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## NEW FORM AND PRACTICE IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN POETRY

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### ABSTRACT

In the late 1960's, there was an infusion of world poetry into the American literary scene that created something of a renaissance. The traditional forms and ideas no longer seemed to provide meaning to many American poets in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. At the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century American poetry came under the radical and permanently altering influence of post-modernism. Now American poetry is directly influenced by mass media and electronic technology. At the same time, Americans became uncomfortably aware that technology, so useful as a tool, could be used to manipulate the culture. From Walt Whitman to the present, American poets have steered a changeable course between form-based and content-based poetics. Poetic form is more than an extension of content or a revelation of content. Recent and contemporary American poetry is a fascinating stage where constant innovation and evaluation of the role of form and content are the order of the day. This paper aims to analyze the major practices and formal diversity in the work of several contemporary American poets as a manifestation of the main developments in recent American poetry. The study reflects three major practices in contemporary American poetry that demonstrate real vitality, are the Gurlisque, Flarf and conceptual writing. The study also reveals that the workshop lyric, the mainstream American poetic form of the last thirty years, will be contrasted with three recent challenges to the tradition – language poetry, New Formalism, and multicultural poetry. Thus this paper explores the details of new forms and practices of contemporary American poetry.

**Key words:** Gurlisque, conceptual writing, Flarf, language poetry, new formalism, multicultural poetry.

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### INTRODUCTION

In the late 1960's, there was an infusion of world poetry into the American literary scene that created something of a renaissance. The traditional forms and ideas no longer seemed to provide meaning to many American poets in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. At the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century American poetry came under the radical and

permanently altering influence of post-modernism. Now American poetry is directly influenced by mass media and electronic technology. At the same time, Americans became uncomfortably aware that technology, so useful as a tool, could be used to manipulate the culture. From Walt Whitman to the present, American poets have steered a changeable course between form-based and content-based

poetics. Poetic form is more than an extension of content or a revelation of content. Recent and contemporary American poetry is a fascinating stage where constant innovation and evaluation of the role of form and content are the order of the day. This paper aims to analyze the major practices and formal diversity in the work of several contemporary American poets as a manifestation of the main developments in recent American poetry.

Major practices in contemporary American poetry

The last forty years of poetry in the United States have seen the emergence of a number of groups, schools and trends. Clearly we are in the midst of literary revolution. Today digital media has set the stage for a literary revolution. With the rise of the internet, writing arguably facing its greater challenge. Poetry has also become a significant presence on the Web, with a number of new online journals, 'zines, blogs and other websites. There are many poets in America writing fantastic poetry. Three modes of practices that demonstrate real vitality are the "Gurlesque" and its related poetries, Flarf, and Conceptual writing.

#### **Gurlesque**

Greenberg describes the Gurlesque as "poetry, that regularly incorporates and rejects confession, lyricism, fragmentation, humor, and beauty", characterized by a frank treatment of sexuality often "dolled up" in a "specifically girly kitsch". These poets have an interest in the visceral, grotesque, kitschy and cute with explorations of alternative epistemologies.

Concept of the Gurlesque- 'The words of the Gurlesque luxuriate: they roll around the sensual while avoiding the sharpness of overt messages, preferring the curve of sly mockery to theory or revelation.'

Gurlesque poets are unafraid of making poems that seem silly, romantic or cute; rather, they revel in cuteness, and use it to subversive ends, complicating the relationship between feminism and femininity. Gurlesque poems own their sexuality, wear it proudly, and are thoroughly enmeshed in the visceral experiences of gender; these poems are non-linear but highly conversational, lush and campy, full of pop culture detritus, and ultimately very powerful. And, like glittery snowflakes, no two

Gurlesque poets are exactly the same. Gurlesque poets are as likely to dip into a mannered formalism as they are into the fragments of language poetry or the gritty kineticism of the New York School, crossing aesthetic boundaries freely and loosely.

The term Gurlesque comes from the combination of Carnavalesque, burlesque and the grotesque. It is the evocation of three different ideas: Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque, burlesque theatre, and the feminist punk movement riot grrl. Bakhtin creates the term carnivalesque to talk about literature or art which, like the carnival, brings together both leaders and lay people in one crowd, delighting them with costumes and grimy beauty and jokes. Burlesque theatre is a kind of parody, a performance of femininity and sexiness where the falsity and charades become part of the act. Riot grrl were also interested in reinterpreting the markers of femininity through apparel and gesture. Gurlesque poetry takes its cues from all of these things: subversive and angry but flirty and sweet, owning and critiquing sexuality in candid ways. Its origins in the turbulent years after the women's movement of the 1960s and 70s make it a poetry which documents a psychic schism. The term describes a very wide range of things and is a concept that even Greenberg has had trouble pinning down. Lara Glenum describes it in her introduction to Gurlesque as a kitschy, campy take on feminism. Gurlesque is an Avant garde view of feminism which followed many of the same ideas of disrupting gender roles that allowed the kinderwhore look and riot grrl "movement" to take hold. Glenum and Greenberg both insist that like the riot grrl movement, Gurlesque poetics is "not a movement or a camp or clique". The concept of the Gurlesque merely strings together a common strain that Greenberg noticed following through modern feminist poetry in the early 2000s.

