstein's great finds is a collaborative letter to Koch's wife written by O'Hara and Ashbery, and the other is O'Hara's "Finding Leroi a Lawyer," a self-conscious parody of his own "The Day Lady Died," which Epstein reads as suggestive of how "friendship—perhaps interracial friendship, especially—stretches across an unbridgeable chasm" (203). Epstein's book is, simply put, a pleasure to read.

This last point is a good way of introducing Stephen Burt's *The Forms of Youth*, a seamless and brilliant expansion on a surprising observation: that a dominant strain of twentieth-century American, British, Irish, and Australian poetry derives much of its subject matter, and often form, from adolescent culture. Burt argues that numerous poets draw on the new significance of the "teenager" (voted the "most important new word of the twentieth century" by one of his sources [1]) and that adolescence is inseparable from writing itself. "If innerness, selfhood, privacy, and individuality are now the province of adolescence," Burt says, "they are also the province of the lyric poem" (6). By examining scores of canonical poets (Marianne Moore, John Ashbery, Amy Clampitt, W. H. Auden, Philip Larkin, Robert Lowell, Thom Gunn, Jorie Graham, Paul Muldoon, and Yusef Komunyakaa) and less well-known authors (Phyllis McGinley, Thylis Moss, Laura Kasischke, John Koethe, and Brenda Shaughnessy, among many more) spread across one century and three continents, Burt examines this phenomenon in the various subcultures of schools, rock and roll, the rituals of dating, and bohemian New York. In one of his best examples, Burt links the "authentic, proud blackness" of racial discourse of the 1960s with Gwendolyn Brooks and the Black Arts movement, showing how adolescence is a protean, mobile concept that informs culture at large, not just single aspects of it (109). This book is also full of surprising connections (the influence of Auden's ideas about adolescence on Ashbery), rarely sighted poets who offer fresh perspectives on well-known coteries (the American early modernist Emanuel Carnevali), and

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examinations of stray fragments from important writers (a draft version of Larkin's "High Windows").

In fact, adolescence is an extremely capacious term, signifying an enormous number of things. Some of these include "a distinctive period of life" between childhood and adulthood; "heightened sexuality; rebellion against authority; group-mindedness or conformism; a focus on the inner life or the authentic self; emotional volatility; unstable or rapidly changing beliefs and commitments; and freedom from adult mores and norms" (4). It is not hard to see how modernist and postmodernist poetry might use adolescence as both material and model, as in poem XIX from William Carlos Williams's *Spring and All* (1923):

This is the time of year
When boys fifteen and seventeen
Wear two horned lilac blossoms
In their caps—or over one ear. (31)

"At this point," Burt says, "we can see modernist adolescence in Williams not just as a topic but as a component of style: it means not only sexualized energy but unfinished surfaces, refusals of inherited norms and of inherited ideas of mastery" (32). "Unfinished surfaces" and a resistance to the authority of the past might aptly describe, well, twentieth-century poetry. It is this capaciousness and argumentative scope that can lead, at times, to the sense that we are not good readers—how could we have missed this?

Here, as in Epstein's work, the organizing principle concatenating these many poets and strains of culture derives from a governing social concept: literary history is social history. It seems, from this perspective, that we have exorcized the ideal of a purely formalist criticism because the poem operates as a social text. Burt describes adolescence as "a state of being or becoming, as an attitude toward experience, a state of mind" for poets, and such ideological saturation suggests how deeply the poem is inscribed by a cultural moment (3). It seems that we have moved far, far away from the New Critical study of poetry as form, poetry dissociated from what Pierre Bourdieu would call its *habitus*—the dispositions, behaviors, and attitudes that develop in a particular social and historical scene.

Yet, as I have been arguing, Burt's book also returns to the fold of a more familiar, more formal critical style. As with Epstein's book, though, his logic works by looking outward between and among poets rather than solely inward on the poem itself. One important distinction that Burt makes is between two

versions of adolescence legible in this poetry, what Burt calls the “pastoral” and the “revolutionary.” Pastoral adolescence refers to a youthfulness that signifies a “self-enclosed, artificial, or innocent other world” (5). Poets writing in the pastoral mode “suggest that youth does not change from cohort to cohort, that young people will grow up as they always have” (5). The pastoral is that part of adolescence that provides a retreat from the adult world. Adolescent rebellion is, of course, the opposite of this, the adolescence of resistance to adult ideals and institutions, not withdrawal from them. Burt makes the following argument about these two modes: “In showing explicitly that adolescence matters, that some major poets and some gifted minor ones derive both subjects and forms from it, I hope also to hint at patterns in the history of literary ideas and modes. . . . The *tension* between youth as pastoral and youth as rebellious or revolutionary novelty emerges in the development of teen cultures through the twentieth century and in poetic reactions to them” (5; emphasis added). Here, literary “tension” is projected outward and into the “patterns” of the history that encompass them. One might argue that what Wimsatt called “the verbal icon”—that is, the text as a complex of constructed meaning—has been enlarged and projected outward to include the field in which the icon rests.

