

Introduction

Daniel Morris

In “Can Poetry Matter?” (1991), Dana Gioia points to a contradictory situation for American poetry:

Decades of public and private funding have created a large professional class for the production and reception of new poetry comprising legions of teachers, graduate students, editors, publishers, and administrators. Based mostly in universities, these groups have gradually become the primary audience for contemporary verse. Consequently, the energy of American poetry, which was once directed outward, is now increasingly focused inward.

Noting the lack of poetry reviews in newspapers and the rise of the novel as the preeminent literary genre in the United States, Gioia, writing in *The Atlantic*, worries that an insulated subculture has taken custody of poetry: “Even if great poetry continues to be written, it has retreated from the center of literary life. Though supported by a loyal coterie, poetry has lost the confidence that it speaks to and for the general culture.” Contra Gioia, the success of US poet laureate Robert Pinsky’s 1997 “Favorite Poem Project,” to which, as the project website reports, “18,000 Americans wrote in to share their favorite poems – Americans from ages 5 to 97, from every state, representing a range of occupations, kinds of education, and backgrounds” – suggests a strong undercurrent of enthusiastic poetry readers. Similarly, Tracy K. Smith, US poet laureate from 2017 to 2019, “made seven trips across the country in an ‘American Conversations’ tour, traveling from Alaska to Louisiana, holding readings in rural areas that are not on the typical literary circuit,” writes Neely Tucker. Addressing an audience at Georgetown University in 2017, Smith has described poetry as “a perfect vehicle for promoting national conversations” because it “tells us you have to talk but you also have to stop and listen and struggle with what you hear. And honesty, rather than elaborate obfuscation, is the currency of a poem” (qtd. in “U.S. Poet Laureate”). Exploring the claims of Smith,

Pinsky, and Gioia, each of which paints a partial picture, this companion focuses on how American poets since 1900 have (and have not) engaged with politics in the broad sense of the term as defined by Adrienne Rich in a journal entry from 1969: "politics is the effort to find a way of humanely dealing with each other – as groups or as individuals – politics being simply process, the breaking down of barriers of oppression, tradition, culture, ignorance, fear, self-protectiveness" (Rich 24, quoting from her own journal entry of 1969).

In June 2020, *Together in a Sudden Strangeness: America's Poets Respond to the Pandemic* was published, gathering "85 poems about isolation, grief, boredom, longing, and hope, including work by Billy Collins, Jane Hirshfield, Kamilah Aisha Moon, Jenny Xie and Matthew Zapruder." The collection was assembled in forty days, published as an e-book with a hardcover edition that November. Contra W. H. Auden's declaration in "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" (1939) that poetry "makes nothing happen," Knopf, the Poetry Society of America, its executive director, Alice Quinn (who edited the volume), *New York Times*, and eighty-five American poets regard poetry as essential personal protective equipment (PPE). It is software to help readers work through COVID-19 trauma. *Together in a Sudden Strangeness* (2020) takes its place alongside *An Eye for an Eye Makes the Whole World Blind: Poets on 9/11* (edited by Allen Cohen, Michael Parenti, et al., 2002), *Cry Out: Poets Protest the Iraq War* (2003), *Poetry after 9/11: An Anthology of New York Poets* (edited by Dennis Loy Johnson and Valerie Merians, 2011), and *American Poets in the 21st Century: Poetics of Social Engagement* (edited by Claudia Rankine and Michael Dowdy, 2018) as illustrations of how twenty-first century American poets grapple with unsettling current events.

My opening paragraphs confirm that American poets are engaging with social issues that have inevitably morphed into political conflicts, but Tracy K. Smith (b. 1972) contends that the efforts of her generation lack precedence. In fact, when she honed her craft as an MFA student at Columbia, her teachers discouraged the writing of "political poems":

In the mid-1990s, when I was a student of creative writing, there prevailed a quiet but firm admonition to avoid composing political poems. It was too dangerous an undertaking, one likely to result in didacticism and slackened craft. No, in American poetry, politics was the domain of the few and the fearless, poets like Adrienne Rich or Denise Levertov, whose outsize conscience justified such risky behavior. Even so, theirs weren't the voices being discussed in workshops and craft seminars. (Smith)

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In her poetry, teaching, and criticism, Smith joins “the domain of the few and the fearless” by engaging with a tangle of relationships between poetry and politics: race, sexuality, violations against the fragile human body, civics, war, terrorism, and institutional amnesia in relation to the history of twentieth-century American political poetry.

