

TRENDS IN CONTEMPORARY POETRY

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ABSTRACT. The present paper analyses the poetic trends manifested by the 21st century poets. It focuses on the traits of the genre, highlighting the great range of poetic forms manifested nowadays all over the world. The fragmentation of poetic culture and tradition, the division into innumerable subcultures is analysed in the context of digitalization, of heightened online connections established at the level of literary societies and clubs. The works of some acknowledged authors are cited in order to prove the novelty brought forth by poets who are contemporary with us. The paper also raises the issues of the validity and the relevance of contemporary poetry, as well as the struggle for establishing a poetic canon. Digital and technological accessibility are also looked upon as influencing factors in the distribution of poetic verse. Contemporary poetry is greatly influenced and enhanced by the establishment of poetic manifestations, such as competitions, public readings and workshops. Creative writing is analysed in the context of more and more creative writing schools that have produced freelance writers and published authors worldwide, irrespective of country, social or political background. Creative writing takes the process of writing poetry to a next level, and the arguments and counterarguments towards it are minutely addressed in this paper.

KEY WORDS: contemporary poetry, poetic forms, social media poetics, creative writing, poetic canon

Introduction

Poetry has proven to be a prolific genre in the 21st century, perhaps more than at any other time in history. The entire process of writing poetry has taken such impressive lengths that, at first sight, one can remain perplexed. At a physical level, this comes mainly as a result of technological and digital development. Poetry has the advantage of condensation, of vast topics condensed within relatively short word spans. Deep, philosophical ideas ingrained within few words. Poets, unlike writers of prose, can easily present their end product in different settings and on different occasions. Hence, the emergence of poetic societies, poetry clubs and organizations, most of which also have a well-sustained online activity. At a simple search on the Internet, we plunge into a vast web of forums, blogs and poetry sites that host emerging or acknowledged poets. Once accepting the challenge, the rabbit hole takes us deeper, providing a wide range of examples such as: Contemporary Poetics Research Centre, BEPC: British Electronic Poetry Centre, The Poetry

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Library, Writing Industries Network, The Poetry Society, to name just a few. Their activity is not limited to poetry writing only, at least not in the sense that we are accustomed to.

The poet is no longer that figure secluded in a remote Romantic enclosure, torn by inner turmoil. “Poetry is an opportunity to discover other worlds while learning more about ourselves, and discerning new meanings in life. Poets reach out in a language of the heart and soul” (Martinez 2014: 1-2). Solitude and isolation are not the attributes of a successful poet any more. On the contrary, the poet of the 21st century takes part in workshops and poetic gatherings held in appealing landscapes or cityscapes. Contemporary poets, at least at the beginning of their writing endeavour, submit their writing to poetry competitions, have their work reviewed by more experienced writers, and, in general, strive to make themselves as visible as possible.

Acknowledged Names and Poetic Themes

Nowadays poetry explores everything from social coping mechanisms and the turmoil of our contemporary society, to relationships and spiritual quests. The current poetic movement includes names already acknowledged, such as Seamus Haney, Fleur Adcock, Wendell Berry, Joyce Carol Oates, Margaret Atwood, Vikram Seth, Sherman Alexie, Carol Ann Duffy, Billy Collins, Derek Walcott, and Ian Humphreys. They are all poets of diverse cultural backgrounds and their work has been visible in anthologies and digital texts. Ian Humphreys is no stranger when it comes to the common traits of the 21st century poetry. In his writings, punctuation steps back and gives way to lyricism. For instance, in *touch-me-not* he zooms on a very small corner of nature and creates a beautiful sensation out of it, the entire perspective is photographic, narrowing down towards minute details: “This flower/ doesn’t belong/ on the canal/ hiding/ in an airless tunnel/ where no one goes/ before dark/ rooted/ to a thin layer/ of dirt/ head bowed/ butter bloom/ an open mouth/ that faint smell/ of sherbet/ when someone/ passes/ it brushes/ a thigh/ springs back/ against the wall/ careful/ just one touch/ triggers/ a scattering/ of seed/ into the night.”