This location of tension and irony is what helps make this an interesting study, of course. When Burt makes the case that the Australian poet Les Murray loathes the “uncertainty,” “cruelty,” and “misery” of adolescence, it is gratifying to see this “tension” within the very context of adolescence itself: “Murray may be the only prominent and aesthetically original twentieth-century poet who takes sustained notice of modern adolescence in order to attack it seriously” (184, 185). Murray’s work serves Burt’s argument well by showing how it functions within the constellation of texts already discussed, and its value is in the ironic thrust it gives to his story. We do not care about an argument that fails to provide some kind of friction or challenge to itself because, in fact, that argument would not be worth making. In no ways am I suggesting that the critical recourse to New Critical ideas is retrograde; nor am I unaware that subsequent theory relies on similar kinds of fissures in and struggles for the conquest of meaning. Paul de Man’s deconstructive “aporia,” for example, or Foucault’s “power” both rely on a form of tension that is cousin (distant, perhaps) to New Critical tenets. Yet critical writing might recognize the inheritance and usefulness of New Criticism’s basic categories.

There are other markers of a retrospective critical gaze in these works. Burt’s book often mentions the basic grammatical

categories of close reading, focusing in on how the diction and syntax of certain poems draw on the diction and syntax of youth culture. In Ginsberg's *Howl* (1956), for example, Burt argues that terms like "angelheaded hipster" and "madman bum and angel beat in time" were "not the creation of new language from nothing but the appreciative quotation of young rebels' nonstandard speech" (93). Paul Muldoon's "Incantata" reveals how the poet "has been drawn to verb forms that suggest uncertainty" (168). Liz Waldner's poetry exploits some of the "stylistic adaptations to modern adolescence" like "diction—words, phrases, references and common and proper nouns that suggest in-groups, new subcultures, teen tastes" (207–8). A New Critical attention to text drives the analysis, yet of course the significance of this diction lies in social history. Waldner's "most remarkable adaptations," Burt continues, "involve a notionally adolescent syntax, in which incompleteness and shared secrets show up as stuttering, incomplete, or idiosyncratically assembled sentences" (208).

All of this seems to change slightly when making claims about Haralson's *Reading the Middle Generation Anew*, a collection of 10 essays by writers including Elisa New, Rei Terada, Susan Rosenbaum, Benjamin Friedlander, Eleanor Berry, Jim Keller, Trenton Hickman, Stephen Burt, and others. This collection takes as its subject the generation of writers that falls not only between the high moderns and the high postmoderns, but also between the avid ideologies of early- and late-twentieth-century America. In Haralson's words, these writers' "seasons of prime productivity fell between the 1940s and the 1970s" (1), and the word "middle" refers not only to this generation's temporal placement but also to its supposed political quietism (Bishop) and lack of resistance (Robert Hayden). Like Epstein's discussion of Baraka, and Burt's citation of so many less canonized writers, Haralson includes essays on major canonical figures from this period—Lowell, Bishop, Berryman—and also a few less scoured (though still major) figures—Delmore Schwartz, Theodore Roethke, and Loraine Niedecker. When making anthologies of any kind, one always leaves open the familiar hoots and howls over conspicuous absences: where's the essay on Charles Olson? James Schuyler? The collection has no pretensions to full coverage, however. One strength of the book is the way the various entries "track unforeseen connections across semantic boundaries," suggesting an intertextuality in the volume itself (2).

One of the starkest examples of formalist criticism in Haralson's book is surely Eleanor Berry's "Paradoxes of Form in the Poetry of Lorine Niedecker," a straightforward close reading of "Paeon to Place," "Wintergreen Ridge," and other poems. This is

