The Monkey & the Wrench

Essays into Contemporary Poetics

Mary Biddinger and John Gallaher, editors

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Nick Sturm, Associate Editor

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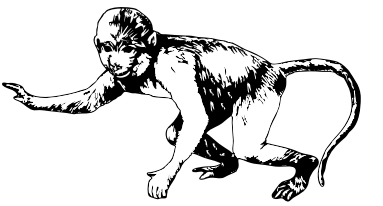

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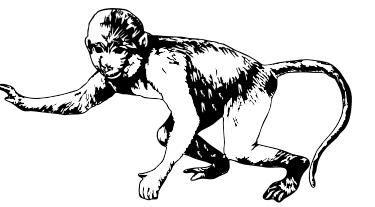
Introduction
Of Monkeys and Wrenches

Mary Biddinger and John Gallaher



Coming up with a title for this collection caused us great consternation. Monkey see, monkey do. Throw a monkey wrench in the works. Monkey mind. Don't monkey with it. Hundredth monkey effect. Infinite monkey theorem. No more monkeys jumping on the bed. A barrel full of monkeys, etc. And then what happens?

There's a long history of monkey metaphors, as well as wrench metaphors, so as soon as our Associate Editor, Nick Sturm, suggested "The Monkey and the Wrench," we leapt at it. It is a fine way to encapsulate our thinking behind putting this collection together, that there are many ways into contemporary poetry and poetics, and that we wanted to provide a forum for some writers to tinker with it.

We wanted a book that might prove as useful to readers of poetry as it would be to poets, and, as well, as interesting for students as it would be to general readers. We share the feeling about poetry that we're all in this together as readers, writers, critics, students, and teachers. We're all of the above in the face of art. And to deny any of these roles is to deny a fundamental way that art works upon and with us. The essays in this volume, then, are not meant to stake out a territory or to advance

a singular aesthetic position. Nor do we see this volume as definitive. These are open questions, beginnings or continuances of conversations around and in contemporary poetry, not manifestos or final words. We saw this as our goal.

We chose these authors (with a few exceptions, which we'll get to in a bit) without knowing what they were going to take as the specific subjects of their essays. We wanted to know what they were interested in, to let the contents lead the collection. Eclecticism was our hope, and we've been rewarded. Give enough monkeys a wrench, as the saying goes that we just made up. The wrench—both the way to fix something and the way one might throw it into the works. The monkey—both James Tate's "Teaching the Ape to Write Poems" and Thomas Lux's "Helping the Monkey Cross the River." We're all in this together, helping the monkey along.

If we're doing it right, we inhabit art as a part of the encounter, to paraphrase one of our teachers, Wayne Dodd, who illustrated, through his presence with a text, how it's not reading we're doing, but living into. Texts are experiences, and this is serious stuff, worth taking seriously, which also includes an open field for the antic. *Attend,* is what art calls out to us. What, if anything, art owes us, is another thing. Sometimes in this encounter it's enough to point, and sometimes it's imperative to point out.

Beware monkeys with wrenches. You never know what they'll do. And so what has been done here?

The collection opens with a bit of context. By historically unraveling poetry's relationship with the reading public, Robert Archambeau, in "The Discursive Situation of Poetry," deconstructs the contemporary argument that American poetry is out of touch with its audience, and reconceptualizes the issue in the face of larger and farther-reaching trends. From that moment of history, we move to "The Moves: Common Maneuvers in Contemporary Poetry," where Elisa Gabbert revisits a topic that was popular on the internet last year. Gabbert, along with Mike Young, investigated some of the common compositional practices and ticks of twenty-first century American poetry on the website HTML GIANT. We asked her to work part of it up for this volume, and we were pleased that she sent it to us.

Just as important as the common moves in poetry are the less common ones. Michael Dumanis's essay, "An Aesthetics of Accumulation: On the Contemporary Litany" discusses the popularity of litany in contemporary poetry, highlighting litany's sonic qualities as well as how it establishes a unified framework on which even a poem consisting of fragmentary elements can be built. The investigation of less common moves in contemporary poetry continues as Stephen Burt's "Cornucopia, or, Contemporary American Rhyme" takes up the topic of rhyme. Burt examines the technical and aesthetic principles of rhyme in English over the centuries, and then focuses on its use by contemporary American poets.