Gurlesque signifying an exciting turning point in American poetry; the Gurlesque could not exist without the means to disseminate it. Many of the most influential, exciting new poetry journals, reading series, presses etc., are run by women who are themselves Gurlesque poets, or sympathetic to Gurlesque; Rebecca Wolff, Aimee Kelly, Jena Osman and Juliana Spahr, and Elizabeth Treadwell Jackson.

### Conceptual writing

Conceptual writing – a contemporary movement in Avant-garde literature that involves copying, manipulating, reformatting, and otherwise appropriating found text. In conceptual writing the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work. It is the objective of the author to make the work mentally interesting to the reader, and therefore usually want it to become emotionally dry.

Conceptual writing Spearheaded by Kenneth Goldsmith and the poet Christian Bok, it takes its cues from conceptual art, Dada, Fluxus and Oulipo movement, and operates at the very edges of literary possibility. The chronology of conceptual writing has always been slightly out of sync. The term was coined in 2003, in the title for The Ubu Web Anthology on conceptual writing, a gallery of online Works that brought together texts from traditions of conceptual arts the Oulipo, and Avant-garde poetry.

One major example is Kenneth Goldsmith's Day. In more general terms, conceptual writing is a catchall description for a mixed bag of writing techniques used by people who are interested in the impact of networked digital media on the creative process, the social function of authorship, and the economy of publishing.

Conceptual writing rarely looks like poetry and uses its own subjectivity to construct a linguistic machine that words may be poured into; it cares little for the outcome.

This sort of writing is fannish in the sense that it draws much of its inspiration from things that were happening in the art world from the mid-1960s to the late 1970s. Conceptual art is a big, complex category.

What conceptual writing did was to draw attention to the rhetorical aspects of writing that canonical literature usually neglects: weather reports, legal transcripts, social media feeds, stock quotes, use net posts and so on. These texts are the "dark matter" of literature; they make up the bulk of everything that's written. John Guillory describes the conceptual writing belonging to 'what he calls "information genres". Conceptual writing drew attention to the fact that all writing is poetic. What conceptual writing does now is produce more

poetry. Conceptual writing also produced the inevitable science of cultural legitimacy:

The digital revolution has fostered a fertile environment in which conceptual writing can thrive, the roots of this type of writing can be traced as far back as the mechanical processes of medieval scribes or the procedural compositional methods of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. The 1960s brought the advent of conceptual art and saw the emergence of Andy Warhol, perhaps the single most important figure in uncreative or conceptual writing.

In the 1990s, with the emergence of the internet, conceptual writing developed as an appropriate response for its time, combining historical permissions with powerful technology to imagine new ways of writing. Kenneth Goldsmith reminds us that Conceptual art is good only when the idea is good.

Flarf

Flarf poetry is Avant-garde poetry movement of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. The term Flarf was coined by the poet Gary Sullivan, who also wrote and published the earliest Flarf poems. The work of a community of poets dedicated to exploration of "flarfiness" heavy usage of Google search results in the creation of poems, plays, etc. though not exclusively Google-based. Poems created, revised, changed by others, incorporated, plagiarized, etc., in semi-public. Its first practitioners, working in loose collaboration on an email list serv, used an approach that rejected conventional standard of quality and explore subject matter and tonality not typically considered appropriate for poetry. One of their central methods, invented by Drew Gardner, was to mine the internet with odd search terms then distill the result in too often hilarious and sometimes disturbing poems, place and other text. Pioneers of the movement include Jordan Davis, Katie Degentesh, Drew Gardner, Nada Gordon, Mitch Highfill, Rodney Koeneke, Micheal Magge, Sharon Mesmer, Mel Nichols, K Silem Mohammad, Rod Smith, Gary Sullivan and others.

Goldsmith asserts that "Flarf is Dionysus. Conceptual writing is Apollo". Flarf started as an exercise in bad poetry by Gary Sullivan as a means of playing with the online vanity publishing scm site

poetry.com, and quickly gained impetus as the poems evolved from “bad” to “sort of great”. Much Flarf is created through the use of ‘sculpted’ Google search results, where terms, often suggested on the Flarfist listserv, are entered into Google, then the result sifted, arranged, edited and turned in to poetry.

