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Disappearing Ink: Poetry at the End of Print Culture

> Since all media are fragments of ourselves extended into the public domain, the action upon us of any one medium tends to bring the other senses into a new relation.
>
> —Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media*

I. The End of Print Culture

We are currently living in the midst of a massive cultural revolution. For the first time since the development of moveable type in the late fifteenth century, print has lost its primacy in communication. The proliferation of electronic technology has gone far beyond providing new means for the communication, storage, and retrieval of information: the new media have gradually changed not only the way we perceive language and ideas but also the world and ourselves. The shift in the modes of communication has had an extraordinary impact on every aspect of contemporary life, but literature, an imaginative enterprise created entirely from words, has been profoundly affected in ways that we are still in the process of comprehending.

How does one describe this cultural change? A few gross statistics may help to characterize the general environment. According to one recent study, the average American now spends about twenty-four minutes a day reading, not just books, but anything—newspapers, magazines, diet tips, and *TV Guide*. This small investment of time compares with over four hours daily of television and over three hours of radio. Less than half of U.S. households now read daily newspapers, and many of the newspapers they do follow, such as *USA Today*, increasingly model their short attention span formats after television. Younger adults

(ages 18 to 30) read significantly less than older groups. Children now grow up in a world where reading has been overwhelmed by other options for information and entertainment. According to a 1999 survey, at that time the average American child lived in a household which owned two television sets, three tape recorders, three radios, two videocassette recorders, two compact disk players, one video game player, and a computer. The survey neglected to mention if the home had any books, but it did note that the child spent 5 hours and 48 minutes each day with electronic media versus 44 minutes with print. It should be noted that the time the child spent with print includes that compulsory activity called homework.

Many experts also feel that illiteracy is on the rise in America. According to a 1986 United States Bureau of Census study, 13 percent of Americans over the age of 20 are illiterate. That statistic means that in the United States, which that same year officially measured its literacy rate at 99 percent, somewhere around 19 million adults cannot read with minimal competency. Significantly, subsequent measures of illiteracy have become controversial because experts no longer agree on what constitutes literacy, which has become a divisive ideological issue in education. It was simpler in the bad, old days when the Census Bureau automatically bestowed literacy on anyone who had completed fourth grade. I particularly enjoy that measure because, by sheer coincidence, both of my grandfathers stopped school after fourth grade. My paternal grandfather was educated in Sicily, so his example is not especially relevant, but my maternal grandfather, half-Mexican and half-Native American, learned enough in his four years of New Mexican Indian reservation schooling to become an avid lifelong reader. Today, however, when school-age children spend considerably more time watching television than in the classroom, educational level is no longer an accurate predictor of literacy.

For years many intellectuals and academics have observed these trends with a mixture of disappointment and detachment. While lamenting the sorry state of literacy among the public, they remained confident in the power of print culture among educated Americans. That confidence now seems misplaced. Books, magazines, and newspapers are not disappearing, but their position in the culture has changed significantly over the past few

decades, even among the educated. We are now seeing the first generation of young intellectuals who are not willing to immerse themselves in the world of books. They are not against reading, but they see it as only one of the many options for information. As the poet-critic Jack Foley has said, "At the current moment *writing* is beginning to seem 'old-fashioned.'"

For intellectuals, the implications of the shift from print culture to electronic media are vast, complex, and often troubling. The situation touches on every aspect of cultural life, and many intellectual debates have already been waged over the issues at stake. There is probably no more important argument in our culture because this issue focuses on the means by which our society uses language, images, and ideas to represent reality. The decline of print as our culture's primary means of codifying, presenting, and preserving information isn't merely a methodological change; it is an epistemological transformation. As Neil Postman has observed, the shift from print to television "has dramatically and irreversibly shifted the content and meaning of public discourse, since two media so vastly different cannot accommodate the same ideas." The technology used to present information is never neutral. The ways in which a medium works dictate the kinds of content it communicates, or to revise Marshall McLuhan's famous formula, the medium predetermines the message.

II. Verse Is No Longer a Dying Technique

The end of print culture raises many troubling questions about the position of poetry amid these immense cultural and technological changes. What will be the poet's place in a society that has increasingly little use for books, little time for serious culture, little knowledge of the past, little consensus on literary value, and—even among intellectuals—little faith in poetry itself? These questions are all the more pressing in American academic life where the art of poetry is often put on the margins of scholarly inquiry in favor of literary theory and cultural studies.

Any serious attempt to assess poetry's current position will need to proceed in unorthodox ways—not out of intellectual

perversity but from sheer necessity—because the orthodox views of contemporary poetry no longer are either useful or accurate in portraying the rapidly changing shape of the art. The conventional academic perspective views poetry as a series of texts placed in an historical or thematic framework of other printed texts. This traditional approach is invaluable in judging the past, but in assessing radical change, it is hopelessly fixated in what McLuhan called "rear-view mirror thinking." No driver can negotiate a sudden turn in the road by looking backward, and neither can a critic accurately see what is most innovative in contemporary poetry through the now-antiquarian assumptions of Modernism and the avant-garde. Those powerful ideas once produced great art, but now nearly a century old, they reflect a culture without radio, talking-films, television, videocassettes, computers, cellphones, satellite dishes, and the Internet. Even as the academy attacks and rejects Modernism, it remains caught in its conceptual framework at least in discussing poetry. That historical frame of reference is no longer relevant because the forces most affecting contemporary poetry now mostly come from altogether outside that tradition.

When the conventional methods no longer seem adequate to comprehend new developments, it is time to ask different questions. This essay therefore will look at contemporary poetry from an unfamiliar vantage point. This unusual perspective may initially annoy some readers and confuse others, but as the argument unfolds, it will become obvious that it allows one to discern certain significant, even perhaps essential, changes in American poetry not otherwise easily visible.

Consider the following question: What has been the most influential and unexpected event in American poetry during the past twenty years? Language Poetry? New Formalism? Critical Theory? Multiculturalism? New Narrative? Identity Poetics? These have all been significant trends, but none has been especially surprising—and all of these movements have been confined largely to the academic subculture. Oddly, the most important new trend won't be found in what Language Poet Charles Bernstein calls "official verse culture"—the small but respectable literary network of books, journals, conferences, and university writing programs. Instead, it will be discovered in the general culture in poetic works widely covered in the mass media.