Smith’s essay, however, begs the question that underscores the need for this companion: What *were* the relationships between poets, poems, poetics, and politics throughout the twentieth century in the United States? Contra Smith (and her teachers at Columbia), this companion demonstrates there are instructive, if unsung, stories to tell. Given, as Cary Nelson lamented in 1991, that English professors rarely explain why “the poetry sung by striking coal miners in the 1920s is so much less important than the appearance of *The Waste Land* in *The Dial* in 1922,” it remains an uphill task to remember how American poets engaged with politics over the course of the twentieth century (68). This “uphill task” is especially the case when we acknowledge, as do the contributors to this volume, that the range of responses to political issues covers the gamut of ideological perspectives. Further, as contributors demonstrate, individual poets have themselves been of mixed minds about how to address political themes in poems. Writing in 1993, even Adrienne Rich, the legendarily activist poet cited by Smith, admits the impact of New Critical dogma that engraved the autotelic – or “art for art’s sake” – nature of poetry on her perception that poetry cannot amend social relations:

I knew – had long known – how poetry can break open locked chambers of possibility, restore numbed zones to feeling, recharge desire. But I had, more than I wanted to acknowledge, internalized the idea, so common in this country, so strange in most other places, that poetry is powerless, or that it can have nothing to do with the kinds of powers that organize us as a society, as communities within that society, as relationships within communities. (Rich, xiv)

No longer stymied by New Critical pieties, which guided how Radcliffe professors taught poetry to Rich in the 1950s, Smith says that since 9/11 and, subsequently, the Iraq War (2003–2011) opened the door, we may characterize American political poetry by its empathy, ambivalence, and spiritual yearnings. Until recently, however, she considers what has passed for engaged poetry as merely enraged poetry. This companion emphasizes the approach to political poetry practiced by Rich and Smith, but it acknowledges that no poets or critics hold a monopoly over how poetry should or should not relate itself to politics.

Contrarily, as Susan Ehlers observes in Chapter 3, “Depression-Era Poetics and the Politics of How to Read,” New Critical formalist assumptions dominated mid-twentieth-century American literary values in part by discouraging poets from doing political work in a direct way. These, in turn, were shaped by “a conservative critical movement that originated with the southern ‘fugitive poets’ [that] defined itself against the rise of a left cultural front.” These earlier “culture wars” were won, at least temporarily, by the faction that wished to squeeze politics out of poetry.

Yet poetry has always had a social and political side, and explicitly political poetry has a long history. At the same time, a primary lesson I have learned from editing this companion is that even when poets are self-consciously writing “political poetry,” they bring with them myriad understandings of how poetic language relates to speech acts that compel direct actions such as strikes or demonstrations. As Florian Gargaillo writes in Chapter 2 on poetry and propaganda, most twentieth-century American poets preferred *not* to view their poetry as overt and direct political discourse. Deploying a strategy that he refers to as “echo and critique,” Gargaillo attends to poets who suggest their discomfort with overt political discourse by, ironically, including political slogans in their poetry. Their intent is *not* to endorse the sentiments put forward in the slogans, however, but rather to challenge the comprehensibility or validity of the partisan statements. As Gargaillo writes, “For [Denise] Levertov, the goal of a poem – or at least, a good poem – is not to spur readers to action, but instead to sharpen their attentiveness, so they are able to respond more fully and more responsibly to the world, from ordinary sights and sounds to the news of global events.” This companion demonstrates that Levertov and Rich, both of whom participated in solidarity movements, were not alone in expressing wariness about regarding their poetry as speech acts comparable to a political leaflet or a rousing speech designed to spur listeners to engage in collective action.

Like Gargaillo, Mark Van Wienen in Chapter 7 regards a key task of American war poets for at least a century as ideological critique, that is, as contesting idealistic rhetoric put forward by national leaders that conceals hard facts on the ground. President Woodrow Wilson declared America’s entry into World War I as intended to make “the world safe for democracy,” but American poets after 1917 challenged the message: “Yet under the idealistic veneer Wilson’s aim was no less than US hegemony in a world capitalist system, in which ‘political liberty’ would promote an open global marketplace that the United States could dominate. This contradiction between Wilsonian ideals and reality catalyzed, in turn, a body of

