
WHAT

IS

A

POET?



EDITED BY
HANK LAZER

WHAT IS A POET?

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*Essays from The Eleventh
Alabama Symposium
on English and
American Literature*

Edited by HANK LAZER

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To Kenneth Burke

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HANK LAZER

WHAT IS A POET?

Hank Lazer

INTRODUCTION

What is poetry? is so nearly the same question with, what is a poet?
that the answer to the one is involved in the solution of the other.

—Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*

The Eleventh Alabama Symposium: What Is a Poet? took place October 18–20, 1984, at The University of Alabama. In late 1982 when I began to plan the symposium, my main intent was to gather together a distinguished group of poets and critics to discuss the nature of poetry. From the outset, I hoped that I would be able to assemble a group of critics and poets who represented at least a fairly wide portion of the spectrum available today for a discussion of contemporary American poetry. I did not want nor hope for a symposium of backslapping, mutual admiration, and easy consensus. I hoped that the differences in aesthetics and writing practice would lead not only to disagreement but also to clarification of the reasons for differently held views of poetry. Also, I was just plain curious to see what would happen when poets and critics *together* took part in a program of this kind. Often, poets scorn the work of critics as overly theoretical, abstract, and out of touch with the practice of writing, while critics bemoan the lack of intellectual rigor or ambition and the absence of serious self-questioning in much contemporary poetry. I had already attended plenty of poetry festivals and literature conferences where one group quite self-satisfyingly describes the failings of the other.

I also had a dim awareness that, once again, American poetry was beginning a period of upheaval and renewed questioning. After all, the well-documented¹ poetic revolt of the late fifties and early sixties had become rather comfortably (and institutionally) entrenched. I had read Robert Pinsky's grumblings in *The Situation of Modern Poetry* (1976) but had dismissed them as the rather predictable complaints of a neo-Winters sensibility, a conservative bemoaning directed at an accomplished American mysticism, which was incompatible with Pinsky's own more discursive ramblings. Then, Charles Altieri's essays, especially "From Experience to Discourse: American Poetry and Poetics in the Seventies" (published in *Contemporary Literature* in 1980), began more seriously to chip away at the habits and assumptions of what had become the dominant poetry of the seventies and eighties. In my own essay in this volume, an essay written a year or so prior to the symposium, I tried to refute Altieri's criticisms. I have since found myself to be in greater and greater agreement with Altieri's fundamental criticisms,² points which he developed at length in *Self and Sensibility in Contemporary American Poetry* (1984).

In addition to creating a topic—"What Is a Poet?"—that would give the speakers at the symposium the freedom to approach such a nebulous subject in whatever manner they deemed appropriate, I also had in mind an earlier effort to ask and answer such a question: Heidegger's "What Are Poets For?" Heidegger's essay, which was first delivered as a lecture to a small group in 1946 commemorating the twentieth anniversary of Rilke's death, prompted me to wonder what the function of our best poets might be in our own "destitute" time. For his own era, Heidegger turned back to Hölderlin's poetry and concluded:

Poets are the mortals who, singing earnestly of the wine-god, sense the trace of the fugitive gods, stay on the gods' tracks, and so trace for their kindred mortals the way toward the turning. . . . To be a poet in a destitute time means: to attend, singing, to the trace of the fugitive gods. This is why the poet in the time of the world's night utters the holy.

It is a necessary part of the poet's nature that, before he can be truly a poet in such an age, the time's destitution must have made the whole being and vocation of the poet a poetic question for him. Hence "poets in a destitute time" must especially gather in poetry the nature of poetry.³

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I hoped that by putting in question the vocation and nature of the poet, the writers gathered for the Alabama symposium might offer their own descriptions and definitions.



The format for the symposium was, to a great extent, one that I inherited. That is, as with the previous ten symposia, the major event would be a series of lectures by the principal speakers. Several speakers—Czesław Miłosz, John Ashbery, John Hollander, Donald Hall, Gary Snyder, Harold Bloom, Robert Bly, and Allen Ginsberg among them—were, for various reasons, unable to attend. Other than the celebrity status (with schedules booked well in advance) of many American poets and critics, one other “problem” began to crop up. Many of the poets I considered either simply did not write essays, or they were quite leery of writing a substantial lecture for presentation and publication. Considering that many of these same poets hold established teaching positions, I found such a distancing from discursive activity to be especially odd.

