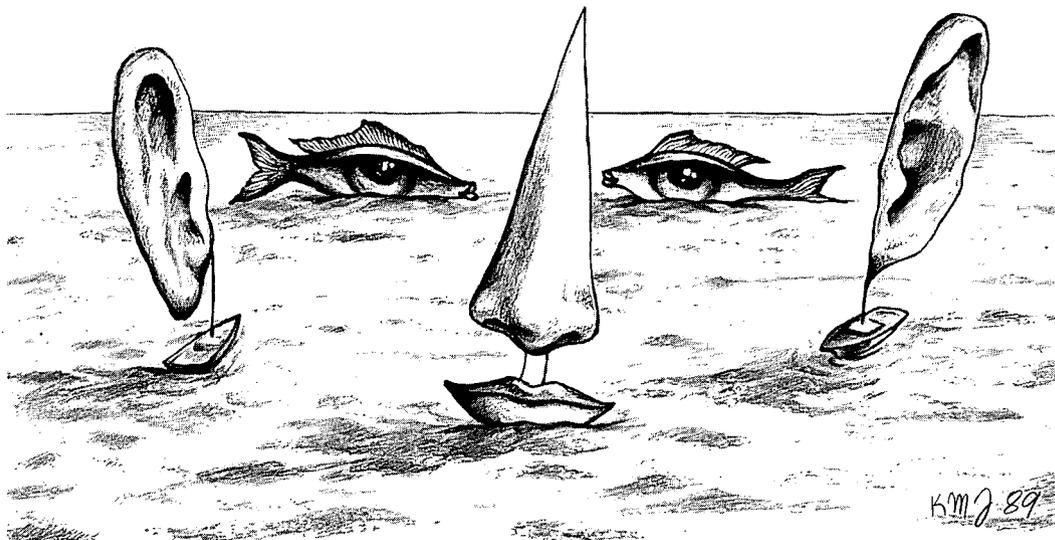


Poetry You Can Read

by R.S. Gwynn

"It seemed so simple when one was young and new ideas were mentioned not to grow red in the face and gobble."

—Logan Pearsall Smith



Expansive Poetry: Essays on the New Narrative & the New Formalism

Edited by Frederick Feirstein
Santa Cruz: Story Line Press;
262 pp., \$24.95 (cloth),
\$15.95 (paper)

In his introduction to the 1962 Penguin anthology *Contemporary American Poetry*, Donald Hall wrote, "For thirty years an orthodoxy ruled American poetry. It derived from the authority of T.S. Eliot and the new critics; it exerted itself through the literary quarterlies and the universities. It asked for a poetry of symmetry, intellect, irony, and wit. The last few years have broken the control of this orthodoxy." Following a brief summary of current trends in which he parodied some of the extremes of the academic formalism of the 1950's,

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Hall offered quotes from Robert Bly and Louis Simpson as representative of the new direction of poetic style: "This imagination is irrational, yet the poem is usually quiet and the language simple; there is no straining after apocalypse. There is an inwardness to these images, a profound subjectivity." In other words, the poetry arising to challenge the status quo would employ open forms in lieu of the symmetry of traditional meters and rhyme, the voice of the unconscious as opposed to that of the rational mind, and a tone of sincerity and commitment instead of wit and irony. The new poem, if we are to judge from Hall's own selections, would likely be a short, free-verse lyric in which the poet would try to communicate the "intricate darkness of feeling and instinct" that makes up "general subjective life." In these remarks, Hall proved remarkably prescient.

While Hall expressed optimism that the new poetry would not "substitute one orthodoxy for another," hoping that "all possibilities, even contradictory ones, [might] exist together," the essays in Frederick Feirstein's *Expansive Poetry* indicate that the new order

proved as inflexible as the old. Feirstein and Frederick Turner, in their introduction, speak of "how narrow and doctrinaire . . . the world of poetry in the seventies" had become. Paul Lake describes the era as one "when to write in a tradition that extends beyond the formal and prosodic possibilities of the verse of William Carlos Williams and his epigones was to court silence or critical disdain." Dana Gioia experiences "a deep disappointment over the predictable sameness, the conspicuous lack of diversity" in a typical year's publications. Robert McDowell notes that the successive movements of postmodernism—"Academic, Beat, Confessional, Projective, Deep Image, Surrealism"—stressed "the importance of the poet's interior landscape rather than the poet's place in the larger community." While these generalizations cannot be empirically proven, they are borne out by a perusal of the contents of most American poetry magazines, where free verse and autobiographical subject matter far outweigh closed forms and such genres as the dramatic monologue and narrative. If the subjectivism of the deep image school and the surrealism of the

70's have waned to a degree, the reader still will not have to look far to find such leaps of association as this one by Jack Driscoll, from a recent issue of *Poetry*: "I stared and stared / at the shape of my mother's lips, the square of Kleenex almost dissolved, a perfect red O / floating in the toilet. / I don't know why I thought of you, Houdini, / naked beneath the frozen Detroit river."