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trenchant antiwar poetry.” From William Vaughn Moody’s poetry of the Spanish American War to contemporary poets writing about wars in the Persian Gulf and Iraq, the Balkans, or Afghanistan, Van Wienen argues that poets have offered an anti-imperialist critique that flies in the face of sloganeering put forward by government officials. The story of how poets imagined war in their writings, however, is not one-sided. Hundreds of American poets wrote patriotic verses in support of the nation’s entry into World War I; female poets wrote elegies lamenting the loss of their sons on the battlefield; mainstream poets such as Carl Sandburg critiqued the war effort by arguing that “economic and political interests . . . ultimately propelled the United States into the war,” and African American soldier-poets such as Lucian B. Watkins responded to the contradictions between Wilsonian idealism abroad and Wilsonian racism back home. Working in a form recognized for nuanced self-expression, not ham-fisted diatribe, is it a surprise that American poets who wrote about war tended to see martial conflict in shades of gray? Like Van Wienen, Michael Collins, writing in Chapter 11 on three African American poets who endured incarceration, demonstrates that poets often regard their poems as revisionary correctives to public discourse, which they view as a mask to conceal domination and exploitation. The task of such poetry is to encourage readers to think twice about interpreting political language as an assertion of unambiguous meaning. Collins shows how Bob Kaufman, Etheridge Knight, and Reginald Dwayne Betts trouble President Ronald Reagan’s version of American history as a “utopian statement because it refers to an America that never existed . . . especially [for] those who have been caught up in the legislation written for comic-strip reality rather than the real thing.”

In line with Collins and Van Wienen, both of whom align poetry with ideological critique, Christopher Spaide, in Chapter 1, on how American poets have addressed public monuments, notes that the most famous example of the genre, Emma Lazarus’ “The New Colossus,” negates an “exceptionalist mythos,” in this case one associated with a precursor from the ancient world: “Against the classical monumental merits of the Colossus of Rhodes – masculinity, military success, an exceptionalist mythos decorated in ‘storied pomp’ – this New Colossus offers maternal authority and an unconditional invitation.” As Spaide explores in his essay, however, Lazarus’ revisionary treatment of the Colossus of Rhodes has itself come to represent an exceptionalist ethos for contemporary poets who wonder if the United States has lived up to the compassionate ideals of “world-wide welcome” in the 120 years since her poem became affixed to the base of Lady Liberty. Spaide writes, “Thanks to Black Lives Matter

and related activist movements, it is increasingly common to probe the meaning of monuments, the retrospective narratives they tell, and their connections to settler colonialism, slavery, patriarchal force, and American exceptionalism."

One need not point to a range of American poets representing a specific topic such as propaganda or war or incarceration to notice how ambivalently related are the terms "poetry" and "politics." Individual poets often combine feelings of hope, anger, grief, and despair when confronting a major topic of social import. No individual poet discussed in this companion may be more characterized by a complex relationship to politics in tone and temperament than Wallace Stevens (1879–1955). In Chapter 5, Alec Marsh traces how Stevens negotiated a middle path between aestheticism and political commitment at a moment when influential poets on the Left during the Great Depression "set the agenda; to be useful in the social struggle, art should function as propaganda." In his close reading of "Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue" (1936), Marsh describes how Stevens wrestles with a figure representing Burnshaw, the Marxist critic, to offer "a dialectical dance between things imagined (the future) and things as they are (the past) which may be far apart, but still reflect each other." For Stevens, as for Robert Frost, freedom of thought, liberation of emotion, and the treatment of literary language as a medium for creative play signal personal emancipation from groupthink. At the same time, Stevens accepts the Shelleyan role of the poet as unacknowledged legislator. His task it is to accurately reflect on a social world. As Marsh writes, Stevens' "poems address issues that lie behind the struggle of the poet to make sense of 'things as they are' (*CP* 165), that is, the social responsibilities of the poet, and deeper, expressive responsibilities to the poetic self, struggling in an incorporated world of militant mass politics and economic crisis." Control of thought, whether associated with the politics of the Right or the Left, is, for Stevens, anathema to what Frost called "the freedom of the poet," but, as Marsh shows in his reading of "The Man with the Blue Guitar" (1937), Stevens agrees with the need for social reform, but questions a propagandistic or blatantly political role for the poet, but he is also concerned with the poet's role in representing conflicts within social life and the common cause. Writing on Stevens, a corporate insurance executive who lived and worked in Hartford, Connecticut, and whose finances were secure during the Great Depression, Marsh reminds us of the range of subject positions from which poets regard their art as a forum to represent a contested social text. In Chapter 3, Sarah Ehlers highlights a much more explicitly political poet than Stevens, and even a model for many of today's political poets.

