LAUREATES AND HERETICS

SIX CAREERS IN AMERICAN POETRY

Yvor Winters
Robert Pinsky
James McMichael
Robert Hass
John Matthias
John Peck

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University of Notre Dame Press
Notre Dame, Indiana

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Introduction

Laureates and Heretics of the American Poetic Field

Gertrude Stein, in her essay “Composition as Explanation,” has said almost everything that I want to say in this book:

No one is ahead of his time, it is only that the particular variety of creating his time is the one that his contemporaries who also are creating their own time refuse to accept.

The things refused are only important if unexpectedly somebody happens to need them. (521)

In just two sentences, Stein lays out a whole theory of literary composition (creating the time), and a theory of canonization and marginalization, with a sidebar on the recovery of neglected works. In one sense, this book is a series of footnotes to Stein’s observations about literature and literary reputations, an application in practical criticism of her condensed theory of poetry and its reception.

Other recent critics share similar concerns, and one of these, David Kellogg, has been of particular use to me in the writing of this book. When I first read Kellogg’s essay “The Self in the Poetic Field,” I knew I had found a paradigm for understanding poetry that would make the project I had in mind possible. Kellogg’s
work, based on the cultural sociology of Pierre Bourdieu, provided both a set of compass points by which one could begin to understand the vastness and the variety of American poetry, and a way of reading that could account for the conditions of composition and reception. His model proposed a reading of American poetry in terms of the social and aesthetic claims made for it by its readers, and he offered a way of constructing models of the poetic field as it shifted over time. Kellogg gave Bourdieu’s general observations about the dynamics of culture a specific application to contemporary poetry.

Kellogg’s article defines the field of American poetry in terms of two axes of value: one aesthetic, ranging from the traditional to the experimental; the other sociological, ranging from the individual to the communal. Readers, critics, reviewers, prize committees, anthologists, and publishers define the relative prestige of these different values as well as the relation of individual poets to the various values. They do this not only through the selection of works for publication or prizes but also in subtler ways, such as by claiming that a certain poet represents an identity group, or by placing a poet’s work in the context of a tradition or a school of innovative writing. To simplify greatly, you could say that the poet who is claimed from the most positions (or is claimed most strongly for a certain position) wins—if by “winning,” we mean gaining a large readership or a prestigious reputation. If the critics, anthologists, and prize-givers from a number of different communities happen to need what you have to offer, you could be claimed from several sides at once.

The career of John Ashbery is a shining example of a poet benefitting from multiple claims. For some, Ashbery carries into our own time the great tradition that runs from Keats through Wallace Stevens (people like this write articles with titles such as “John Ashbery’s Revision of the Post-Romantic Quest”). For others, he is the great linguistic innovator who inaugurated a new era in poetry with *The Tennis Court Oath* (people like this write articles with titles such as “Nimbus of Sensations: Eros and Reverie in the Poetry of John Ashbery and Ann Lauterbach”). For still others, Ashbery is the most personal and private of poets (people like this write articles with titles such as “John Ashbery: The Self against Its Images”). And for some, he is a representative of the gay male community (people like this write articles with
titles such as “Reports of Looting and Insane Buggery behind Altars: John Ashbery’s Queer Politics”). If not exactly all things to all people, Ashbery is, at any rate, many things to many people. His way of creating his time happens to be useful to representatives of all quadrants of the American poetic field. It is surely no coincidence that Ashbery is one of the most canonical American poets of our time.

Looking at the works of poets in Kellogg’s terms allows us to understand them and their reputations in a somewhat systematic way. The symmetry of his system of analysis is the perfect tool with which to investigate asymmetrical reputations, differing in both degree (of sales) and kind (of prestige). The model helps explain not only the popular appeal but also high-culture veneration. While Kellogg does not, in the limited space of his article, go on to apply his theory or test it in practical criticism, he offers a way to examine poetry both sociologically and aesthetically.

Kellogg’s work comes out of a long debate about the nature of canonization, with a rich literature of its own. One thinks immediately of Jed Rasula’s The American Poetry Wax Museum, for example, and of Alan Golding’s From Outlaw to Classic: Canons in American Poetry. In fact, a few words are in order by way of explaining my title which, with its “heretics,” invokes the “outlaws” in Golding’s. (I should also own up to going back to Stein’s “Composition as Explanation” after seeing an excerpt as the epigraph to Golding’s book.) One way of considering the six poets here—Yvor Winters and his last generation of graduate students, Robert Hass, Robert Pinsky, James McMichael, John Matthias, and John Peck—is to divide them into a group of “laureates” and a group of “heretics.” In this view, those who were literally laureates, Hass and Pinsky, both of whom served multiple terms as U.S. Poet Laureate, are the laureates of popular fame and institutional canonization, while Matthias, McMichael, Peck (and, to a degree, Winters) are heretics in the sense of writing largely outside of the laws of canonization. Whatever its very real merits, their work has not resulted in strong canonization or wide readership. Their different kinds of reception cannot be explained by anything so simple as the “mainstream”

1. These articles are by Frank Lepkowski, James McCorkle, David Bromwich, and John Vincent, respectively.
nature of the popular work versus the “experimental” nature of the less popular. While Peck is surely an innovative writer, and Matthias is at times a profoundly experimental one, McMichael is perhaps the most formally traditional poet in the group. Moreover, Yvor Winters’ chances at achieving full canonical status faded just at the point when he left a promising career as a modernist and proto-objectivist and took up a less experimental poetic.