Suspicious of the sacredness of what is "original," Benjamin Paloff, in "I Am One of an Infinite Number of Monkeys Named Shakespeare, or; Why I Don't Own this Language," advocates for a continual rethinking and subversive reimagining of meaning and completeness in poetry, arguing that all poetry is a kind of translation, a transformation of thought, a blasphemous and necessary risk. Staying in this realm a moment longer, in "Persona and the Mystical Poem," Elizabeth Robinson explores the mystical poem, defining "mystical" information not necessarily as religious or divine experience, but as that which defies conventional logic. Robinson engages the notion of speaker and persona in this paper, and cites the work of numerous poets, including Jean Grosjean (Keith Waldrop, tran.) and Jack Spicer.

In the next essay, "A Wilderness of Monkeys," the second piece to mention monkeys in the title, and thereby making us feel some sort of monkey title was in order, David Kirby addresses the power of indistinctness, and invokes a variety of art forms and artists, from Shakespeare to Johnny Cash. Kirby argues that a lack of concrete imagery in art is just as, if not more, gripping than continual direct reference to meaning and intention.

At the AWP convention in Denver, we attended a panel titled "Hybrid Aesthetics and its Discontents," which brought several criticisms of the anthology *American Hybrid* together. As *American Hybrid* was both highly praised and highly criticized, and as Cole Swensen, one of the editors, talked about it as a way to start a conversation, we contacted the panel organizer, Michael Theune, about including it in this volume. After

talking with the other panelists, Arielle Greenberg, Craig Santos Perez, Megan Volpert, and Mark Wallace, Theune sent it to us. Since this was now a fully involved conversation, we thought it would be a good idea to contact Cole Swensen for a response, and she generously replied with her "Response to Hybrid Aesthetics and its Discontents."

We felt it was fitting for us to have this symposium and response from Cole Swensen in this, our first volume, because it illustrates our vision in putting this collection together, which is that we're not looking for essays that agree with each other (or with us), but essays that are investigating poetry and the situation of poetry as something important, and with something at stake. We tried to get some of that feeling in the title, by having "Essays into Contemporary Poetics" as our subtitle. That "into" was important to us. It's not *in*, it's *into*. Anyway, those were the sorts of things we were thinking about.

In a fitting move, we saved "Goodbye, Goodbye, Goodbye: Notes on the Ends of Poems" by Joy Katz for the end. In it, Katz examines the musical and traditional roots of repetition, while suggesting various alternative poetic closure techniques available to contemporary poets.

Concluding with really concluding, we look forward to the future conversations that these essays will certainly be a part of, as well as what might happen next in this series. The doctor said, as we all know, "No more monkeys jumping on the bed." But doctors don't know *everything*.

We'd like to thank Thomas Bacher, Amy Freels, and Carol Slatter at the University of Akron Press for their tremendous support for this project. We also wish to thank our Akron Series in Contemporary Poetics editorial board for helping us to conceptualize this project: Maxine Chernoff, Martha Collins, Kevin Prufer, Alissa Valles, and G. C. Waldrep.

Special thanks to Associate Editor of the Akron Series in Contemporary Poetics Nick Sturm, and to the band of talented Assistant Editors for this project: Michelle Skupski Bissell, Susan Grimm, Michael Krutel, Eric Morris, and Samuel Snodgrass. We'd also like to thank Curt Brown, Alexis Pope, and Jay Robinson for their editorial contributions to this project.

This monkey, as they say, has gone to heaven.

The Discursive Situation of Poetry

Robert Archambeau

"Why *do* poets continue to write? Why keep playing if it's such a mug's game? Some, no doubt, simply fail to understand the situation."
—SVEN BIRKERTS

The important point to notice, though, is this:
  Each poet knew for whom he had to write,
Because their life was still the same as his.
  As long as art remains a parasite
  On any class of persons it's alright;
The only thing it must be is attendant,
The only thing it mustn't, independent.
—W. H. AUDEN

Statistics confirm what many have long suspected: poetry is being read by an ever-smaller slice of the American reading public. Poets and critics who have intuited this have blamed many things, but for the most part they have blamed the rise of MFA programs in creative writing. While they have made various recommendations on how to remedy the situation, these remedies are destined for failure or, at best, for very limited success, because the rise of MFA programs is merely a symptom of much larger and farther-reaching trends. These trends are unlikely to be reversed by the intervention of a few poets, critics, and arts-administrators. I'm not sure this is a bad thing. Or, in any event, I'm not sure it is worse than what a reversal of the decline in readership would entail. Let me explain.