If one is a believer in neat Hegelian progressions, "the New Narrative & the New Formalism" that are the subjects of this collection would indeed seem inevitable, representing a synthesis that repudiates certain aspects of the past and consolidates others. Both of the movements that make up *Expansivist Poetry* favor retention of a relaxed, conversational idiom and a subject matter, according to Robert McPhillips, derived "not from the academy but from the quotidian world and the desire to write about emotion directly and memorably." The poet should reject the excesses of confessionalism in favor of a more objective stance; as McDowell notes in outlining ten qualities of a New Narrative, "In a good narrative poem the narrator is a witness." A more traditional approach to prosody is advocated by a number of the participants. Wyatt Prunty, decrying what he calls the "stylish, highly marketable thinness" of the poetry of Robert Creeley and A.R. Ammons, what he wittily terms "Emaciated Poetry," argues for "rhythm regular enough to function as rhythm, lines long enough to allow that rhythm to work." All of these, if not quite automatically yielding what the book's jacket loudly promises ("THIS BOOK IS ABOUT POETRY YOU CAN READ!"), at least offer alternatives to an American poetry whose bankruptcy is undeniably demonstrated by its lack of readers beyond the poets themselves, and by its general retreat into the closed world of the university writing programs and presses subsidized by public funds.

As much as one might welcome the levelheadedness that characterizes the writing in *Expansive Poetry*, some problems surface almost immediately. The writers' tone is often too shrill and self-congratulatory in alluding to "struggle" and the "irritated and isolat-

ed" persistence of the poets they advocate. The wilderness in which they have cried has not been without its compensations: Feirstein lists several impressive awards and a Guggenheim in his biographical notes; Dick Allen has received grants from the NEA and the Ingram-Merrill Foundation; Timothy Steele's *Sapphics Against Anger and Other Poems* was published by Random House. Further, the circle of writers discussed here may be too small to validate the editor's claims that the poetry has had time "to prevail and establish itself," especially since many of the essays refer to poetry written by the book's own contributors. These blemishes notwithstanding, they are more than balanced by the often hysterical responses quoted from poets of the other camp. Diane Wakoski somehow manages to equate T.S. Eliot's poetics with Ronald Reagan's politics; another critic labels the movement "Yuppie Poetry"; Bin Ramke, poetry editor for the University of Georgia Press, asks whether "the return . . . to received forms" has occurred because "the elite wants its badge shined." One notes in all three comments a simplistic, even simpleminded, attempt to politicize the aims of the movement. Addressing this point, Paul Lake entitles his essay "Toward a Liberal Poetics," arguing that politicization is "simply a rather shabby rhetorical device employed to frighten the sheep back into the fold." Unfortunately, some of the other contributors employ the same strategies. At the end of their fascinating essay on the neurological basis of poetic meter, "The Neural Lyre," Frederick Turner and Ernst Pöppel make the farfetched contention that "free verse, like existentialist philosophy, is nicely adapted to the needs of the bureaucratic and even the totalitarian state, because of its confinement of human concern within narrow specialized limits where it will not be politically threatening." The legions of Hitler and Stalin did not march to the different drummer of projective verse.

A larger defect than any of these, however, arises from the need to gather several different poetic camps under the *expansivist* banner, an attempt that leads to confused aims in many essays. While many of the contributors explore the possibilities of the long poem, no one ever manages to define how

long *long* is, as if Poe's preposterous hundred-line limit had settled the question for all time. Either through oversight or willful omission scant attention is paid to such extended efforts as James Merrill's *The Changing Light at Sandover*, Vikram Seth's verse novel *The Golden Gate*, or Alfred Corn's *Notes from a Child of Paradise*. Similarly, no one succeeds in explaining how the New Narrative differs from the old; Richard Moore skillfully examines the delights of narrative poetry, but his chief exemplars are Hardy and Frost. McDowell's ten points of definition, which grew out of his and Mark Jarman's editorial criteria for *The Reaper*, contain little that cannot be deduced from the *Poetics*. In one of the collection's clearest pieces of analysis, Robert McPhillips contrasts the plain styles of the New Formalists with the baroque utterances of the 50's academics, but, in citing examples from the early works of John Hollander, Anthony Hecht, and Richard Wilbur, he ignores the more relaxed idioms employed by all three poets since roughly the mid-1960's. While "expansive" may be as good a label as any for the general directions probed in these essays, no clear relationship is established between a poet's technique (whether to write in meter or free verse, for example) and his way of dealing with subject matter (the ancient distinctions of lyrical, dramatic, and narrative approaches).