Without doubt the most surprising and significant development in recent American poetry has been the wide-scale and unexpected reemergence of popular poetry—namely rap, cowboy poetry, poetry slams, and certain overtly accessible types of what was once a defiantly avant-garde genre, performance poetry. These new forms of popular verse have seemingly come out of nowhere to become significant forces in American culture. Rap especially has become ubiquitous in our society—not only filling concert halls and radio programming but also heard and seen in films, television, and live theater. Although far less commercial, the other forms have also shown enormous vitality. And all these new poetic forms have thrived without the support of the university or the literary establishment.

In a literary culture that during most of the twentieth century declared verse a dying technique, no one would have predicted this vastly popular revival. In ways that Edmund Wilson could never have foreseen, verse has changed into a growth industry, though its rehabilitation has happened mostly off the printed page. Whatever one thinks of the artistic quality of these new poetic forms, one must concede that at the very least they reassuringly demonstrate the abiding human need for poetry. Please note that while admiring the energy of the revival, I *do not* maintain that these new forms of popular verse represent the best new poetry of the period. Individually considered as works of literary art, most of this work is undistinguished or worse, though some of it is smart and lively. Collectively, however, the work has enormous implications for the future of poetry. Not only does it call into question many contemporary assumptions about the current state of poetry; the new popular poetry also reflects the broad cultural forces that are now reshaping all the literary arts.

While the new popular poetry has received immense coverage from the electronic media and general press, it has garnered relatively little attention from intellectuals and virtually none from established poetry critics. One can understand the reluctance of academic critics. If they have noticed the new popular poetry at all, they immediately see how little it has in common with the kinds of poetry they have been trained to consider worthy of study. It does not grow out of the long esteemed and meticulously studied high-art traditions of Classicism, Romanticism, Modernism, or Postmodernism that inform most literary

scholarship. In fact, in general terms it hardly seems to connect to any conventional academic notion of literary poetry. What is a conscientious critic supposed to do with an Eminem or Jay-Z? As individual texts for analysis, Snoop Dogg's "Doggy Style" or Wallace McRae's "The Cowboy Curmudgeon" offer a Harold Bloom or Helen Vendler little opportunity to display their critical chops.

Meanwhile, mass media coverage of the new popular poetry has focused on what it usually does—celebrities, their astonishing triumphs, their regrettable falls, and their eye-popping annual incomes. In the electronic media, all stories tend to be reduced to personality and human drama—to the people, that is, who can actually be shown or heard on the air. The limited commentary on the new popular poetry provided in the mass media by intellectuals has habitually focused on ideological issues, especially in the case of rap, which has been examined almost entirely for its subject matter or sociological significance.

From a poet's perspective, however, both the mass media and the culture critics miss the most interesting aspects of the new popular poetry, which is not the extravagant personalities of its creators or the sociological nature of its contents; rather, it is the unusual mixture of radical innovation and unorthodox traditionalism in the structure of the work itself and the modes of its performance, transmission, and reception. These aspects reveal deep and influential changes in American literary culture that show more about the current situation of poetry than any number of more academically fashionable subjects.

In order to discuss these new trends, however, one must address two preliminary issues. The first concerns terminology. One thing becomes immediately clear in comparing the various modes of contemporary poetry—namely, the inadequacy of our conventional literary vocabulary. The general term *poetry*, for example, now encompasses so many diverse and often irreconcilable artistic enterprises that it often proves insufficient to distinguish the critical issues at stake. This essay will use the term *poetry* in an all-inclusive sense to include all the forms of verse—written or oral—that shape language for literary effect. The term is used as a neutral description without imputing any literary value on the object or objects to which it refers. But, in order to distinguish and compare the fundamentally different forms of

verse now being practiced, there will often be a need to qualify the term *poetry* with a crucial adjective. The general heading *literary poetry* will be used to encompass all written, high-art poetry of whatever school. Likewise the term *popular poetry* has already been used to discuss the new forms of verse that have emerged outside the official literary culture. Why such terms are needed will quickly become evident when examining recent developments in American poetry.

The second preliminary issue involves evaluation. The contemporary poetry world is extraordinarily partisan. A critic is not supposed to discuss new poetry without overtly praising or categorically condemning it. But is there not a need sometimes merely to analyze and describe what one finds in neutral terms? And isn't such a dispassionate view especially important with controversial and polarizing new phenomena like rap and poetry slams? The evaluation of the new popular poetry is an interesting issue, but it lies outside the scope of this essay. What is most urgently needed now is an accurate description of what is happening in both popular and literary poetry—an up-to-date road map of American poetry, not a Michelin dining guide.

III. The New Oral Poetry

Sight isolates, sound incorporates.
—Walter Ong

If one examines the new popular poetry in more than a cursory fashion, one notices several significant ways in which it departs from the assumptions of mainstream literary culture. There are at least four fundamental ways in which it differs from traditional literary poetry. These radical differences reveal crucial changes in American culture.

The most significant fact about the new popular poetry is that it is predominantly oral. The poet and audience usually communicate without the mediation of a text. Rap is performed aloud to an elaborate, sampled rhythm track. Cowboy poetry is traditionally recited from memory. Poetry slams consist of live perform-

ance—sometimes from a text, more often from memory. To literary people whose notion of poetry has been shaped by print culture, this oral mode of transmission probably seems both strikingly primitive and alarmingly contemporary. It hearkens back to poetry's origins as an oral art form in preliterate cultures, and it suggests how television, telephones, recordings, and radio have brought most Americans—consciously or unconsciously—into a new form of oral culture.

Conventional literary poetry, meticulously composed as written language, published in books and journals, and evaluated against a canon of printed texts, could not be more different from these spoken and sometimes even improvisatory forms. Much of the new popular poetry is never written down; it exists only as sounds shaped in the air. When there is a text, it was often created *post factum* by transcribing a recorded performance from audio- or videotape.