Decades of Complaint

While we don't have many instruments for measuring the place of poetry in American life, all our instruments agree: poetry has been dropping precipitously in popularity for some time. In 1992, the National Endowment for the Arts conducted a survey that concluded only 17.1% of those who read books had read any poetry in the previous year. A similar N.E.A. survey published in 2002 found that the figure had declined to 12.1%. The N.E.A. numbers for 2008 were grimmer still: only 8.3% of book readers had read any poetry in the survey period (Bain). The portion of readers who read any poetry at all has, it seems, been cut in half over sixteen years. Poetry boosters can't help but be distressed by the trend.

Poets and poetry lovers have somewhat less faith in statistics and rather more faith in intuition and personal observation than the population at large. They've intuited this state of affairs for more than two decades, beginning long before the statistical trend became clear in all its stark, numerical reality. As far back as 1983, Donald Hall sounded a warning note in his essay "Poetry and Ambition." Although he did not blame the rise of the graduate creative writing programs for the loss of connection with an audience, he did feel that MFA programs created certain formal similarity among poems. The programs produced "McPoets," writing "McPoems" that were brief, interchangeable, and unambitious. His solution, delivered with tongue firmly in cheek, was to abolish MFA programs entirely. "What a ringing slogan for a new Cato," wrote Hall, "*Iowa delenda est!*" (Hall). Five years later Joseph Epstein picked up Hall's standard, and carried it further. In the incendiary essay "Who Killed Poetry?" Epstein argued that the rise of writing poems led not only to diminishments of ambition and quality—it furthered the decline of poetry's audience. The popular audience for poetry may have shrunk by the 1950s, argued Epstein, but at least the poets of midcentury were revered, and engaged with the larger intellectual world. By the late 1980s, though, poetry existed in "a vacuum." And what was the nature of this vacuum? "I should say that it consists of this," wrote Epstein, "it is scarcely read." Indeed, he continues,

> Contemporary poetry is no longer a part of the regular intellectual diet. People of general intellectual interests who feel that they ought to read or at least know about works on modern society or recent history or novels that attempt to convey something about the way we live now, no longer feel the same compunction about contemporary poetry. . . . It begins to seem, in fact, a sideline activity, a little as chiropractic or acupuncture is to mainstream medicine—odd, strange, but with a small cult of followers who swear by it. (Epstein)

The principle culprit in the sidelining of poetry was, for Epstein, the credentialing and employment of poets in graduate writing programs. "Whereas one tended to think of the modern poet as an artist," argued Epstein, "one tends to think of the contemporary poet as a professional," and, "like a true professional, he is insulated within the world of his fellow-professionals" (Epstein). The poet, instead of responding to the audience-driven world of the book market, responds only to his peers, *with the effect that the audience simply melts away*.

Après Epstein, *le déluge*. The 1990s saw a phalanx of poets and critics complaining about the decline of poetry's audience, and linking this decline to the rise of MFA programs. Dana Gioia fired the loudest shot in *Can Poetry Matter?* (published as an article in *The Atlantic* in 1991, republished in book form a year later). "American poetry now belongs to a subculture," said Gioia, "no longer part of the mainstream of intellectual life, it has become the specialized occupation of a relatively small and isolated group" (1). While he allows that they have done so "unwittingly," it is "the explosion of academic writing programs" that is to blame for this sad state of affairs, as far as Gioia is concerned (2). Gioia was by no means alone in this opinion. Vernon Shetley's 1993 study *After the Death of Poetry: Poet and Audience in Contemporary America* tells us that poetry has "lost the attention not merely of common readers but of intellectuals" (3)—and that creative writing programs have contributed to this loss by cultivating "a disturbing complacency" and by a "narrowing of the scope" of poetry (19). Bruce Bawer introduces his 1995 book of criticism, *Prophets and Professors,* by lamenting the professionalizing of poetry. He tells us that "those who read poetry—which, in our society, basically means poets" shy away from being too critical of the art, since "they conside[r] poetry so ailing and marginal a

genre that criticism was . . . like kicking an invalid" (8). In the same year, Thomas Disch claimed in *The Castle of Indolence* that "for most readers . . . contemporary poetry might as well not exist." The reason, he says, is

> . . . that the workshops, which have a monopoly on the training of poets, encourage indolence, incompetence, smugness, and—most perniciously—that sense of victimization and special entitlement that poets now come to share with other artists who depend on government or institutional patronage to sustain their art, pay their salaries, and provide for their vacations. (5)

Blaming writing programs for the isolation of poetry extended beyond the fairly conservative literary preserves inhabited by the likes of Bawer, Disch, and Epstein. Charles Bernstein's 1995 essay "Warning—Poetry Area: Publics Under Construction," argues "it is bad for poetry, and for poets, to be nourished so disproportionately" by universities, adding that "the sort of poetry I care for has its natural habitat in the streets and offices and malls" (Bernstein).