In another poem, *Bare Branch*, the ancestors are witnesses to the unfolding of life processes and relationships. When the reader expects a deepening into this merging between individual and nature, the 21st century poet reverts things back into the context of technological developments: “She boarded the weekend bus/ to shanghai, found a job dusting iPhones. In spring/ she returned with a husband who worked/ on an assembly line—making buttons/ for Samsung tablets and iPads.”

Sasha Dugdale and Dina Queyras write about mothers and foremothers, and the role of female figures in the endurance of history and myth. “This

little town had an ancient centre, but nowhere to eat. The/ little hotel was shut for repairs a thousand years/ in the completing, and the woman who poked her head from a/ window said: - If you're from here then why don't you stay with your family?/ - My family left./ So, asked the woman, why come here then?" The author "escorts the reader courteously and quietly through displacements, disavowals and the destructive forces of history" (Crowther 2018: 125).

Ten: Poets of the New Generation is a collection comprising the work of ten emergent British poets. This anthology "gives the reader the sensation of moving quickly through a brightly chattering crowd in which observation, reaction and interpretation, along with subject matter both light and dark, doggedly personal and expansively wide-ranging, terse and voluble, mix easily together" (Bidisha 2017: 91-92). The collection opens with the poems of Omikemi Natacha Bryan who tackles the topic of unethical experiments against African-American children. As opposed to her, the Anglo-Indonesian writer, Will Harris "brings sardonic levity. He is wonderfully inventive, with a formal sparseness and a great, flat wit" (Bidisha 2017: 92). The above mentioned anthology is part of a vaster publishing scheme entitled *The Complete Works* meant to bring to the frontline of poetic manifestation, British Asian and Black British poets: "The Complete Works project has changed the literary world measurably, letting in variety not just of race, sex and cultural identity, but also of voice, form, attitude, outlook and experience" (Bidisha 2017: 94).

Another poet, Theophilus Kwek, author of *The First Five Storms*, has a unique prevalence for music and he transfers this into his verse. The image of a storm is interwoven with the speaker's emotional, inner landscape: "The delicate tension between the internal and the external, between one's immediate experience of the world and an eclipsed future, is sustained by the subtle, seamless shifts in perspective and imagery." This sense of continuity and shared wisdom between the human and the natural world is also reflected in *The Weaver*, where "creatures love and, like us, try/ to bind the ones they love", or in *What Follows* in which a deer "on the flint of that eternity/ more alive than in the burnished wood". Through measured and elusive verse, Kwek articulates the proximity of history in tender, personal terms (Wong 2017: 130).

Acknowledged topics are reiterated in mundane settings, far away from the Romantic scenery that we are accustomed to. This tendency towards deromanticization has been a long-lasting process, already announced and manifested in the 20th century: "But the modern poetry that our general reader finds baffling and obscure is a radical departure from the Romantic achievement; it contains features that his 'education' has not prepared him for; neither in sensibility nor in intellect is he ready for a kind of poetry that

does not offer him the familiar poetical objects alongside the familiar poetical truths” (Tate 1940: 3).

The poetry of the 20th century and the poetic currents manifested all along, modernism, the new criticism, have steadily prepared the reader for an estrangement from the poetic objects presented. The reader is no longer instructed on how to decrypt the poetic endeavour; on the contrary, the reader is encouraged to find personal revelations in the poetic message. Poetry is not an end product in itself. It is also a middle agent, a means of self-discovery. As the old saying goes, namely that the translator is a traitor, we can also paraphrase that the reader is also estranging the meaning of poetry from its initial ground.

Certain modern poets offer no inherently poetical objects, and they fail to instruct the reader in the ways he must feel about the objects. All experience, then, becomes potentially the material of poetry—not merely the pretty and the agreeable—and the modern poet makes it possible for us to “respond” to this material in all the ways in which men everywhere may feel and think. On the ground of common sense—a criterion that the reader invokes against the eccentric moderns—the modern poet has a little the better of the argument, for to him poetry is not a special package tied up in pink ribbon: it is one of the ways that we have of knowing the world. And since the world is neither wholly pretty nor wholly easy to understand, poetry becomes a very difficult affair, demanding both in its writing and in its reading all the intellectual power that we have (Tate 1940: 3).