We can only understand the different aesthetic choices made by these poets, and their appeals to various reading publics, when we examine the social forces that played into making them write as they did, and the forces that made their publics value certain kinds of poetry more than others. Such forces include the postwar growth of universities, the coincident movement of poetry into universities, the radicalism of the 1960s, the post-1960s radical exhaustion, and the birth of identity politics and identity poetics. Some poets emerged from this maelstrom clutching the laurels of fame, and others did not.

There is no judgment inherent in this last observation. Poets are not lesser artists because they are less than popular. Nor should one fall into that somewhat adolescent elitism, the reflex that tells us that something popular cannot be good, not if all of those people like it. Then again, I have operated on the assumption that the importance and value of the popular are, ipso facto, clear to many and do not need an advocate. The importance of the less-well-known poets not being common knowledge, I have made gestures of advocacy in certain cases. These are not, though, to be taken as exclusive gestures made at the expense of other poets: I value all of those dealt with here.

Any study of a group of poets has to make its exclusions as well as to make some case for those exclusions. The five men under consideration here do not represent anything like a full roster of the poets who had been Winters’ students at Stanford. Such a roster, when drawn up, is impressive indeed, including Thom Gunn, J.V. Cunningham, N. Scott Momaday, Edgar Bowers, and Donald Hall. Instead, this is a study of Winters and his last generation of students, those who arrived in Palo Alto around 1962. Even as such it is incomplete, since so many of Winters’ students went on to write poetry. (Ken Fields, for example, was a member of this final generation.) It does, though, represent what I take to be the poets of that generation who contributed
most significantly to American poetry, for reasons ranging from mass popularity (and therefore sociological interest) to what I find myself calling philosophical depth.

Heresy and Orthodoxy at Stanford

Winters, late in life, was known for the extremity, exclusivity, and orthodoxy of his literary views. A rigorous formalist, an idiosyncratic traditionalist with his own narrow version of the canon, a moralist who felt that the wrong poetics could lead to disastrous errors in life, he was a commanding presence. F.R. Leavis comes to mind as a corresponding figure—he did, anyway, to Gunn, who had studied under both men and had observed the same tendency of both men’s students to split into zealous champions of the great man’s orthodoxy, on the one hand, and into rebels against the tyrant’s authority, on the other. The champions of Wintersian orthodoxy among the final generation of Winters’ students—those who come closest to his opinions—are McMichael and, to a degree, Pinsky. The Wintersian rebels or heretics include Matthias and Peck. Hass, interestingly, treads right along the border of Winters’ kingdom. It often seems that he holds both Wintersian and anti-Wintersian ideas simultaneously, and for this reason I call him an agnostic Wintersian.

It is perhaps surprising that there is some correlation between a moderate Wintersian poetic and poetic canonization. While McMichael’s Wintersianism has been too austere for most audiences, the more ecumenical Pinsky and the agnostic Hass have gone on to great fame and have received the highest honors available to American poets. While Winters found himself excluded by the poetic establishment of his time—he once told Hall that the Ivy League “thought he was lower than the carpet” (Hall, “Rocks and Whirlpools” 247)—some of his more faithful students now find themselves honored by that same establishment. The phenomenon can be explained with reference to the modifications Hass and Pinsky made to Winters’ poetics, and, more important, to the changes in the values of many readers of American poetry from the 1950s through the 1980s. In Pinsky’s case, Winters’ Augustan poetics and Enlightenment ideas of the self have appealed to
those threatened by the growth of identity politics in the 1970s and early 1980s. In Hass’s case, negative capability with regard to Winters’ ideas led him to write a poetry that has appealed to both sides of the “theory wars” of the 1980s and 1990s. A poem such as “Picking Blackberries with a Friend Who Has Been Reading Jacques Lacan,” for instance, ends up being praised by deconstructionists and antitheorists alike. Hass’s reputation grew in large measure due to a kind of bidding war over his work between radical and conservative forces.

The uncanonical status of the Wintersian heretics, Peck and Matthias, can be explained with reference to similar changes in the poetic field, as can the reputation of one other Wintersian outlaw who has languished in obscurity. This is Winters himself, or at any rate the young Yvor Winters, whose experimental work the mature poet all but disowned. I treat this poet not only because the work of the mature Winters can only be explained in the context of the work of the young Winters, but also because I firmly believe that his achievement was larger than his more orthodox critics maintain. Just as his legacy includes poets as diverse in style and substance as Pinsky and Peck, his own career includes substantial work in a wide breadth of styles. If there is one element of this book that I think will enrage some of the more orthodox Wintersian true believers, it is the assertion, implicit on many pages, that all of Winters’ work is legitimate, as is the whole of his legacy.