One hundred years ago in America, there was also a thriving tradition of popular poetry. A huge audience existed for verse who read it in newspapers, magazines, pamphlets, books and almanacs. A best-selling poet like James Whitcomb Riley not only commanded a mass following; he was a public figure who dined at the White House and saw his birthday become an Indiana State holiday. The novelty of the new popular poetry is not its mass appeal; that was a commonplace in American culture in the late nineteenth century. What is strikingly innovative of these contemporary forms are their means of transmission, which almost entirely avoid the apparatus of print culture. For the first time in American history, a poet can reach a national audience without the use of books, magazines, newspapers, publishers, bookstores, and libraries. Instead the new popular poetry uses the apparatus of the musical entertainment world—recordings, radio, concert halls, nightclubs, auditoriums, bars, and festivals.

The shift from written to oral presentation has significant implications. The oral nature of the new popular poetry not only demonstrates how electronic media like television, radio, and recordings have transformed the ways in which imaginative literature can now be transferred; it also suggests how deeply those media have changed the forms of literature itself. Just as European literature changed two and a half millennia ago as it moved from oral to written culture, so has popular poetry

transformed itself as it moves from print culture to our audio-visual culture in which writing exists but is no longer the primary means of public discourse.

As readers turn into viewers and listeners, they naturally approach the new poetry in ways conditioned by television and radio. This epistemological change, to quote Neil Postman again, affects the "meaning, texture, and values" of literary discourse. Not least important, it transforms the identity of the author from writer to entertainer, from an invisible creator of typographic language to a physical presence performing aloud. Performance poetry and the poetry slam, for instance, owe at least as much to the tradition of stand-up comedy and improvisatory theater as they do to literary poetry. Roland Barthes, a creature of print culture, saw the world as a text and announced "the death of the author." Anyone attentive to the new popular poetry sees the antithesis—the death of the text. American culture conditioned by electronic media and a celebrity culture based on personalities has given birth to a new kind of author, the amplified bard.

IV. Innovation from the Margins

The next significant fact is that these new popular forms emerged entirely outside established literary life and were initially developed by individuals marginalized by intellectual and academic society. Rap was the creation of urban African-American males. It started in the West Bronx in the 1970s (reportedly the creation of Cool Herc, a Jamaican DJ), rapidly spread through metropolitan New York and New Jersey, and soon became national. Quickly commercialized and distributed by recording companies, rap is now an international form which one is as likely to encounter in Finnish or Bengali as in English. Unsubsidized and unsupported by the official literary culture, it has thrived. In most years it ranks as one of the top two best-selling segments of commercial recordings.

Cowboy poetry represents the survival of the verse and songs that Western cattle drivers composed and performed to entertain themselves on the range. To a Manhattan crowd, this form may

summon up corny cinematic images of Gene Autry and Roy Rogers, but poetry is an authentic rural tradition. Pastoral people have traditionally valued poetry as an anodyne against the loneliness and isolation inherent in their lives—the shepherd, in fact, has long been the Western symbol of the poet. A 1985 gathering in Elko, Nevada, organized by folklorist Hal Cannon, was intended to celebrate what many thought a dying tradition by bringing a group of these isolated poets together for the first time. The gathering was so successful that it revitalized the form. There are now over one hundred fifty widely-attended festivals of cowboy poetry in Western America attracting huge audiences as well as producing a steady stream of anthologies, books, tapes, and videos.

Poetry slams are an urban phenomenon. There is some debate over their genesis, but the best guess is that the poet Marc Smith began them in 1985—the same year as the Elko festival—at the Green Mill, a Chicago bar. Slams are hard to characterize in strictly literary terms because the form encompasses the work of anyone in a bar or café with enough nerve (or alcohol) to get up to recite original verse to the crowd. The most significant feature of this new medium, however, is not the poetry but the format. The poems are typically performed in competition and judged by the audience or a representative jury—an arrangement that both Sophocles and Pindar would find quite natural but which would be as unusual at an academic poetry festival as a bathing-suit competition.

Needless to say, no graduate writing program has stepped forward to take credit for any of these new movements, whose styles, subjects, and formats contradict many of the assumptions of standard literary poetry. The term "Cowboy Poetry" still elicits snickers from literati, and most professors bristle at the mere notion that rap is a literary form. Issues of class, race, and age also contribute to these attitudes, especially toward hip-hop culture. Nor are the origins of these forms intellectually respectable in academic terms. As most rappers never cease to remind their audience, they are "gangstas," who coexist with the criminal class. As the obituaries of murdered rappers like Tupac Shakur, the Notorious B.I.G., Scott LaRock, and Jam Master Jay confirm, this is no empty boast.

V. Renovation from the Margins

> Acoustic rhythm is a component of the reflexes of the central nervous system, a biological force of prime importance to orality.
>
> —Eric Havelock

The third interesting feature of the new popular poetry is that it is overwhelmingly, indeed characteristically, formal. Twenty years ago it was a critical piety that rhyme and meter were obsolete poetic techniques, discredited elitist and European forms that had no place in the democratic future of American literature. Verse narrative was held in only slightly less contempt. The Modernist movement, it was felt, had demonstrated that storytelling had little place in the lyric mandate of contemporary poetry. No alert critic would risk that argument today—not only because of the emergence of New Formalism and New Narrative in literary poetry but also because of the immense success of rap and other forms of popular verse. While the revival of form and narrative among young literary poets could be dismissed by critical tastemakers as benighted antiquarianism and intellectual pretension, its universal adoption as the prosody-of-choice by disenfranchised urban blacks and marginalized Western agricultural workers was impossible to dismiss in such simplistic ideological terms. Something important was clearly happening in the culture.

The nearly universal critical bias against rhyme and meter as recently as ten years ago, especially in university writing programs, indicates how distant the poets in a print culture had become from the orality of verse. The new popular poetry reminds literati that auditory poetry virtually always employs apprehensible formal patterns to shape its language. This rule not only holds true in primary oral cultures without writing and in scribal literary traditions like medieval Europe or imperial China where written verse was composed to be read aloud; it also applies to secondary oral cultures like contemporary mainstream America where popular verse is now transmitted without written texts.