This relationship between poetry and the environment suffered great changes and alterations in recent times. Sarah Nolan points to the term of “ecopoetics” in an attempt to better explain the deeply rooted connection between nature, be it urban nature, and poetry. The human being cannot live and become manifest without an intense connection with the environment. Over the years, the environment has changed drastically, from the engulfing nature to the urban space. The projection of the interior onto the exterior is, nevertheless, as vivid as it used to be with earlier poets: “Ecopoetic theory, in the early 2000s, accounted for poetry that engages with nature, even urban nature, but the majority of my environment was unnatural, and ecopoetics had no way of dealing specifically with the built aspects of the city. (...) much of the poetry of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries lacks traditional nature and arises from entirely urban spaces, and all of which is deeply embedded within physical, textual, and personal space. Given this, it might seem easier to simply toss the term “eco poetics” aside and conjure up something new that better accounts for a broader swath of contemporary poetry and other modes of experimental and lyrical language. But to do so would ignore the sense of environmental significance and formal engagement with space that ecopoetics has contributed to—literary studies

(...) The term uncovers how texts use self-reflexive language and formal experimentation to create a textual space where material and nonmaterial elements of environmentality are uncovered” (Nolan 2017: 129).

The Reconfiguration of Poetic Boundaries

The insertion of the new developments into the creation and spreading of poetic forms and messages has been clearly underlined by critics and essayists altogether. In this age of great velocity, spoken and written words travel the world at incredible speed. Subjective experience reconfigures its boundaries. As readers, we have the opportunity to access the writings of people living on different continents, to experience poetic manifestation in a wide array of forms. This should be regarded as a positive, constructive phenomenon:

Such changes may reflect shifting boundaries of public and private, far and near, due to the volume, mobility, and immediacy of information from the World Wide Web. Not only have digital media freed word from page, but global politics, travel, and communication are reconfiguring the physical and discursive conditions that structure subjectivity. At the same time, the presence of consolidated traditions of women’s, ethnic and gender writing in the U.S. diversify and alter the power dynamic of the contexts in which poets write, challenging the twentieth-century dichotomy between the revolutionary avant-gard majority and minority writers in search of representation in traditional forms. To understand poetry’s purpose as well as the forces shaping poetic imagination, we must develop new conceptions of poetic agency and of the politics of form. (Dewey 2013: 615)

All this process of reinterpretation and rediscovery is further taken on by the expansion of our social culture and digitalization, as Anne Day Dewey points out that “poetic activity takes forms hardly recognizable as poetry and poets and audiences inhabit multiple, trans local, and transnational communities. Although conceptions of the poet as visionary and of lyric as private meditation may never have been more than enabling fictions, contemporary poetic forms seem to stem from poets’ renunciation of or inability to forge private language” (Dewey 2013: 615). If we take into the account the numerous poetic groups and societies that manifest a vivid interest in poetic expression nowadays, we can definitely conclude that poetry is suffering a profound change and that the process of distillation will be more intense. The so-called poetry canon of a generation or of a culture will be more difficult to establish. David Baker points out the intensely exposed nature of the poetic endeavour nowadays: “We live in extremely public times. The narcissism of the media, the omnipresence of advertising and gossip, an almost Victorian titillation at things overseen—we just can’t take our eyes off of everybody else.” Moreover, he underlines the striking tendency of our fellow beings to label and judge people, to relate to otherness in a reluctant manner:

Our quickening publicness is frightening especially as its surface images come popping relentlessly, joylessly, out of the popular media; the reductive nature of the media is greatly to blame for the fear and suspicion with which we typically respond to change or to any perceived foreign or “other” cultural phenomena. Confronted, for example, with an increasingly empowered women’s movement, with a homosexual community demanding acknowledgment and fairness (even survival), with a growing minority population, and so on, our “majority” citizenry often responds with impatient judgment, blame, exclusion, or dismissal—allowing only the surface image projected by a hasty medium to register, hence allowing that image and its human foundation little credibility, little chance to connect. (Baker 2000: 61)

Still, when translated to the realm of poetry, this tendency may become something resourceful. The approach an individual may take towards reality can reach a multiplicity of manifestations. One may say there are as many such expressions as the number of human beings on earth, and, furthermore, given the mind’s perpetual capacity of processing, we reach an infinite web of viewpoints and personal re-creations of the self. In the amorphous mass of possibilities, some are voiced, some are idle. In writing creatively, we explore into our capability of giving form and content to all those limitless possibilities of self-expression:

What disturbs us in one realm may nurture us in another. The impulse to include, document, and monitor our changing cultural phenomena is one of the saving graces in our current poetry. It offers understanding and sympathy, an alternative to the judgments encouraged or inflicted by the popular media; within the ranges of poetry this impulse may lead us out of the narcissistic self-confessions of previous decades, out of the exclusive attitude that the private is the only legitimate locus for art. Compared to the media’s typically reductive nature and the public’s learned response to pass quick judgment, a poem’s desire is more likely to be to name, to include, to praise, to sympathize with—to make room, in this case, for the other. (Baker 2000: 62)

As for the relevance and validity contemporary poetry is granted by critics, the situation is arguable. We may affirm that the only solid recognition contemporary poetry is granted is the one of literary groups, clubs or organizations. In an article entitled “Why Contemporary Poetry is Not Taught in the Academy”, Michael McIrvin outlines the lack of any serious enterprise from the academic environment towards the establishment of a recognized poetic canon:

Contemporary poetry is increasingly not taught in college classrooms. At best, students in non-genre-specific survey courses are offered canned responses to the staid standbys from literature survey textbooks. Although there are valid reasons for the academy’s inherent perception of poetry’s irrelevance, including the

mainstream tendency to solipsistic banality and to the art as careerist vehicle to tenure, the role that poetry has traditionally played as a means to explore the deeper self and the depths of human reality has not been usurped by anything to be. Consequently, it is incumbent upon the teachers of contemporary literature to search the moribund corpus for the few excellent examples of the genre still being written, the work of the few poets and their publishers struggling to revivify the art. (McIrvin 2000: 89-99)

Robert Wilson addresses the issue of contemporary literature in general. Given the complexity of the postmodern times, it is difficulty to establish criteria that can easily categorize poetry, that can make it fall into categories:

One of the essential concerns of visual art, performance, and critical thought is the idea of the “contemporary” or the “new”. We are part of an era that had cast forth great themes, and complex ways of organizing society and culture, while also being challenged by many received ideas. How does one take the measure of one’s work in the zeitgeist of the times? What makes a performance, a play, a piece of music, or an essay contemporary? What does the search for the contemporary or the innovative mean to the arts and to the public today? How is it recognized or understood? Consider your own work, or another artist’s work, in this context. (Wilson 2012: 93)

To every aspect of the human existence there is a perceivable and an unperceivable dimension. The former dimension has form and edges whereas the latter can be acted upon harshly or softly, depending on the individual’s will, state of mind or purpose. Whatever people project in their minds, whatever they think of, design or simply sketch on pieces of paper comes out into the open. The imaginary allows itself to be brought out to the palpable world. It is very difficult to define personal space; if we take things physically, personal space may reach the margins of one’s home, including the objects one uses as part of his/ her belongings, the objects that make up the aesthetic surroundings of the individual. Personal surroundings play an important role in starting the process of writing creatively; the extent to which somebody relates to the physical and temporal space influences his/ her writing. A good writer is able to work with the world around him as with a bank of resources at hand:

More accurate would be to say that innovation comes as response to the human crisis: innovation is the mark of rethinking, trying to break out of the obsessive repetition-compulsion that we see all around us, whether in an individual or a family, or politically (in the conflict between states or groups). You might say that severe forms of oppression rob a people of its right to poetry—and the crisis for poetry, for the aesthetic, is to create a space for poetry again and again. For that, anything less than invention falters. (Wilson 2012: 93)

Creative Writing and the Ratio Between Inspiration and Work

New poetry stirs from the highly digitalized environment we mentioned previously. Hence, the means through which it is produced have changed dramatically:

Social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter serve millions of people who populate digital space with autobiographical avatars and simulacra. Digital selves are curated, edited, and maintained in a perpetual process of digitizing life experience in order to produce an imagined life. The emergence of social media poetics—and, specifically, what I term digital realism—demonstrates the use of the confessional mode in social media. Digital realism gives name to a process of literary production that obscures the lines between life and writing. (Lor 2015: 153)

Writing is also a process of learning since it brings the writer in front of a blank page and it makes one confront the need to renew himself/ herself. Going beyond that barrier (after having set one's mind on a particular subject) is the true challenge of any writer. In dealing with that page, the mind tries to find new manners of expression. Every piece of writing is new through that personal struggle to express oneself differently. The writer wants to surpass all that he had previously written and voice novelty. Whether there should be clearly delineated techniques, used in a conscious manner, willingly, is a matter to be discussed. The ratio between inspiration and work is again one of those delicate issues the process of writing supposes. To which extent writing creatively is inspiration or work or a combination of the two is yet debatable. We write things that attune with books, things from other people's experiences or from our own experience but there are no definite borders between those sources of inspiration. Images and facts cumulate to produce a new outlook. There are many ways of rendering that outlook, many techniques writers have looked for over the ages in order to have more clarity or impact, in order to produce vivid images and thus to have a strong rendering of feelings and thoughts.

Visualization is one of the most important techniques in writing. We live surrounded by things and entities that we can represent visually, therefore writing must bear the height and width of visualization. Specificity of detail is another characteristic a piece of writing should be bearing. One of the first steps a student learns as concerns writing is that s/he should be as specific as possible, unwrapping broad concepts into clear, maneuverable bits. The sharper the specificity is, the better the piece of writing. The concept is tightly connected to that of personalization. Rendering things personally means rendering them originally, hence the importance granted to personalization.

Creative writing, despite being a realm difficult to define, proves to be a resourceful instrument, a precursor to being a published writer. It can be

used successfully as a means of completing the more traditional teaching methods and it ranges in use from kindergarten to achieving a university degree in such an educational subject. MA programs and even PhDs focus on creative writing. These programs at universities worldwide are more and more demanded by people who are interested in improving their writing skills and in freelancing themselves in the vast realm of writing.

One of the key aspects any writer-to-be should assume is drafting. That process faces difficulty as it presupposes a distance from the fresh piece of creative writing. Nevertheless, some assert that writing in itself is the unique process of the moment and nothing can be altered by a subsequent intervention. That is a rather restrictive outlook as it grants value to the intensity of emotion a writer is thought to attain at certain moments in the process of writing. Still, that process should be observed with great objectivity and detachment in order for it to be cleared from unnecessary repetitions.

But if we look at this issue with a rather detached attitude, we can say that it is an outlook to be taken into account. Redrafting presupposes a lot of patience and detachment. It resembles clearing away of everything that surrounds you and focusing on a certain state. It may be compared to a mental and emotional journey in time to the state of that particular piece of writing. The writer isolates himself/ herself from the exterior reality and practically returns to the moment of creation. That is a rather difficult procedure as no two moments are alike.

There are advantages and disadvantages to the process of redrafting. The advantage is that we can obtain a more refined piece of writing. In redrafting we reread what we have written and we make those changes necessary for a refinement of the poem or the short story we have worked upon. Be they minor changes at the level of vocabulary or figures of speech, or rather radical changes that modify the mood or the tone of the writing in its entirety. A writer needs to be in control of this process of going back to the moment of creation, relieving all those moments, the feeling of a piece of writing at that time and the necessary changes. He is like a silversmith detached from the creation he gives life to and objectively makes the necessary changes.