Examples of this are Gary Sullivan’s “Angry at God” made using the terms “Awww”, “Yeah and “God”, and Nada Gordon’s poem “Unicorn Believers Don’t Declare Fatwas”. The poetics of Flarf enact a critique of conventional poetics, by the privileging of the ridiculous, the offensive, and through their trawling of the internet what would most likely be considered detritus.

Formal diversity in contemporary American poetry

Analysis of the formal diversity in the work of several contemporary American poets shows the manifestation of the main developments in recent American poetry. The workshop lyric, the mainstream American poetic form of the last thirty years, will be contrasted with three recent challenges to the tradition -Language poetry, New Formalism, and multicultural poetry..

#### Workshop lyric

American poetry since the 1960s has been dominated by a form that David Dooley calls the “the workshop lyric”. Typically it is a free verse lyric poem written in a single voice, with little or no stanzaic division. Its length is usually up to 100 lines, or 2-3 magazine pages, its impulse is narrative, its tone elegiac. Often, the poem uses a dramatic progression from a private evocation of an autobiographical memory towards an epiphany that universalizes such experience. The number of stresses per line usually varies, the importance of sound effects, rhythm, and meter is all but none. Therefore, scanning the lines is less useful than paying attention to the syntactic structure of the poem and its control of tone. The workshop lyric may read like a sentimental piece of prose that is arbitrarily chopped up into lines. If a poem in this mode succeeds, however, it brings the Romantic sensibility to another level of contemporary relevance.

An example of the workshop lyric is “Tagging the Stealer” by Greg Delanty. The poem

enacts an autobiographical reminiscence that culminates in a nostalgic epiphany.

The popularity and prevalence of the workshop lyric in recent and contemporary American poetry seems the outcome of several factors. One, it is the dominant verse form. Two, such poetry is instantly likeable, because it is easy to understand, sympathize with, and relate to one’s own experience. Three, this poem merges the several innovative trends that American poetry witnessed in the 1950s and 1960s as reactions to the overused poetics of the formalist modernists and New Critics that dominated the 1940s and early 1950s – namely it incorporates the best of confessional poetry and deep image poetry. Yet there are drawbacks to this popular form. Unlike these former innovations of the American poetic tradition, the workshop lyric at its most widespread now represents formal and contentual novelty gone stale – too often it only imitates the poetics of showcased personality in a formally sloppy, and ultimately repetitious presentation of the poet’s self and its private woes which are presumed, but fail, to assume public resonance.

#### Language poetry

The first major shift of the paradigm away from the workshop lyric came in the 1970s with the rise of Language poetry, that is, the poetry of linguistic experimentation. In 1971, a new magazine called *this* was released, featuring poetry and criticism in this mode. By the 1980s, poets like Charles Bernstein, Bruce Andrews, Ron Silliman, and Lyn Hejinian began to publish influential poetic statements, anthologies and book-length volumes of poetry in this mode. Their aim was to respond to the challenge of European post-structuralist thought of the 1960s by reviving and innovating the tradition of linguistic experiment in American poetry.

This was not a novelty of the 1970s, for, in American poetry, poetic experimentation dates back to at least 1914 when Gertrude Stein published *Tender Buttons*, a collection prose poems of radically new sensibility that challenged the conventional notions of syntax, language, and meaning. The volume became a hallmark of American experimental writing and a rich formal resource for later generations of avant-garde poets.

From the early 1970s, Language poetry has posed the most serious academic challenge to the workshop lyric. Unlike the poetics of the workshop lyric, a typical poem by Language poet challenges the most basic assumptions about language, meaning, and poetic structure. What finally matters in the poem is language play rather than mimetic representation of the romantic sensibility.

An example of a Language poem is "The Age of Correggio and the Carracci" by Charles Bernstein. The poem undermines the basic notions of how and what a lyric poem should mean. Its beginning reads like a letter with most of the information left out.

Thanks for your of already some  
weeks ago. Things  
very much back to having returned  
to a life that  
(regrettably) has very little in  
common with, a  
totally bright few or something like  
(Bernstein 2001: 44: lines 1-7)

The tradition of the letter-poem, which became overused by the mainstream poets of the 1970s is rewritten by Bernstein so that the very foundations of the epistolary poem point-of-view and theme are defied to the point of unintelligibility.