The specific ways that speech is shaped into poetry differ from language to language, but the practice of arranging some

auditorily apprehensible feature such as stress, tone, quantity, alliteration, syllable count, or syntax into a regular pattern is so universal that it suggests that there is something primal and ineradicable at work. Metrical speech not only produces some heightened form of attention that increases mnemonic retention; it also seems to provide innate physical pleasure in both the auditor and orator. Typographic poetry may provide other pleasures, but it cannot rewire the circuitry of the human auditory perception to change a million years of preliterate, sensory evolution and permanently block the receptors that respond to auditory form.

The specific formal features of the new popular poetry deserve close examination, however, because they are not the traditional forms of English high-art poetry. Rap has developed so rapidly that it now uses a variety of metrical forms, but it is fascinating to analyze some of the early work that established the genre. Most rap still follows the initial formula of rhymed couplets that casually mix full rhyme with assonance. Here are a few metrically representative lines from one of the first popular raps:

> i said by the way baby what's your name
> said i go by the name of lois lane
> and you could be my boyfriend you surely can
> just let me quit my boyfriend called superman
> "Rapper's Delight," Sugarhill Gang

Rap is not written in the standard accentual-syllabic meters of English literary verse, but its basic measure does come out of the English tradition. Rap characteristically uses the four-stress, accentual line that has been the most common meter for spoken popular poetry in English from Anglo-Saxon verse and the border ballads to Robert Service and Rudyard Kipling.

> What is a woman that you forsake her,
> And the hearth-fire and the home-acre,
> To go with the old grey Widow-maker?
>
> She has no house to lay a guest in—
> But one chill bed for all to rest in,

That the pale suns and the stray bergs nest in.

She has no strong white arms to fold you,
But the ten-times-fingering weed to hold you—
Out on the rocks where the tide has rolled you.
from "Harp Song of the Dane Women,"
Rudyard Kipling

The four-stress line is also a meter found throughout *Mother Goose*:

Tom, Tom, the piper's son,
Stole a pig and away did run.
The pig was eat, and Tom was beat
Till he run crying down the street.

Cowboy poetry also characteristically employs the stress meters native to English popular poetry, but it usually employs not couplets but some variation of the traditional ballad stanza. Here is the beginning of Wallace McRae's "The Lease Hound," which describes a mineral rights agent visiting a ranch:

A sharpie in a leisure suit,
With eyelets in his shoes,
Who faintly smelled of talcum
And a little less of booze,
Drove into my neighbor's yard
And gingerly got out,
A little gimpy from the drive,
The altitude, and gout.

In accentual meter, the poet doesn't count syllables, only the strong stresses. The unstressed syllables don't matter as long as the number of primary stresses remains constant from line to line. A four-stress line can be as short as:

/ / / /
Tom, Tom, the piper's son,
(6 syllables)

Or as long as:

/ / / /
The cock's on the dunghill a-blowing his horn
(11 syllables)

The more unstressed syllables usually the faster the line is spoken.

Rap consciously exploits stress-meter's ability to stretch and contract in syllable count. In fact, playing the syllable count against the beat is the basic metrical technique of rap. Like jazz, rap extravagantly syncopates a flexible rhythm against a fixed metrical beat thereby turning a traditional English folk meter into something distinctively African-American. By hitting the metrical beat strongly while exploiting other elements of word music, rappers play interesting and elaborate games with the total rhythm of their lines. Here is a syncopated couplet from Run DMC:

He's the better of the best, best believe he's the baddest
Perfect timing when I'm climbing I'm the rhyming acrobatist
(14 and 16 syllables respectively)

Rap performers are not unaware of their connection to the tradition of English spoken verse. Here are a few lines from Run DMC's "Peter Piper":

Like the butcher, the baker, and the candlestick maker
He's a maker, a breaker, and a title taker
Like the little old lady who lived in a shoe
If cuts were kids he would be through
Not lying y'all he's the best I know
And if I lie my nose will grow
Like a little wooden boy named Pinocchio
And you all know how the story go

If rap were a written form of poetry, its complex syncopation would frequently push the meter to a breaking point. A reader

would not always know exactly where the strong stresses fell. See how difficult it is to discern the four strong stresses in the first Run DMC couplet quoted, simply from the *printed* text, which I have purposely left unscanned. Likewise literary scholars often have enormous difficulty in scanning *Mother Goose* rhymes on the page—unless they accept the performative tradition of schoolyard recitations which place the beats squarely on certain syllables. Anglo-Saxon poets understood the problem inherent in strong-stress verse. That is at least one reason why they added alliteration to reinforce the meter. In rap the meter is also enforced by what its performers call "the beat," usually a prerecorded digitally sampled rhythm-track. Traditional prosody describes the rhythm of poetry as the meaningful counterpoint of speech pattern against a fixed abstract meter. That same principle of expressive counterpoint is quite literally what rap does and its audience hears and enjoys.

Influenced by print culture's habit of silent reading and its typographical bias toward a text's visual identity on the page, contemporary literary poets often neglect or underplay the auditory elements of their verse. Too overt or apprehensible a verbal pattern seems old-fashioned to many poets. Even when they employ new or traditional auditory forms, they often tone down the musical effects by deliberately flattening the rhythms, avoiding end-stopped lines, and eliminating noticeable alliteration or assonance. If they venture rhyme, that most conspicuous auditory technique of verse, they often play it down as well by burying it in run-on lines or substituting slant and half-rhymes.

The new popular poets, by contrast, flamboyantly display their metrical schemes. In the aesthetic of rap, for instance, the stronger the beat, the more extravagant the rhyme, the more elaborate the pattern skillfully deployed, the better the poem. In its quieter way, cowboy poetry takes equally overt delight in its formal elements. The ostentatious display of these forms once again links them to the celebrity culture of the American entertainment industry. The personalities of the performers need to be projected as strongly as possible, because in performance there is no absolute separation between the singer and the song, the actor and the script, or the poet and the poem.