By 1999, the chorus had grown so loud that Christopher Beach claimed we were "discussing the death of poetry to death" (19). Not that this stopped anyone. In 2006, Poetry Foundation President John Barr caused a stir with "American Poetry in the New Century," an article in *Poetry* magazine in which he noted poetry's "striking absence from the public dialogues of our day," as a sign that we have a reading public "in whose mind poetry is missing and unmissed." The problem, he asserts, stems from the writing programs. These produce poets who "write for one another," producing "a poetry that is neither robust, resonant, nor . . . entertaining." It cannot exist without "academic subsidies" and fails in the market, unable to sell in "commercial quantities" (Barr). While Barr surveys the terrain from the heights of the Poetry Foundation offices above Chicago, more recently the poet Daniel Nester has come to similar conclusions (albeit without the invocation of the values of the marketplace) from the depths of New York's poetry scene. Nester has characterized that scene as the product of the writing programs. Looking around at poetry events, he says he'd see university cliques such as the "Group of People Who Went to Iowa" and those starting "Teaching Jobs Out West." The scene was isolated from a larger engagement with society, with "a lack of connection to the reader"

and readings attended only by "other aspiring poets" (Nester 2009). "It's an unsustainable system," he said when asked by an interviewer about his article. "Even the most niche of niche art forms has an audience. Not so with contemporary poetry" (Nester 2010).

As even this brief and incomplete survey of writers makes clear, American poets have noted the decline of the audience for poetry, and found it troubling. But when decriers of the decline make MFA programs their whipping boy they misunderstand the role such programs play in the distancing of poet from audience. In fact, poetry's decline of popularity predates the rise of writing programs, and such programs are properly seen as the latest episode in a larger and long-enduring drama, a drama that began in the nineteenth century.

Bohemia Misunderstood

Both Dana Gioia and Joseph Epstein contrast the contemporary situation with what they imagine to be better times for poets: for Gioia, the golden age took place in the 1940s, while for Epstein it took place a decade later.

What is most immediately striking about Gioia's imagined halcyon days for poetry is the strange combination of market-driven values and the idea of bohemia. The whole apparatus of poetry in the 1940s was, in Gioia's view, based on meeting consumer demand. In the 1940s, says Gioia, poets wrote with the idea of reaching a general readership, and "a poem that didn't command the reader's attention wasn't considered much of a poem." Editors of poetry journals looked to the market when determining their choices, not picking poems that met their own particular aesthetic standards, but choosing "verse that they felt would appeal to their particular audiences" (7). The problem since the professionalization of poetry has, for Gioia, been that "a poetry industry has been created to serve the interests of the producers and not the consumers" (10). Even critical judgment was bent to this end, as "the reviewers of fifty years ago knew that their primary loyalty must lie not with their fellow poets . . . but with the reader" (16). Such conditions continued only so long as poets remained outside of an organized profession, and a preponderance of them "centered their lives in urban bohemias" (12).

Gioia's idea of a market-driven bohemia is, to put it mildly, singular. One can find nothing like it in the annals of the sociology of bohemian life and art. The standard view is that bohemia emerges in response to the marginalization of artists, poets, and other creative producers. Cesar Graña's classic study *Bohemian vs. Bourgeois*, for example, finds the origin of bohemia in the economic dislocations following the destruction of the aristocracy in the French Revolution. These dislocations led to a migration into urban centers of a "large marginal population" of educated people formerly connected to, or dependent on the aristocracy. Here they worked in opposition to, or at best on the fringes of, the market-driven world of the bourgeoisie (39). Albert Parry argues in *Garrets and Pretenders* that bohemia can only exist when there is an overproduction of certain kinds of skills and talents in relation to market demand for those skills. Pierre Bourdieu has famously defined the world of artistic production, especially as it involves poetry or occurs under bohemian conditions, as "the economic world reversed" (29). "The literary or artistic field," says Bourdieu, "is at all times the site of a struggle between the two principles of hierarchization: the heteronomous principle, favorable to those who dominate the field economically (e.g. 'bourgeois art') and the autonomous principle (e.g. 'art for art's sake')" (41). The heteronomous principle—that art should serve a force outside itself, such as the market—is certainly the force Gioia saw at work prior to the rise of writing programs. But the heteronomous principle is not the dominant force at work in the poetic and bohemian worlds. In such conditions, says Bourdieu, "the economy of practices is based, as in a generalized game of 'loser wins,' on a systematic inversion of all ordinary economies" including that of the market, because "it excludes the pursuit of profit and does not guarantee any sort of correspondence between investments and monetary gains" (39).

