

MATT TURNER

LATE STYLE IN AMERICAN POETRY

The Pritzker Prize-winner Wang Shu has described his practice as “amateur,” has named his firm Amateur, and has said of his contemporaries, “they have forgotten history, common peoples’ feeling about lives.” Like an amateur, he is willing to work with most anyone, but ready to pack up and go home if necessary.

In an interview, Aaron Kunin was asked about the role of the poet, and replied that there were two paths available: the prolific, process-oriented approach, not too concerned with overall quality, and the radical approach, in which sometimes impossible problems are solved. His exemplars were Raúl Ruiz, the sometimes-bad filmmaker, and Gins-Arakawa, the poet-architects.

Generalizations about American poetry: considering that my generalizations would be based primarily on my sense of things, and not necessarily those of those who don’t read poetry, it seems best to use empirical evidence or data, aspiring to an *Atlas and/or Grammar of American Poetry*.

n+1 published an article, “MFA vs NYC,” which generated a number of repasts. The author, Chad Harbach, claimed that not only two distinct sensibilities were at work, but two distinct markets existed, in which urbane, non-academic, authors and audience were pitted against prissier, coddled, authors and audience. One audience was larger than the other, if at times lamentably more commercial.

Safe haven economics: “No one with ‘literary’ aspirations will expect to earn a living by publishing books; the glory days when publishers still waffled between patronage and commerce will be much lamented. The lit-lovers who used to become editors and agents will direct MFA programs instead; the book industry will become as rational—that is, as single-mindedly devoted to profit—as every other capitalist industry.”

Unexpectedly, a number of replies were written, most memorably Joyelle McSweeney’s “Lay off the Motherf\$%ing MFA Students,” which defends the MFA track for giving (“coddled”) students time to write, and for what she sees as actively resisting the kind of market efficiency implicitly championed in Harbach’s defense of non-academic writers.

She also defends the “Artist” over and above these distinctions. She also ignores the economics of the original article.

The original article, McSweeney’s reply, and a number of other replies all have New York and the MFA system in common. None engage with international practices, in excess of their (NYC’s, or MFA’s) professionalism or Artistry. All assume to understand what American literature is in the broad sense of the term (one city versus a gazillion MFA programs), and so understand the logic behind the scenes (i.e.: biz and entertainment). Furthermore, there is a sense of myopia regarding the literary function: writing for the masses, the high-rent payers, or the Artists.

More recently, there was an opinion piece in the *Washington Post*, “Is Poetry Dead?” The article was predictable in its complaints about a specifically un-international poetry (crowds too small, writers too many, etc.), but ended lamenting, curiously, that the revolutionary impulse in (American) poetry had disappeared. A revolution, overthrowing the existing order to reinstate the old.

In Ang Li’s movie *Lust, Caution*, a group of radical students, displaced to Hong Kong from the Mainland by the Japanese invasion, extend their political literary ambitions to assassinating a Chinese “traitor.”

Equally predictable, there were plenty of online replies. The one that stood out to me most was Emily Temple’s “10 Reasons Poetry’s Not Dead,” which gave capsule reviews to ten recently published poetry books. The reviews tended to focus on theme, and the (authorial) individual as one who feels his or her way through basic problems of their identity. Each book is a reason (there are presumably thousands more such reasons). So much for revolution; it’s unnecessary.

(Other reviews did tend to give more attention to form in poetry, if almost always insipidly adjectivally described - nothing new there, except that the formal features, i.e.: “humanly linked” line breaks, were thought to inspire better psychological states in the readers).

“...has a mission to redefine the terms of accessibility by publishing challenging writing distinguished by idiosyncrasy and intelligence rather than by allegiance with camps, schools, or cliques.”

“...seeks to publish the best in traditional and nontraditional genres... Both distinguished and emerging artists are encouraged to submit.”