The unabashed stylization of the new popular poetry demonstrates two basic features of oral poetry. First of all, it always revels

in its own formal elements. Why? Because that overt stylization distinguishes it from ordinary speech. Form is how oral verse announces its special status as art. In the same way that an early Modernist poem in free verse distinguishes itself from prose by certain typographical conventions such as empty space and line breaks that visually disrupt the standard page rule of the right-hand margin, oral poetry uses apprehensible auditory patterns, such as rhyme and meter, to command the special attention an audience gives to the heightened form of speech known as poetry.

Second, oral poetry understands—as does all popular art—that much of its power comes from the audience understanding exactly the rules the artist follows. Popular art is a performance that feeds, teases, frustrates, and fulfills the expectations of the audience. In this situation, the artist must demonstrate his or her conspicuous skill to do something better than the members of the audience could manage and to engage, move, surprise, and delight the audience within predetermined conventions. Without knowing anything about the etymology of English words, the audience for the new popular verse understands that poetry like its Greek root *poesis* is something made and that the poet, like the medieval English synonym, *makar*, must be its maker. The purpose of art is not to deny artifice but to manage it so well that it appears inevitable.

Finally, the new popular poetry differentiates itself from mainstream poetry in the most radical way imaginable—by attracting a huge, paying public. In a culture where high-art poetry requires state subsidy, private support, and academic subvention to survive, the new popular verse shamelessly thrives in the marketplace. Rap has already become a major branch of commercial entertainment. It would be no exaggeration to say that rap is the only form of verse—indeed perhaps the only literary form of any kind—truly popular among American youth of all races. If there is a new generation of readers emerging in America, rap will be one of its formative experiences—just as jazz or movies were to earlier generations. Cowboy poetry is not an international or even national phenomenon, but it represents a major regional literary presence. Cowboy poetry plays to capacity audiences across the West. Not only has it revivified an endangered rural tradition; it now has attracted huge numbers of university-trained

writers who view it as a viable populist style, perhaps the first widely accessible poetic movement since the Midwestern populist brand of early Modernism, exemplified by Sandburg, Lindsay, and Masters. Poetry slams fill bars and cafés throughout America. All three forms now appear on television and radio with equal or greater frequency than literary poetry.

A skeptical critic could, of course, interpret the popularity of the new forms to the debased taste of the American public, corrupted by mass media, ignorant of great literature, obsessed by novelty, and unwilling to exert the mental energy necessary to engage with serious poetry. There is some truth in such a dire assessment. Our commercialized, entertainment-oriented television-based culture has cheapened and trivialized all forms of public discourse. Like virtually everything else in contemporary mass culture, the new popular poetry resembles entertainment more than art. It courts its audience too assiduously. It more often projects the fantasies of its consumers than it challenges their imagination.

All these criticisms may be true, but if the new poetry's audience is truly so lazy, uninformed, and undiscerning, why isn't it just staying at home watching cable? Why have these new forms of verse proven so immediately engaging and important to so many people? Why do Westerners drive hundreds of miles to attend cowboy poetry festivals? Why do teenagers learn lengthy and intricate raps by heart? Perhaps, beyond the obvious and indisputable shortcomings of the new forms, we are also seeing something at least slightly reassuring—a large audience hungry for what poetry provides. If that audience is so alienated from literary poetry, both traditional and contemporary, that it does not look beyond the options offered by popular culture, we should not blame them without also questioning the educational system that trained them and the literary culture that has left them bored and indifferent.

Why spend so much time analyzing popular verse so seriously if one makes no special claims for its artistic distinction? No, I do not consider Busta Rhymes and Jay-Z the Wallace Stevens and T. S. Eliot *de nos jours*, but I do insist that their creative methods, performance techniques, and public reception illuminate the world of literary poetry in ways that conventional frames of reference do not. I also understand that a critic risks intellectual

derision by discussing popular poetry on its own terms without first clothing it in an elegant ideological wardrobe, preferably imported from Paris. But there are odd things currently happening in the poetry world—both high and low—that don't make sense in conventional terms, and the key to understanding these events lies in the innovative nature of new popular poetry.

VI. The New Literary Poetry

Studying a familiar subject from a new perspective often forces one to make surprising and radical reassessments. Feminist criticism, for instance, significantly altered our sense of the literary tradition—not so much by suggesting subtle interpretive strategies to older works but by asking big, obvious questions about conventions that were once taken for granted. After considering some features of the new popular poetry, I would suggest that the seemingly familiar world of literary poetry will begin to look slightly different. The four trends that appear so obvious in rap, cowboy poetry, and poetry slams—its reliance on oral performance, its non-academic origins, its revival of auditory form, and its popular appeal—also exist less overtly in the established literary world.

Literary poetry has not yet been influenced by the new popular poetry—although that is starting to happen among young writers—but it is changing in similar ways. Just as eighty years ago the technology of film suggested new methods of telling stories in prose and thereby influenced the course of modern fiction—both popular and literary—the broader technological and cultural forces that created popular poetry are reshaping the course of literary poetry.

The most conspicuous difference between literary poetry and the new popular poetry is that one is written and the other predominantly oral. Those features seem irreconcilable, do they not? And yet, who would dispute that the contemporary American poet's primary means of publication is now oral—namely the poetry reading? Poets of every school now reach more people through oral performance—in person, by broadcast, through

video or audio recording—than they generally do through print. Books remain the basic medium for literary poetry, but paradoxically an author's print readership now heavily depends on attracting an audience initially through oral performance.

The poetry reading is not a recent phenomenon. Roman poets published their carefully composed written work by reciting it before a small audience. Edgar Allan Poe read his poems to a paying public. Dylan Thomas famously toured America. But over the past twenty years there has been a fundamental change in the role poetry readings play in literary culture. Until recently poets made their reputations primarily through print. Public readings were an esteemed but ancillary activity, something an established poet might do spurred by vanity, ambition, or a shortage of funds. Robinson Jeffers, for example, gave his first public readings in his mid-fifties only to pay the property taxes on his home. That was the first and only time his print audience saw and heard him speak his poems aloud. Recordings of the great Modernist masters like Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams, Marianne Moore, and even e. e. cummings reveal how awkwardly most of them faced the task of reading their verse aloud. "The public reading of poetry," grumbled Stevens, "is something particularly ghastly." Only T. S. Eliot and Robert Frost seem at home in oral performance.