Among the disadvantages we could number the time length between the two moments of creation, all the perturbing elements the writer may come across to interfere in his/ her work. Another disadvantage would be the inability of the writer to explore too much into the range of possibilities certain elements in the poem allow for and therefore drift away from the original mood of the writing itself.

In redrafting, writers who seek success and lasting recognition among the readers should overview the elements of vocabulary, those tiny elements that need to be changed in order to give more tightness to the poem or the short story. Synonyms, a change in a certain image, it being made clearer, the

adding of a detail, a different hue like a brush stroke, all may add to a new and much better bit of writing. Redrafting necessitates a lot of patience and willingness, time spent to think what works best, weighing possibilities, living things over again. It is not a painful process, but it is surely perturbing, since it makes the writer go through elements of personal experience or imagined processes which require a great amount of energy and willingness.

Another problem a writer may encounter, especially a poet, is that of completeness. Is there a literary work ever complete, finished? When is it complete? To poetry especially, length is of no importance, but the power of suggestion that the words bear matters the most. Ideas can be changed or expressed differently and there is really a great extent to which writing can go in terms of changing one word with another one, one idea with a more appropriate one. Length is determined by the connections one term has with the other or the multiplicity of extra ideas it can line up. The degree of ornamentation to which an idea can get is variable, depending on the writer's availability to open up to the exterior. Ideas can take as many shapes as possible, practically an infinity. Creativity goes beyond one's power of understanding that is beyond reason; it goes beyond somebody's patterned responses and gives the spirit the opportunity to play freely.

We can assume there are only two instances of creation: one derived from the exterior, an exterior stimulus taken as source and used as a starting point for the development of a creative line; and one connected to a realm where nothing is predefined; nothing is connected with the already completed forms of the exterior; there is nothing predetermined in creating something with one's imagination; elements connect in a series wherein they harmonize. In writing, one should try to set images in a balance, to introduce elements gradually in a logical chain of images be them olfactory, auditory or especially visual.

The creative idea comes from the unspoken world; there is no distinguished line between ideas at the level of the unspoken. They stay together, light colour changing into dark colour and vice versa. Nuances change from dark to light in a process of fading and burning again. It could be said that, in writing, poets are like painters before a wooden placard. Some want to paint an icon, others a landscape, others an abstract conglomerate of colours. All of them start by looking at the empty board just like writers look at the blank piece of paper. And they start putting a little bit here, another on the other edge, and so on and so forth. The image and the view are created by looking at the piece of work with patience and relaxation. To some writers, it is a difficult process that results paradoxically in contentment of having created an original piece of writing. This cyclic pattern strengthens the writer, in whom there is a sense or rather a thirst for novelty.

Contrary as it may seem, discipline is a must when coming to writing. It goes altogether with having a strong morale, as writers should be ready to accept refusal and criticism a great deal. Discipline has a great influence on both the process of writing and on its result. It influences writing because it should be a style of being while writing. But discipline is really difficult to follow and instill. It is like a programme that somebody needs to set in order to obtain full capability of writing. It means setting a certain pattern in writing, setting ideas in a certain order, trying to follow this order as its aesthetical elements are concerned. Nevertheless, there are drawbacks as well, the following of a certain order in writing can make the piece of writing deficient in terms of spontaneity and novelty. It may make it lack the freshness the sudden outburst of imagination may bring.

Discipline may interfere in the process of imagination but, if exerted consciously, it brings positive effect in the long run, in the process of creating a personal style. One's writing style is set gradually, through ups and downs, moments of prolific imagination and moments of emptiness. They all lead to the creation of a writer's portfolio and help him/ her take steps further towards becoming a freelance writer. Thus, we may say that the profile of poetry in the 21st century has changed dramatically, if we were to compare it to the poetic discourse and techniques of the previous centuries. The production of poetry nowadays is filtered by poetry clubs that inherently boost hierarchies which would perhaps generate a better distillation of poetry.

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