The nine speakers—Charles Altieri, Charles Bernstein, Kenneth Burke, David Ignatow, Denise Levertov, Marjorie Perloff, Louis Simpson, Gerald Stern, and Helen Vendler—each presented a lecture, and Bernstein, Ignatow, Levertov, Simpson, and Stern each gave a poetry reading (as well as contributing two poems to *On Equal Terms*, a deluxe limited-edition book printed under the supervision of Gabriel Rummonds, cofounder of Plain Wrapper Press and Director of The University of Alabama’s Institute for the Book Arts). The concluding event of the symposium was a two-hour panel discussion, held Saturday, October 20, 1984. All nine speakers participated in the panel discussion, and Gregory Jay (author of *T. S. Eliot and the Poetics of Literary History* and coeditor of *After Strange Texts: The Role of Theory in the Study of Literature*) and I served as moderators. The complete panel transcript is included in this present volume.

In transcribing the panel discussion I have tried to keep my editorial activities to a minimum. Whenever possible, I have opted for a verbatim transcription, while occasionally eliminating repetitious phrases. It has been my intent to retain, as much as was practical, the flavor of actual speech. I hope that the transcript gives some indication of the intensity, anger, impatience, humor, and seriousness of the discussion which took place.

The discussion was an extremely valuable airing of differences and stating of positions, especially since the issues being argued will not go away. Immediately after the discussion, I thought that the general mood was one of exhaustion, mixed with a sense that an opportunity of some sort had been missed. Certain topics, questions, and perspectives remained unexplored. For example, Greg Jay's opening questions about the nature of poetic thinking were, to a great degree, ignored. These questions, I contend, remain both unanswered and of interest. Perhaps the opportunity missed, though, was not the chance to answer a specific question, but the occasion to use this assembled talent *collectively* (to think as a group about issues common to our involvement with poetry). During the discussion, there were attempts to establish such a common base: Helen Vendler's assertion of a genetic similarity between poets and critics, Charles Bernstein's advocacy of the term *writer* (instead of the polarizing terms *poet* and *critic*). But such suggestions were bypassed. Instead, we spent much of our time struggling to draw boundaries between poetic and critical activity, and then arguing against the validity of such boundary lines. And, of course, much of the discussion was devoted to an articulation of differences in tastes and principle.

I would call attention, however, to several issues from the panel discussion, which, in all likelihood, will remain central to arguments about poetry. The first is Helen Vendler's distinction between reviewing and criticism. To ignore this distinction would be to blur the (often hidden) reasons for disagreement. Often the panelists, as with other readers and critics of contemporary poetry, while seeming to argue over more general principles of criticism, were in fact arguing over matters of evaluation and taste, i.e., reviewing. Second, I would direct attention to the exchange between Greg Jay and Louis Simpson over the relationship between language and experience. In part, their disagreement may be seen as generational: a younger generation whose reading habits are more theoretically inclined is much more apt to grant to language itself a formative role in shaping our versions of experience and of our world. Simpson counters with a defense of the primacy of experience over language and of a writing practice which strives to represent (not produce) that primary world. Third is the sporadic but repeated concern in the discussion with poetry's uneasy institu-

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tional accommodations. What effects do English departments, critical theory institutes, M.F.A. programs, and workshops have on our reading and writing habits? (Such questions are taken up quite directly in a supplemental essay to this volume, Donald Hall's "Poetry and Ambition.") What kinds of writing are allowed to be heard (accepted, assigned, awarded, and sponsored), and what approaches are rendered inaudible by our current institutional practices? I predict further inquiry into and serious fighting about such matters. Finally, while the panel seemed to agree that poetry and politics are not divorced, there was considerable disagreement over *how* poetry and political considerations can be most effectively meshed.