Validation for the poet, under bohemian conditions, cannot come in any great measure from the support of the market. Indeed, as Parry and Graña point out, bohemia comes into existence because there is too much literary and artistic talent for the market to absorb. In the absence of market support, poets do not seek to command the attention of a large readership for a sense of their worth. Rather, they start to seek

validation from one another, and from a literary community separate from the broad, commercially profitable marketplace of readers. As the sociologist Ephraim Mizruchi puts it, the establishment of bohemia depends upon conditions where "status opportunities contract or organizations fail to expand in time to absorb" artistic producers (39). Under such conditions, artistic producers such as poets worked "to establish and monitor what they alone determined to be the highest standards of artistic output" (15). That is, artistic producers in bohemia start to set their own standards for what counts as good or meaningful work.

Gioia's notion that bohemia represented a market-driven world for poets is deeply at odds with the sociological consensus. In point of fact, bohemia represented a stage in literary development quite close to that which we have come to see in the (admittedly less colorful) world of MFA professionalization: in both cases, poetic value is determined by a community of poets and critics, not by a market. One could follow Mizruchi and argue that the development of writing programs is little more than organizations finally expanding to absorb the artistic producers they could not absorb during the time of literary bohemia. The absorption involved little change in the notion of the validating principle of poetry. In both conditions it remained a matter of autonomy, or poets deciding for themselves what was of value, and ignoring the market forces Gioia imagines were dominant in what he takes to have been happier times.

Like Gioia, Joseph Epstein laments the failure of contemporary poetry to be governed by market forces. "Sometimes it seems as if there isn't a poem written in this nation," he writes, "that isn't subsidized or underwritten by a grant either from a foundation or the government or a teaching salary or a fellowship of one kind or another" (Epstein). Unlike Gioia, he is too aware of the conditions and values of the pre-professionalized literary era he valorizes to claim that this was an era in which poets were broadly popular. Praising the modernists writing in the 1950s, Epstein tells us:

> They published their work in magazines read only by hundreds; their names were not known by most members of the educated classes; their following, such as it was, had a cultish character. But beyond this nothing else seems comparable [to the world of the writing programs]. Propel-

> ling the modernist poets was a vision, and among some of them a program—a belief that the nature of life had changed fundamentally and that artists now had to change accordingly. . . . New, too, was their attitude toward the reader, whom they, perhaps first among any writers in history, chose in a radical way to disregard. They weren't out to *épater*. If what they wrote was uncompromisingly difficult, they did not see this as their problem. They wrote as they wrote. . . . Somehow, through the quality of their writing, the authority of the sacrifices they made for their art, the aura of adult seriousness conveyed in both work and life, the modernist poets won through.

The "somehow" is, one fears, a little desperate. Epstein dearly wants the poetry of the 1950s to have been central to the general culture of the time, but he is too well-informed and intellectually honest to omit mention of the evidence to the contrary. Unfortunately, he is not able to prevent himself from simply dismissing it with a wave of the hand.

Should we wish to provide evidence for the centrality of poetry to national culture in the 1950s, filling in the virtually blank space where Epstein gives us a vague "somehow" and an even vaguer "won through," we would be a bit hard up. The only truly dramatic piece of evidence, one oft-cited by critics and journalists, would be T. S. Eliot's appearance before several thousand people in Minnesota. This event, prominently misrepresented as a poetry reading in a baseball stadium in Peter Ackroyd's biography of Eliot, was in fact a lecture held in the rather smaller confines of a university basketball arena. Few records of the event are available, but those we have tend to deflate any sense that the event represented anything like a massive popular interest in poetry in the 1950s. Consider the testimony of Theresa Enroth, an audience member for Eliot's lecture, writing to the *New York Times* in 1995 to disabuse readers of some inaccuracies in the paper's representation of the event:

> When Eliot appeared at the University of Minnesota in 1956, his performance had no similarity to what is generally meant by "poetry reading." He read his essay called "The Frontiers of Criticism." That the poet drew a big crowd probably had something to do with his having received the 1948 Nobel Prize in Literature.

For a great many readers at that time, his voice defined the disillusionment and angst of the midcentury. In addition, Eliot's poetry and criticism