The Modernists were born in the last three decades of the nineteenth century. For them the typewriter, the silent film, and the gramophone were new technology. Poetry readings began to proliferate in the early 1960s with the rise of the Beats who were in the first generation to experience radio and talking films from childhood. At first poetry readings supplemented print culture by providing a local public forum to celebrate poetry, mostly in universities, but gradually, as the poetry subculture began producing more poets than anyone could possibly read or review, their position changed. Readings became the primary means by which the literary public first encountered and assessed new poetry.

Today for the first time in the history of American literature, it would be difficult for a new poet to build and sustain a significant reputation on print alone. A poet still needs to publish books. They remain the minimal prerequisite for visibility and credibility in literary culture. But in a society with too many books and too

little time for reading, especially serious literary reading, a book of poems, no matter how superb, can no longer be sure of attracting an audience by means of print alone.

This situation represents an extraordinary shift in literary culture from the printed page to the spoken word and reflects the electronic media's influence even on the most educated readers. The poetry reading—despite its high-art aura—fulfills the prerequisites of the new orality: like radio, television, film, and recordings, it takes language off the printed page; and like television and film, it links the spoken word to the physical presence of the speaker. These conditions have greatly helped the popularity of the medium but have also increasingly separated it from the culture of print.

If the medium of a discourse is never neutral to its content, the process of transformation is usually gradual. Early talking films, for instance, copied the formats of spoken and musical theater. It took some time, even at the frenetic pace of Hollywood, for writers and directors to explore and master the possibilities of their new medium. The poetry reading is also reshaping the nature of the art, but in ways that have only recently become apparent. The current revival of populist poetry in the literary world, for example, is inseparable from the presence of writers like Billy Collins who made his reputation by public readings not only in the lecture hall but on the radio.

When established poets like Stevens, Jeffers, or Moore began giving public readings in late middle age, the medium had relatively little effect on their writing. Their styles and aesthetics had been formed. But once the spoken medium not only became a beginning poet's first real experience of publication but continued to be the established poet's most frequent and constant connection with his or her audience, it starts to affect the work itself profoundly.

VII. The Four Types of Literary Poetries

American literary poetry is now radically reconfiguring itself in response to these cultural changes. As a result, what was once conventionally considered a unified enterprise, namely literary

high-art poetry, is now in the process of breaking up into at least four distinct literary forms, each based on a fundamentally different relationship between spoken and typographic language. These four new forms of poetry are also currently transforming the factional politics of the literary scene because the basic assumptions about the artist's relationship to his or her own linguistic material are more important than the more visible differences between one contemporary poetic school and another.

The most extreme response to the new orality is performance poetry. As the artist's social role changed from the creator of a text to the creator of an oral performance, it was probably inevitable that a new art form would emerge out of the medium of the poetry reading. Performance poetry represents the merger of certain poetic techniques with forms of drama and live entertainment, especially stand-up comedy and improvisatory theater. It differs from traditional oral poetry in that it no longer focuses primarily on the creation of a linguistic text that could—at least in theory—be transcribed and transmitted independently of the speaker's physical presence. Performance poetry is not rooted only in language. Instead, it recognizes and exploits the physical presence of the performer, the audience, and the performance space. The text is only one element in its artistic totality. Though its historical origins are in literary poetry, performance poetry is now a different art, and its fundamental irreconcilability with literary poetry becomes more apparent each year. As it develops over time, performance poetry will probably find its ideal medium not on the page or even the podium but in the more malleable forms of video and audio recording—a trend already in evidence on a limited scale. Performance poetry is not so much a form of poetry as a living metaphor for it.

The second form of poetry is oral poetry. Whether based on a written text or quasi-improvised, this form resembles music more than writing since its primary medium is sonic rather than visual or even audio-visual. The new oral poetry differs from performance poetry in that it uses words—rather than the artist's total physical presence and performance space—as its raw material. Rap and cowboy poetry pioneered this form in the context of popular entertainment. Poetry slams represent a sort of experimental laboratory for the form's crossover possibilities, especially since many university-trained poets now slip into bars and cafés to play around in the medium. Among literary poets, the new oral

verse is called "Spoken Word" poetry, and it has developed a substantial and serious following. In the San Francisco Bay Area, for example, there is already a sophisticated community of Spoken Word poets, including at least one writer—Jack Foley—who is working out of a Poundian experimental tradition and doing work that is fine by any standard—except perhaps a typographic one. Foley's example raises a general question. By what standard should performance poetry be judged? As oral performance, much Spoken Word poetry is powerful and persuasive; on the page it often seems only half-realized.

The third form of poetry is, by comparison, audio-visual. There is no trendy new name for it because this aesthetic most closely resembles our traditional conception of poetry. It focuses on the creation of verse that can work equally well as a typographic entity and a spoken performance. The problematic nature of this enterprise should be evident by now since it faces the conflicting demands of the visual aesthetic of Modernist poetry and the new orality of mass culture. Consequently, the poets working in an audio-visual aesthetic, whether they use metrical or free verse, are increasingly drawn to auditory form—apprehensible patterns of syntax and rhetoric, if not rhyme and meter. In this sense, they more closely resemble the poets of scribal cultures like the early Renaissance, who composed carefully written verse to be read aloud, than they do the high Modernists like Pound, cummings, or Williams who, confident in their place in print culture, regularly composed poems that could not be realized as speech without totally or partially dissipating their effects.

Finally, there is visual poetry, a form where the language exists primarily as typography. At one end of this aesthetic, the work can be read aloud like the work of Marianne Moore or Robert Creeley, but not without losing at least some of its impact since the form of the poetry engages the eye and creates a visual prosody at least partially dependent on silent reading. Language Poetry, for instance, self-consciously separates itself from the spoken language in this way and characteristically announces itself as "writing" or "text." But it usually remains a text that can be read aloud. At the other end of this visual aesthetic, as in concrete poetry, the text cannot be realized in any meaningful sense as spoken language. A poem like John Hollander's famous shaped "Swan" has no real existence as spoken language. As a work of art, it rests entirely in typography.