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Focusing on Muriel Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead* (1938), a book-length modernist poem that documents with archival precision the plight of West Virginia coal miners, many of whom were African American, who died in an industrial disaster at Hawk's Nest Tunnel at Gauley Bridge, West Virginia, Ehlers joins contributor Mark Steven in attending to a quintessential, if at times underappreciated, author who believed poetry could awaken readers to human suffering stemming from economic causes and environmental crises. By placing Rukeyser in conversation with a contemporary documentary poet, Susan Briante, Ehlers builds a new literary historiography, one in which, as Paula Rabinowitz has put it, the literary productions of Depression-era leftist writers "must still be reckoned with if we are to comprehend fully what depression means to . . . aesthetics."

Like Ehlers, Kathy Lou Schultz in Chapter 12 contributes to a fresh approach to literary history by, in this case, placing Rukeyser in conversation with another leading contemporary poet, Claudia Rankine, who emphasizes how microaggressions are inseparable from structural violence against African Americans. Schultz aligns Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014) to Rukeyser's *The Book of The Dead*. Both are long poems put in the service of historical documentation of social crises involving the mistreatment of individuals by representatives of institutional power. As importantly, Schultz notes that Rukeyser and Rankine understand the political dimension of multimedia aesthetics. Each wanted to combine visual and verbal media to document crises within a social, economic, and political environment characterized by racial division and class conflict.

For Schultz, Rukeyser's and Rankine's interest in photography and other media underscores "the importance of both documentation and social connection as remedies for social injustice." Countervailing ways of recalling history as well as retelling the history of poetic representation are crucial aspects of the story of the politics of American poetry since 1900.

In a separate way from those discussed above, Stephanie Burt in Chapter 6 develops an intersection between poetry and politics by rethinking the history of modern and contemporary American poetry. Rather than recover the long form documentary tradition of a Rukeyser or a Louis Zukofsky, Burt attends to a neglected heritage: the eighteenth-century Augustan tradition of witty poetry associated with English authors such as Alexander Pope. At first, Burt's recovery of "wit" in modernist poets such as Marianne Moore and Langston Hughes; mid-twentieth-century poets such as Richard Wilbur, Randall Jarrell, and James Merrill; and contemporary poets such as Terrence Hayes and Rae Armantrout may seem out of

place in a book about the political dimension of poetry. But Burt's point is that "wit" is a political mode of addressing imagined readers. Witty poetry is a social form. It implies an author's respect for the reader's sensibility, one characterized by intellectual flexibility, sense of discovery, and an awareness that there is often more in a statement than what one might at first assume. Witty poetry treats the reader as participant in the complex task of meaning making.

The goal of the witty poet is to facilitate a community of equals between reader and writer. Given the internal divisions, culture wars, and polarizing rhetoric of our current moment in the United States, a moment in which words are too often imagined as things, and thus treated as ways to inflict pain on others, perhaps even spurring violence, Burt's recovery of a "wit" tradition may serve as a corrective model for us to imagine a political discourse and sociability based on trust, empathy, and respect. Witty poetry is not compatible with a conception of the self as inhabiting a separate universe that is unknowable to another. If "wit" moves language in the direction of play, we may remember that playful words are often preferable to fighting words. Burt's essay reminds us that poets may be politically engaged but need not be dogmatic or ideological.

If wit may be an indirect way of touching on political subjects, experimental poets throughout the twentieth century have fused a play of language with an implicit political critique, often made explicit in their theoretical writings. Discussing the legacy of twentieth-century leftist poets such as Zukofsky, Oppen, and, again, Rukeyser, Mark Steven in Chapter 4 argues that an experimental formalism need not suggest apolitical aestheticism. Steven demonstrates that leftist poets from the 1930s "were contemporaneously engaged in a program of aesthetic innovation, producing works not only informed by political commitment and revolutionary imperative but also beholden to the modernist mission of literary reinvention. These poets – writing in their capacity as labor organizers, as insurrectionary agitators, and as comrades at arms – set out to socialize the means of poetic expression, creating verse that is revolutionary in form no less than content." Acknowledging affinities between West Coast Beat poets from the 1950s and Bay Area avant-gardist writings by language poets in the 1970s – ludic, antiestablishment, and anarchistic – Tyrone Williams in Chapter 14 also situates language poets within a long history of "experimental writings and Marxist politics." He notes that while language poets drew on the Objectivists, they remained skeptical about considering distinct poets in terms of group labels. Williams writes, "Louis Zukofsky's and George Oppen's combination

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of innovative writing and social critique made them especially significant to language poets [Barrett] Watten and [Ron] Silliman, thus the more linear narrative forms deployed by Objectivists like Carl Rakosi, Charles Reznikoff, Muriel Rukeyser, and Lorine Niedecker led to their relative neglect by Watten and Silliman despite their avowal of leftist politics.” Further, Williams explains that language poets were influenced by aesthetic developments associated with politically conservative High Modernists such as T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, as well as by the documentary long-form tradition favored by many poets on the political Left. Literary experimentation continues to this day, encompassing a growing array of voices and media formats.