While a two-hour panel discussion could not be expected to resolve major differences, I do think that the discussion accomplished what Louis Simpson asserted, in the symposium's opening lecture, had *not* been happening for nearly twenty years in America: a heated exchange of ideas. For a rare time in recent American literary history, a relatively diverse group of poets *and* critics, writers, took part in that exchange.

One particularly painful irony of the panel discussion was that the participant who was nearly overlooked, Kenneth Burke, was the one who by the example of his seventy years of writing could have best assisted us in extracting ourselves from our least productive moments of divisiveness. Burke's entire career rebukes our usual habits of categorizing and partitioning thinking. Charles Bernstein, from what seems to me a Burkean perspective, argues in "Writing and Method":

For what makes poetry poetry and philosophy philosophy is largely a tradition of thinking and writing, a social matrix of publications, professional associations, audience; more, indeed facts of history and social convention than intrinsic necessities of the "medium" or "idea" of either one.⁴

While for my own purposes I would like to think of Burke as a writer who practices a thorough disregard of boundary lines, that is an inaccurate picture of his viewpoint. Instead, Burke argues:

Critical and imaginative works are answers to questions posed by the situation in which they arose. They are not merely answers, they

are *strategic* answers, *stylized* answers. For there is a difference in style or strategy, if one says “yes” in tonalities that imply “thank God” or in tonalities that imply “alas!” So I should propose an initial working distinction between strategies and “situations,” whereby we think of poetry (I here use the term to include any work of critical or imaginative cast) as the adopting of various strategies for the encompassing of situations.⁵

While I would like to seize on Burke’s parenthetical definition as absolute, he also, as in his essay included in this book, draws distinctions between poetic and critical activities. In Burke’s conception, the activities of poet and critic overlap, complement, and complete one another, though I’m still not at all sure that either is *necessary* to the other. The two activities (for Burke) are certainly not the same, but their relationship might still be described as constituting a kind of off-rhyme, with both resembling and differing from each other. At his most conciliatory, Burke concludes:

As poet-plus-critic, one both acts and observes his act. By this faculty of observation, he matures his acts with relation to other people. . . . And we all, as poet-and-critics working together, win somewhat by developing poetic symbols and critical formulation that enable us to size up the important factors of reality (particularly by recourse to the comic critique of social relationships) and to adopt workable attitudes toward them.⁶

I discuss Burke’s work at length in this introduction because he anticipates (and encompasses) so many of the problems and conflicts that were essential to our symposium. His notion of counter-gridlock may, in fact, be an apt metaphor for the variety of approaches taken to poetry at the symposium. In “The Philosophy of Literary Form” (1941), Burke equates “dramatic” with “didactic” and applies such a definition of drama to conversation and argumentation:

Where does the drama get its materials? From the “unending conversation” that is going on at the point in history where we are born. born. Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun

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long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending upon the quality of your ally's assistance. However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, and you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress.⁷

Within this discussion, Burke sees each speaker as departing from some "rock-bottom fact." Burke hastens to point out that such "facts" are, of course, not the special possession of the speakers, but representative stances taken at a given historical moment: "Actually, the very selection of his 'rock-bottom fact' derives its true grounding from the current state of the conversation, and assumes quite a different place in the 'hierarchy of facts' when the locus of discussion has shifted."⁸

Thus, I had expected there to be conflict, but not at the level at which it took place. For example, during the talk by Charles Altieri, two poets in the audience, after cracking a few jokes, got up and left, encouraging their friends and students to do likewise. One said, "Who can understand *this* . . . ?" Charles Bernstein, the writer least known to the audience, and the most experimental of the writers present, was also the focal point for a fair amount of hostility by the audience, and even by certain symposium participants. In the opening lecture, Louis Simpson delivered a very thinly veiled attack on Helen Vendler. While not attacking Vendler by name, Simpson derided two of Vendler's favorites: Wallace Stevens and Amy Clampitt.