Of course, no poet is required to work in only one form. Pound and cummings frequently crossed the border between auditory and visual poetry. Rather, the point is that the aesthetic of each form is different, and under the pressure of electronic culture, artists are pushing the forms further apart as the emergence of new forms like Spoken Word and Slam Poetry demonstrates. Writers who work in multiple forms will treat them as different media just as visual artists approach oil painting and copper-plate etching as individual media requiring different techniques.

The decline of print culture has been especially hard on literary poets since it has broken down the elaborate cultural machinery by which they once reached their audience. Traditionally a poet's readership and reputation was influenced mainly by four interrelated factors—journalistic reviews, serious (usually academic) literary criticism, anthologies, and general press coverage. All four means of reaching the literary reading public have diminished notably in the last few decades. First of all, contemporary poetry occupies a much smaller place in the academy than it did thirty years ago. As literary theory and cultural studies dominate critical discourse, contemporary poetry becomes a marginal field. Attend an academic literary conference these days and you are more likely to hear, as I recently did, papers on the design of the Los Angeles Freeway system as an expression of phallocentric power or gender-coding in breakfast cereal advertising than you are to find examinations of contemporary poetry.

Second, much of the academic commentary on contemporary poetry is written in the professional language of academe rather than a public idiom. This mandarin code may offer certain advantages, but engaging the interest of the serious and intelligent non-specialist is not one of them. Third, the magazines that still review poetry are usually small, expensive, and hard to obtain. Anyone without access to a large university library will not be able to locate most literary journals, and even informed readers do not know of the existence of many leading journals. The traditional print medium has so conspicuously failed in this regard that most new literary journals are now electronic.

Finally, there has been a decline in the quality and seriousness of poetry reviewing itself. The few reviews written in a public idiom whether in literary journals or the general press are increasingly characterized by their blandly uncritical quality.

Conscious of how little coverage new verse receives and how small the poetry subculture is, most reviewers avoid negative or skeptical assessments. Savvy readers soon learn to discount this overt puffery. Consequently, the reader seriously interested in following contemporary poetry finds that criticism now comes mainly in four varieties: invisible, incomprehensible, inaccessible, and insincere. Is it any wonder that most aficionados prefer to go to poetry readings and make up their own minds?

The unprecedented wealth of performance venues for poetry, however, is not without its irony. If the public reading has become the most important cultural force sustaining the audience for new poetry, it is also a chief cause for its continuing fragmentation. Since there is little mass media coverage for poetry, the art has not only become highly regional but even local. With few exceptions, the audience generally knows the work of living poets only if they have heard them or perhaps had a friend who heard the poet and passed along a book. Another revealing irony is that sometimes the only place one can find a reasonably well-known poet's books is at his or her reading. Oral performance hasn't replaced the printed medium for poetry, but in the absence of other public support for poetry it now serves as the main public entrance into an increasingly inaccessible medium.

VIII. Rise of the New Bohemia

The second notable aspect of the new popular poetry, its non-academic provenance, also seems to distinguish it from literary poetry. The most common observation about the situation of contemporary American poetry—made by native and foreign observers—is that it is headquartered in the university, mainly the hundreds of graduate creative writing programs across the country. Surely, here at least, literary poetry differs fundamentally from the new popular poetry.

On closer inspection, however, the near monopoly that the university so recently enjoyed in the stewardship of poetry now seems to be dissolving in the face of economic, demographic, and technological changes. The academy's role in supporting new

poetry is not disappearing. Writing programs and English departments continue to play a decisive role in contemporary letters. But the larger literary world that surrounds the university has recently changed so significantly that the academy's position in literary culture is being transformed. The forty-year period of undisputed dominance that the university exercised over American poetry (which one might date from that moment in the early sixties when Beats and other survivors of the old literary bohemia, like Rexroth, Ginsberg, and Baraka began taking academic jobs) is now over. American poetry is presently returning to a more historically typical, an intellectually healthier situation where the university's role is balanced by a strong non-academic literary culture.

One sees evidence of the diminished role the university plays in contemporary poetry merely by listing some of the most influential recent developments in American literary life, most of which happened off campus. Beyond the emergence of rap, cowboy poetry, and poetry slams, notable changes include the rise of independent nonprofit literary presses like Graywolf, Copper Canyon, Curbstone, and Story Line unaffiliated with institutions or academic or commercial publishers; the growth of non-academic literary service organizations like Poets & Writers, Poets House, Poetry Society of America, and The Academy of American Poets; the creation of electronic networks and journals like *Poetry Daily*, *Contemporary Poetry Review*, and *Eratosphere*, linking individual writers across the nation; the development of desktop publishing that has made books and small magazines easy to issue without the financial and organizational support of academic institutions; and the transformation of bookstores, libraries, galleries, museums, and community centers into venues for literary education and performance. Together these trends have created a new bohemia not located in a specific urban neighborhood but scattered across urban areas and linked by electronic media and communal space.

The transformation of the American literary bookstore during the past fifteen years can serve as a paradigm for the broader changes in non-academic literary culture. As print culture declined, as the public space for serious literature dwindled, and the university became the only visible forum for literati, an entrepreneurial vanguard of American booksellers pioneered a radical

and effective defense that has done at least as much to build the audience for American poetry as all the writing programs in the republic. They gradually transformed their premises from a marketplace for books into a marketplace for ideas. Ironically, their means of supporting print was to borrow features of the new oral culture.