Orchid Tierney in Chapter 18 connects early twentieth-century modernism to the most innovative trends in twenty-first-century poetics while emphasizing the politics of new media formats in her essay on digital poetics. She argues that digital modernism builds on language poets’ experimentalism while being more explicitly political, and considerably more culturally and racially diverse. She says that digital modernism aligns with strategies of the avant-garde: it challenges traditional expectations about what art is and does. It illuminates and interrogates the cultural infrastructures, technological networks, and critical practices that support and enable these judgments. Following Marshall McLuhan, the philosopher and communications theorist who taught generations to recognize that media are not value neutral, but, as he famously quipped, are the message (or, as his book title from 1967 wittily stated, the message), Tierney proposes that digital media poets simultaneously address economic themes including who owns a literary work in a hypertext environment – an issue of copyright – and the related issue of authorship in a medium associated with appropriation and the repurposing of “found” materials. As with most essayists in this companion, Tierney teaches us that the questions digital media poets are grappling with today are simultaneously new and not new, forward-looking and backward-glancing, original and unoriginal. Upending Romantic conceptions of the inspired author as individual genius and the modernist division of cultural productions into racial and class-based “brows” – high, middle, and low – Tierney argues that the emphases on proceduralism and assemblage in digital poetics troubles traditional categorizations of creative expression. In Tierney’s cultural assemblage, we notice how literary history makes for strange political alliances. Here we have Ezra Pound, the right-wing modernist impresario, recast as a precursor to digital poets who explore the political implications of said technologies in relation to contemporary

issues that range from immigration and environmentalism to racial hierarchies and gender categories of identity.

Wanda O'Connor in Chapter 15 offers another example of strange alliances in her essay on innovative women poets from the 1970s and beyond. O'Connor shows that Charles Olson's theory of "field" or "open" form poetics and his composition of what he called "projective verse," developed in the 1940s and published in his epic poem *The Maximus Poems*, which he composed until his death in 1970, was adapted by innovative female poets such as Susan Howe, Rachel Blau DuPlessis, and Kathleen Fraser to claim an archivally rich and yet unbounded documentary situation to account for previously unexplored and unacknowledged female experiences. O'Connor writes, "*Projective Verse* provided women poets with the impetus to move into the 'open field' and to explore such blurring of boundaries on the page. Examples of this practice took shape in the plurality or difference of the line, in collage-based fragments, and in palimpsest and supplementary gestures within the textual-visual body. The shaping of plural forms and contexts often instructed unfixed narratives and encouraged further impulses toward openness."

Poetic form usually refers to material structures such as the line or the graphic display of words on a page and to the established patterns poets use to fit words and syllables into pleasing shapes with memorable lilt. Several contributors to this companion, however, expand the definition of poetic form to refer to the frame, context, situation, or medium in which poetry reaches (or does not reach) potential audiences. In his essay on poems about public art (Chapter 1), Spaide, for example, reminds us that Lazarus wrote her iconic Petrarchan sonnet in 1883 as a fundraiser for the Bartholdi Pedestal Fund and that it was not originally intended to appear at the base of a pedestal. In further, ironic recastings, Spaide notes, "beyond the innumerable poems, novels, and children's books responding to it, you can find Lazarus's sonnet in films by Alfred Hitchcock, Ken Burns, and Gus Van Sant; songs by Irving Berlin, Joan Baez, Lou Reed, Patti Smith, and Public Enemy; and even a first-person-shooter video game, *Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus* (2017). Lazarus never would have guessed that her fundraising sonnet would be quoted on a commemorative silver dollar, issued for the statue's centennial in 1986 – a piece of limited-edition Lazarusiana that sells for upward of twenty dollars today."

In another example of how crucial is context to how poetry is assigned political meanings, J. Peter Moore in Chapter 10 observes that the significance of a single ode by Gwendolyn Brooks – in this case one she was originally commissioned to write for a 1965 centennial commemoration of