Nevertheless, *Expansive Poetry* should prove heartening to readers who have found little to cheer them in the last few decades of American poetry, provocative only to those who have some stake in maintaining the hegemonies of such intertwined entities as the Associated Writing Programs, the *American Poetry Review*, and national and state arts councils. The common sense and lucid style common to most of the essays in this collection are good recommendations for the works they examine, and, in seeking them out, one hopes to encounter the honorable aims of pleasure and instruction that too much contemporary poetry seems to have abandoned. ◊

Feminism Fatigued

by William Murchison

Weak Link: The Feminization of the American Military

by Brian Mitchell

Chicago & Washington: Regnery Gateway; 232 pp., \$17.95

The feminist century—ours—is markedly different from any period known . . . I was going to say “to man” but perhaps we don’t talk that way anymore. Events have transformed the relationship of the sexes from one in which men occupied most leadership roles to one in which women make laws, minister the sacraments, and direct corporate takeovers. Over the past twenty years, landmarks have been swallowed up. The terrain is dreamlike: familiar in its own way, and yet shrouded in mist. So quickly have the changes come, so broadly and deeply have they penetrated society, that we cannot completely comprehend what has been happening. It still startles, for instance, to happen on a book jacket bearing a title like *Weak Link: The Feminization of the American Military*. We all know that for the past couple of decades there have been women in all branches of the military service, but we did not know—perhaps had not even thought to wonder—whether the basic meaning of military service had changed.

We know in our hips, to borrow from Willmoore Kendall, that war is about death and suffering and heroism and that none of this will be different short of the Second Coming. Thus we assume that the military, in assimilating women into its ranks, requires that they live up to the masculine requirements of strength and bravery. The thesis of Brian Mitchell’s valorous book—I’ll be surprised if he isn’t lynched on account of it—is that the military has failed to keep in mind these realities: that it has downgraded performance standards in the name of equal job opportunity; that it is building a kinder, gentler military that may or may not pass the next test it faces.

As recently as 1986, Ronald Rea-

gan’s secretary of the Army, John O. Marsh, Jr., asserted that modern military values mirror “the ethic of our people which denies any assertive national power doctrine and projects a love and mercy to all.” Love! Mercy! A fine theological duo, certainly, but the Army is not a seminary. The human consensus, from Homer to Patton, is that the army’s job is unlovingly to stomp the bejesus out of the enemy.

Soldiering-as-a-man’s-job is one of those antique prejudices we are instructed to shed in the last decade of the feminist century: the military bureaucracy seems to have shed it almost completely. If you wonder how soldiers can assert unsoldierly things, remember who appropriates the money the military spends. Congress. Congress is dominated by political, ah, leaders dependent on the support of the feminist lobby. The military knows on what side its bread is buttered. “Personnel,” writes Mitchell, who is a reporter for the *Navy Times* and a former infantry officer, “are required to attend equal opportunity training during which EO officers preach the sanctity of sexual equality and the folly and immorality of belief in traditional sex roles. The definition of sexual harassment has expanded to include the open expression of opposition to women in the military. Officers and senior enlisteds are kept in check by their performance reports; a ‘ding’ in the block that reads ‘Support Equal Opportunity’ can have career-ending consequences.”

The military still resists the introduction of women into combat but has so narrowed the definition of “combat” that many female soldiers would be caught up in the shooting should war actually come. Meanwhile, the sisterhood continues to campaign in behalf of the right of sisters to go into combat, from which the patriarchy has so far excluded them. The question of male-female roles is one that society, out of embarrassment, hesitates to wrestle with. To raise it at all is to acknowledge archaic patterns of thought. Feminist successes in sweeping aside employment barriers have conditioned us to

believe that, for professional purposes anyway, men and women are interchangeable units. If a man can string telephone wires or sew sutures, so can a woman.

The Pope finds that fewer and fewer Roman Catholics listen patiently to explanations of why all priests are male. (In the American Communion they no longer are.) “Come on,” say advanced spirits, “what do you mean a woman can’t say words over some bread and some wine, same as a man can say them?” The priesthood has become another affirmative action frontier, along whose borders impatient caravans are camped, awaiting only the signal to enter. The military is not unlike the priesthood in that it is a sexual vocation—of secular, not theological, character. Men are soldiers for self-evident reasons, such as aggressiveness and upper-body strength (simply to leap from a foxhole, carrying a rifle, takes muscle).

History shows forth a few—a very few—female military leaders, like Boudicca and Zenobia, but no feminized armies at all. The Amazons never existed, and the Israelis, contrary to a familiar fabrication, employ military women largely as clerks, typists, nurses, and so on. Never do Israeli women go into combat.

On what grounds, then, do we challenge the concept of the man as warrior, the woman as tender of the home fires? Ideological grounds, of course: what women want, and these days it is a lot they want. Actually, as Mitchell shows, feminists have divided motives in seeking to integrate the military. Some want to show they’re as tough and hard-bitten as any man (though few if any have achieved this). Others want to sensitize the warmaking profession, to make it more tender, more egalitarian, more pacifistic, of all things. The Army’s male adjutant general recently expressed the pious hope that among American warriors there would grow “sensitivity toward and more caring for one another.”

The net result is the same . . . the sanding down of rough male edges, the softening of tone and substance. Veter-