At stake in such an exchange of views, as I have become increasingly aware, is power. While Shelley's notion of the poet as "the unacknowledged legislator of the world" may sound to us almost comically self-serving and out of touch with American (or British) political life, the last twenty years in America have seen a proliferation of university writing programs, creative writing grants, well-paying academic positions for poets (and critics), and poetry prizes. When Charles Bernstein defines "official verse culture" (in "The Academy in Peril: William Carlos Williams Meets

the MLA,” a talk delivered at the 1983 MLA convention), both his tone and his definition point us toward some of the sources of conflict at the Alabama symposium:

Let me be specific as to what I mean by “official verse culture”—I am referring to the poetry publishing and reviewing practices of *The New York Times*, *The Nation*, *American Poetry Review*, *New York Review of Books*, *The New Yorker*, *Poetry* (Chicago), *Antaeus*, *Parnassus*, Atheneum Press, all the major trade publishers, the poetry series of almost all of the major university presses (the University of California Press being a significant exception at present). Add to this the ideologically-motivated selection of the vast majority of poets teaching in university writing and literature programs and of poets taught in such programs as well as the interlocking accreditation of these selections through prizes and awards judged by these same individuals. Finally, there are the self-appointed keepers of the gate who actively put forward biased, narrowly-focused and frequently shrill and contentious accounts of American poetry, while claiming, like all disinformation propaganda, to be giving historical or non-partisan views.⁹

Given the radically divergent affinities for poetry present at the Alabama symposium, predictably, antagonisms would arise from deep-seated opinions about what constituted “good,” “interesting,” “major,” “significant,” and “vital” poetry.

One year after the symposium, Helen Vendler offered the following argument about the question of the literary canon’s formation:

. . . canons are not made by governments, anthologists, publishers, editors, or professors, but by writers. The canon, in any language, is composed of the writers that other writers admire, and have admired for generations. The acclamations of governments, the civic pieties of anthologists, the hyperboles of marketing, the devotion of dons, have never kept a writer alive for three or four hundred years. It is because Virgil admired Homer, and Milton Virgil, and Keats Milton, and Stevens Keats that those writers turn up in classrooms and anthologies. And writers admire writers not because of their topics (Blake and Keats thought Milton quite mistaken in his attitudes) but because of their writing. And writers admire writing not because it keeps up some schoolmasterly “standard” but because it is “simple, sensuous, and passionate” (as Milton said)—strenuous,

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imaginative, vivid, new. The canon is always in motion (as Eliot reminded us, and as formalists have always known) because new structures are always being added to it by subsequent writers, thereby reshaping the possibilities of writing and of taste; but the evolving canon is not the creation of critics, but of poets.¹⁰

For the poets, the critics have too much power and influence. For critics such as Vendler, it is ultimately the poets who will determine what is read. And thus no one seems to want to acknowledge his or her own power in the process of judgment and recognition.



Included in this book then are the nine lectures presented at the symposium, some of them revised quite significantly. I have included as well my own thoughts on the relationship between poetry and criticism in "Critical Theory and Contemporary American Poetry," an essay written prior to the symposium. In addition, I have included Donald Hall's "Poetry and Ambition," in part because that essay informs some of the questions which arose in the panel discussion, but also because Hall's essay touches directly on the issue of poetry's relationship to institutional settings.¹¹

I leave it to the readers of this book to describe for themselves the "rock-bottom facts" for each speaker/writer in this book. It is hoped that the reader of this present collection of essays and a panel discussion will grapple and argue with the viewpoints articulated here, and thus each reader's response will further extend this conversation.

NOTES

1. Three examples come to mind: Charles Altieri's *Enlarging the Temple: Ontological Themes in American Poetry of the 1960s*, James E. B. Breslin's *From Modern to Contemporary: American Poetry, 1945–1965*, and Robert Von Hallberg's *American Poetry and Culture: 1945–1980*.

2. See my "Criticism and the Crisis in American Poetry," *The Missouri Review*, Vol. IX, No. 1 (1986), especially pp. 213–15.

3. Martin Heidegger, "What Are Poets For?," *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), p. 94.

4. Charles Bernstein, *Content's Dream: Essays 1975–1984* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1986), p. 217.

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