#### **New Formalism**

From the early 1980s until the mid-1990s, American poetry witnessed the rise of New Formalism, another alternative poetics that was, unlike the leftist orientation of Language poets, conservative in terms of poetic form and ideology. New Formalism or Neo-formalism, was a late-20th century development in American poetry that sought to draw fresh attention to traditional forms of verse in terms of metre, rhyme, and stanzaic symmetry..

Poets and critics like Dana Gioia, Brad Leithauser, Mark Jarman, and Vikram Seth attempted to revive the importance of narrative, rhyme, meter, and conscious intelligence in American poetry. Their work was aimed at scholarly as well as popular readers. In 1986, Vikram Seth published *The Golden Gate*, a novel in verse which is set in California. By the mid to late 1990s, the New Formalist contribution had assimilated into the

mainstream, although not without multiple voices of attack by mainstream poets like Ira Sadoff who angrily defended the post-confessional mode of the workshop lyric against the New Formalist challenge.

Disinherited both by the overwhelming popularity of free verse during the Cold War and by the notion that metrical patterns were somehow antithetical to organic truth, New Formalist poets and their advocates rallied behind the traditions, aesthetics, and practices they believed had been all but abandoned by many of their contemporaries.

The poets who considered themselves New Formalists in the '80s and '90s were drawn to form in response to the free verse standard that was handed to them. New Formalism's most noted poets include Charles Martin, Brad Leithauser, Timothy Steele, Molly Peacock, Philis Levin, Marilyn Hacker, Mark Jarman, and Dana Gioia, among others.

In the preface to the anthology *Rebel Angels: 25 Poets of the New Formalism* (1996), editors Jarman and David Mason wrote, "it is no surprise that the most significant development in recent American poetry has been a resurgence of metre and rhyme, as well as narrative, among large numbers of young poets, after a period when these essential elements of verse had been suppressed".

Critics of the movement decried neo-formalists for privileging metrical artifice and stylized speech over otherwise more ambitious, visionary, and free forms. Some have gone so far as to call New Formalism patriarchal. Still, others make the case that free verse is no more or less a form than traditional (metrical, rhythmical) verse. Noteworthy criticism of the movement includes Ira Sadoff's, "Neo-Formalism: A Dangerous Nostalgia," originally published in *American Poetry Review* in 1990.

For all the hype that the New Formalists (Expansive Poets or Expansivists) enjoyed in the 1980s and 1990s, their formal rejuvenation of American poetry, which was to win back a lost larger audience for poetry, has failed to do so. David Bergman points out, the Expansivists have held "a limited view of literary history", leading to "an incomplete analysis of American culture": moreover, they lack serious self-criticism, and they underappreciate the role of genius which makes any

great poetry difficult to write and read, thus discouraging large masses of readers.

#### Multi-cultural poetry

The third major challenge to the mainstream American poem of the last thirty-plus years has been the proliferation of multicultural poetry. This poetry is the poetry of various ethnic groups like Native Americans, Asian Americans, African Americans, Americans of Latin and/or Hispanic origin, and other groups and subgroups. What writers of these ethnicities have in common is a central theme of cultural deprivation. As breaking the silence of many ethnic groups and correcting their historical underrepresentation in the arts, these poetries have held a vital function. However, Justin Quinn notes that the typical multicultural poem, which holds for most postwar poetry selections featured in the *Heath Anthology of American Literature* (1990), is "largely autobiographical anecdote in unstanzaic free-verse whose lines contain between two and five feet". The tone is usually elegiac, the structure goes from narrating a particular event to focusing upon an image or detail to end the poem with. Clearly, this poem resembles the workshop lyric minus the ethnic angle. What many of the multicultural poets like to explore as themes in their work is nostalgia for a lost cultural heritage and emphasis on the family histories and their problems with cultural assimilation.

#### Conclusion

In general, poetry in the contemporary era has been moving out of the mainstream. Our immersive digital environment demands new responses from writers. The various projects of the previous century's avant-gardes have been aimed at the deconstruction of the underlying assumptions of such a position. Fusing the avant-garde impulses of the last century with the technologies of the present, these new strategies propose an expanded field of twenty-first century poetry. There have been several other formal challenges to the mainstream workshop lyric that has dominated American poetry of the last thirty plus years – for example, the rise of the prose poem as a poem that disregards the line break and mimetic representation of reality, the introduction of the talk poem by David Antin in the

early 1970s, the rise of performance-oriented poetry, the vistas opened by multimedia poetry, and so forth. The three major challenges to the mainstream poetry of the last decades – Language poetry, New Formalism, and multicultural poetry – may have illustrated that recent and contemporary American poetry is a fascinating stage where constant innovation and evaluation of the role of form and content are the order of the day.

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