classic formalist criticism that works with meter, genre, line stress, stanza structure, and the like. It is an excellent essay in the New Critical vein. Other essays illuminate different aspects of formalist ideology. Rei Terada's "Writing as a Child: Lowell's Poetic Penmanship" participates in Watten's "constructivist moment" by examining the varieties of "writing" in Lowell's work, from actual words scrawled on paper to the identity of Lowell "as a writer"; it is the difference, Terada explains, between "penmanship and composition" (33). If cursive script signifies the expressive idiosyncrasy of an individual self, printed type implies its bleached out opposite. "Lowell's printed handwriting"—which Terada explains was for Lowell a kind of block printing style learned under a pedagogical method called "the Dalton Plan" of handwriting—"is to him a nether realm between script and type, a realm that corresponds to the poetic limbo he makes a profession of occupying" (34). Furthermore, Terada argues that writing was gendered feminine for Lowell, as women relatives offered Lowell the models for a writing life. This double-alienation of writing—from self and from gender—leads to a brilliant investigation into Lowell's career as a whole. The move from script to print echoes Lowell's development from the early "illegibility" (36) of *Lord Weary's Castle* (1946), and we see how the link between Lowell's pre-Dalton Plan handwriting and the book's "densely artificial and rhetorical mythography" is not coincidental (36). Yet the more "prosaic" middle-career work *Life Studies* (1959) offers a new kind of opacity with the knowledge that "identity is not writable" (37). And like Epstein and Burt, Terada also works with rarer texts, from archival documents to, more simply, overlooked poems, like "Father's Bedroom" from *Life Studies*.

It may seem that there is something different happening in an essay like Terada's from the work of Epstein and Burt. These latter writers work within the overlay of poetry and the variety of large-scale forces, interpersonal and socially mobilized, that develop and contribute to it. It is a criticism invested in shifting the reader's sense of the poetry considered, and readers emerge from a reading of both books changed. *Beautiful Enemies* intervenes significantly into the way we will understand Ashbery's interpersonal themes, and I know I will never read a poem citing adolescence—from Marianne Moore's "The Student" to Jorie Graham's girlhood autobiography—in the same way I might have before. Terada's essay, though, seems concerned with a material practice that allegorizes Lowell's shifting identity formations. Her long close reading of "Father's Bedroom" traces the link between handwriting and self-revelation with an Alexandrian attentiveness to detail, though it might be argued that it merely sets up an

analogy: Lowell's handwriting helps us see something about Lowell's self-expression.

Yet, upon closer inspection, this essay is really a part of the same project of spiraling outward toward practices that lie beyond the poem to find a way back into frictive reading. Ironically, a close reading of "Father's Bedroom," the kind that might take place in an undergraduate classroom introducing literary practice (where New Critical practices are still promoted, though usually briefly and as "tools"), would be fairly dull. At face value, the poem seems to offer a descriptive patina, not a substantial revelation like "Commander Lowell." Yet Terada's analytic extension into the practice and history of handwriting in Lowell's life makes this poem come alive and, in fact, participate in the ironies of close reading itself. Speaking of the "material" of "Robert Lowell" versus its referentiality (that is, its function as a signifier) creates dialectic tension. "[T]he aspect of the materiality . . . of 'Robert Lowell' must alternate with that of its referentiality as a name. Writing splits along, and is formed by, this duality" (48).

James Keller's essay "Delmore Schwartz's Strange Times" is another good example of such a critical practice. To begin with, Keller offers two opposed theories on the experience of time. On the one hand, there is Heidegger, who says that "authentic" time is really forward-looking, constantly making sense of the past as it moves irrevocably forward (155). On the other hand, there is Walter Benjamin who "finds the past unresolved" (156). For Benjamin, memory of time gone by actively constructs what has been, and time constantly reorients all that is gone retrospectively. "In this scheme," Keller explains, "the past stands before us, awaiting our reinscription of it with every present moment" (156). Keller's method is, then, to punt Schwartz's poetry between these theoretical goalposts. He ultimately finds that "the smoothed-over consciousness of time needs constantly to be reaffirmed through our struggle to contain these opposed impulses" (157).

This "struggle" plays out clearly in Keller's competing analyses. The first is of "The Ballad of the Children with the Czar," a poem in which an adult recalls his childhood in such a way as to order and arrange it after the fact, so that we understand how "poetic vision enables us to select past moments and recontextualize them, conferring new meaning upon history" (160). Yet the second, of a passage from "Sonnet: O City, City," weighs the possibility that "a more authentic present and self-presence remain eventually possible in art" (166). Again, like Terada, Keller finds in extrinsic material the grounds to establish a reading of a poet's work that is loaded with the ambiguity, irony, and tension so classically associated with an earlier age of poetry criticism.

There are numerous problems with such an argument. For one thing, basic categories like tension and irony are not owned by New Criticism or even formalism per se. It was Aristotle, after all, who supplied much theoretical groundwork for early-twentieth-century criticism, and Derrida echoed the New Critics in linguistic terms. Yet when reading these recent books, it is difficult not to be struck by how familiar their work is, how much it resembles the writing on poetry supplied to colleges and universities years ago. “The ‘we’ remains in tension with the trumpeting ‘I’ of the poem’s speaker,” says Epstein of an O’Hara poem, citing the endless agon between self and community that he finds crucial for understanding O’Hara’s avant-garde circle (113). There is no question that this is great criticism. It just may be that some contemporary American critics are finding how hard it is, after all, to really be an American original.

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