Dependent on readers for economic survival and fired by conviction in the importance of preserving print culture, booksellers devised a new support system for literature that combined the best features of electronic culture, academic tradition, market economics, and bohemian egalitarianism. They understood that the university's chief appeal to many intellectuals was not its scholarly rigor but the sense of community it provided. They copied the university by turning their bookstores into small communities—often by adding what seemed at the time decidedly odd innovations like easy chairs and espresso machines. They adapted the intimate oral presentation of television and radio to the ends of print culture and presented steady streams of informal readings, lectures, and discussion groups to provide an access into literature. They also catered to electronic culture's obsession with personality by bringing the writers off the page and into the bookstore. They found a way to combine the economic interests of publishers, bookstores, and poets to overcome the financial marginality of serious literature. Finally, they copied bohemia by democratizing literary culture in ways the hierarchical institutions like the university cannot so easily manage. A student, after all, is not always right, but the customer invariably is. Over the past decade bookstores like Chapters in Washington, D.C. or Cody's in Berkeley have presented literary programming equal to that of major universities, and it has been free and open to anyone who walked in the door.

Meanwhile the poetry world has become less academic due to an unlikely source—the university itself. For several decades now academic writing programs have been producing degree-bearing graduates far beyond the needs of the job market. There are now about 25,000 MFAs produced each decade of whom only some small fraction will become college teachers. If a young American poet today is more likely than ever to have studied in a graduate writing program, he or she is now less likely than ever to stay there as a teacher. These jobless graduates are joining non-academic literati to create a new bohemia—a serious literary culture

that is growing out of the constellations of bookstores, nonprofit presses, community-based writing centers, small magazines, weekend conferences, and computer networks, combined with the larger worlds of journalism, publishing, and arts management.

The new bohemia will not replace academia in cultural life but supplement it, and the two communities will not only feed off one another's energy but provide the system of intellectual and artistic checks and balances that was sorely lacking in the late twentieth century's lopsided literary culture. Because this new bohemia is so decentralized, few people, including its own members, now realize the scope of its activities, but its rate of growth is extraordinary. Today, for the first time in fifty years, the vast majority of young American writers now live and work outside the university. The cultural consequences of this economic and demographic change will significantly affect every aspect of American poetry.

IX. The Auditory Avant-Garde

By now it should also be apparent that the third significant feature of the new popular poetry—its use of auditory form, its unapologetic delight in patterning sound—is also increasingly evident in literary poetry. This shift in sensibility toward orality is not a single literary movement, a sinister cabal of young poets maliciously determined to *épater les bourgeois avant-gardes*, as it has sometimes been misconstrued. Rather the generational group of young poets known as the New Formalists reflected a change in the *Zeitgeist*, a widespread and decentralized response to the new oral culture surrounding literary poetry, which includes writers old, young, and middle aged, academics, bohemians, progressives, conservatives, anarchists, and experimentalists. The New Formalists, Spoken Word artists, Slam Poets, Cowboy Poets, and Rappers collectively constitute an auditory avant-garde. Poets of these disparate schools bring different theoretical, historical, and ideological assumptions to their work. What they all have in common is an empirical interest in auditory form and a disregard for the outdated critical taboo under which it was recently placed.

Academic literary critics have been unable to understand the

resurgence. Why? Because they have tried to frame it through "rear-view mirror thinking," by looking backwards at the receding ideas of Modernism and the avant-garde rather than placing it in a broader cultural perspective. But that should come as no surprise. Academic literary criticism is a noble enterprise, but it has never been any more reliable in predicting new artistic trends than econometrics has been in forecasting major changes in the Gross Domestic Product or Dow Jones Industrial Average. Genuinely new artistic developments—be they the revival of popular poetry or the reemergence of form—tend to move dialectically from the margins of established culture rather than smoothly from the central consensus.

This notion leads to a final comparison between the new popular poetry and its literary counterpart—namely the question of popularity. For half a century it has been universally assumed that literary poetry is a moribund art with no audience outside the university and little vitality without institutional support. To borrow an image from popular culture, poetry's recent reputation sounds like the dead parrot described by the customer in the famous "Monty Python" skit. Returning to the pet store to complain that he has been sold a dead parrot, he observes:

> This parrot is no more.
> It has ceased to be.
> It's expired and gone to meet its maker.
> This is a late parrot . . .
> Bereft of life, it rests in peace.
> If you hadn't nailed it to the perch,
> it would be pushing up daisies.
> It's rung down the curtain
> and joined the choir invisible.
> This is an ex-parrot.

But rather than accept literary poetry's position as an ex-art, bereft of life, and nailed to a perch in academe, an astute observer might venture the opinion that the new oral culture has already created the conditions for its revival. Will it be a mass audience? Well, ironically, the mass audience has been the first one to re-engage with the art through the new popular poetry—despite the general consensus among intellectuals that such a rapprochement was impossible.

Although conventional wisdom portrays the rise of electronic media and the relative decline of print as a disaster for all kinds of literature, this situation is largely beneficial for poetry. It has not created a polarized choice between spoken and printed information. Both media coexist in their many often-overlapping forms. What the new technology has done is slightly readjust the contemporary sensibility in favor of sound and orality. The relation between print and speech in American culture today is probably closer to that in Shakespeare's age than Eliot's era—not an altogether bad situation for a poet. For the first time in a century there is the possibility of serious literary poetry re-engaging a non-specialized audience of artists and intellectuals, both in and out of the academy. There is also an opportunity of recentering the art on an aesthetic that combines the pleasures of oral media and richness of print culture, that draws from tradition without being limited by the past, that embraces form and narrative without rejecting the experimental heritage of Modernism, and that recognizes the necessary interdependence of high and popular culture. A serious art does not need a large audience to prosper—only a lively, diverse, and engaged one.

As long as humanity faces mortality and uses language to describe its existence, poetry will remain one of its essential spiritual resources. Poetry is an art that preceded writing, and it will survive television and video games. How? Mostly by being itself—concise, immediate, emotive, memorable, and musical, the qualities most prized in the new oral culture, which are also the virtues traditionally associated with the art. Serious literary poetry may even be better positioned to thrive in this new century than that greatest creation of print culture, the novel. Yes, the poetic art will change but possibly in ways that bring it closer to Shakespeare, Marlowe, and Milton, who understood how to bring richly complex poetry off the page without losing anything on it, than to the typographic traditions of Modernism. But there are surely solutions to this artistic challenge that we cannot imagine at the moment. The problem won't be finding an audience. The challenge will be writing well enough to deserve one. Even if there are fewer readers, people will be listening.