Xi Chuan: “‘Late style’ literature is itself unassailable, containing an irreplaceable beauty, sensuousness, mournfulness, decadence, even incisiveness, and in some cases added learnedness... [not] only sentimental, it’s also proud and self-satisfied.” The absentee landlord also moves to the city, and can have his country connections and remote income while enjoying the urban shopping and stimuli.

Xi Chuan: “Literature is not only a matter of style, it is also a matter of nuanced thought, profound existence, and layered history...” Describing Eileen Chang’s readership: “Many people fuse her ‘late sensibility’ and her ‘petit bourgeois’ or ‘yuppie sensibility,’” which are signs of absentee or, at best, managerial landlord culture.

For the mode of address// equal to the war// was silence, but we went on// celebrating
doubleness.// For the city was polluted// with light, and the world,// warming.// For I was
a fraud// in a field of poppies.

- Ben Lerner, from “Dedication”

For years I have been here without a clear map./ That hopes should dim as days go on
above is/ natural I suppose, what do I know?// I am dressed like one of them./ The thick
walls quake but stay soundproof./ I fear my fists vestigial.

- Ish Klein, from “No Soldier Story”

The irony in Creeley’s work, especially his earlier work, is that for all its “apolitical-ness,” its form rests on its syllables. His form, his syllables, are utterances on the page. That is, utterances made by an individual, an individuating subject using form over and above the form itself: thought, existence, and history.

“Dedication” is faux-philosophical confession where the author uses form as an extension of that process (coming across as tongue-in-cheek, reinforced by using double-spaced verses and enjambment for “seriousness”). “No Soldier Story” fuses dreamy sentimentality with extraneous vocabulary to evocative effect (explicitly, “soldiers” or absence thereof as the broad topic, using lines sometimes enjambed, sometimes end-stopped), a poem resting on its idiosyncratic perception. Both examples are “beyond allegiances” and take from, or consolidate, “the best in traditional or nontraditional genres.”

Creeley, from *The Island*: “He was hungry for pleasure of an uninvolved intimacy, but could any be that. And what was another man to him, at last. A fear he carried, a threat, a judgement, a confusion, feeling too often he could not himself make the measure implied, lacked the vocabulary even, had no words with which to make evident his own manhood, if words might accomplish that. He wanted a friend, of all things, another person simply to listen, to talk to, such a small fact.”

The grid system in Manhattan is a mundane city plan, yet it is both efficient and exciting. The plan of Beijing, at least in its pre-modern versions, is extremely interesting (built to correspond to cosmic orders) but designed to oppress (neighborhoods according to ethnic allegiances, or occupations) - despite its low-rises and high density. Both are expensive cities, driven by speculation.

The subject as iteration of form: it always seems to cost, if not money then time, and, as we all know, time is money. Hold poets to their occupations and income: let there be more than a poor people’s rhetoric: there are thousands of tax returns, the data, to read: the individual sense and history, the individual’s time.

None engage with international practices: all assume to understand what American poetry is in the broad sense of the term: there’s a sense of myopia regarding the function of whatever it is they are talking about: writing for the masses, the high-rent payers, or the Artists.

Late to whom? A: The form belated by the individual.

The sometimes-sentimental poet Lin Huiyin, aunt of Maya Lin, married Liang Sicheng, Chinese representative on the design and construction of the UN headquarters in New York City, architect of the Monument to the People's Heroes, Communist Party member and urban theorist of the "new," post-Liberation, Beijing (unrealized) where a new administrative zone would be built west of the city, where the Japanese had previously worked, and the rest of the city would remain a political and cultural center. Lin Huiyin would assist Liang Sicheng in his efforts to preserve the old city, and document fading evidence of uniquely "Chinese" architectural grammar. Often they worked together in the provinces, documenting and/or preserving Buddhist temples.

Generalizations about American poetry: these guys really need to travel more! There are so many audiences and potential audiences (most of them broke) that "they have forgotten history, common peoples' feeling about lives."

A: The amateur.