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The UB Poetics Discussion Group

242 monthly editions · December 1993 – January 2014

The Currents of the Poetics List

An Introduction to the Reading Editions

An Introduction · by *Kristen M. Fabians*

An introduction to the complete run of reading editions, in two movements — the room's arguments about poetry, and its arguments about itself. Quoted phrases in teal are verbatim from the list; the months in gold are live links to the editions in this folder.

The Currents of the Poetics List

Kristen M. Fabians

These are the reading editions of the Poetics List of the University at Buffalo — two hundred and forty-two months of it, from the first message in [December 1993](#) to the day its founder closed the room in [January 2014](#). I have set every month down, in order, exactly as the archive delivered it. Having now lived inside the whole of it, what I can tell you is that the list was one long argument that never reached a verdict and was never meant to; the value is in the arguing, and in the fact that the same few questions came back, year after year, wearing new clothes and no nearer to settled. I have grown fond of that failure. A room that could resolve its own questions would have had little reason to keep the light on for twenty years; this one kept it burning precisely because nothing was ever finished — and these editions are the record of that unfinishedness, the longest argument I know of that stayed, from first message to last, worth having.

The room argued about two things, and this introduction is divided the same way. It argued about poetry — what a poem is, whom to read, what to do with a great poet who was also a monster, how verse stands beside painting and music and the languages it cannot speak. And it argued about itself — who was allowed in, what a poem was worth, whether the academy had bought it, how it should be governed and how it was dying. I have named the recurring currents of both, marked where each first broke and where it returned, and given the months plainly so that a reader may turn to them. Quoted phrases in teal are verbatim from the list; the months in gold are live links to the editions in this folder.

I · THE ARGUMENTS ABOUT POETRY

What a poem is: the lyric, form, and content

Before it was anything else, the list was a room that argued without cease about what a poem is and does. It could not agree whether form was anything more than content rearranged, nor whether the lyric was dying or merely — as one member put it in [June 2008](#), weighing its fate — becoming “*such a fleeting thing*”. It prosecuted close reading as either the deepest form of attention or a reactionary vice ([March 1995](#), and again over Plath and Hughes in [March 1998](#)); it took up description, abstraction, the sentence, the line, the semicolon, even the single word “the,” as though each were a moral position, which on this list it was. The

standing surprise of the archive is how much genuine poetics gets transacted inside what looks, at a glance, like a squabble.

The mouth and the page

The list argued without end whether a poem lives on the page or in the air. The poetry slam and the spoken word set the oral tradition against the printed line — one member defending it, in [August 2003](#), as “*the human tradition of storytelling*” — while the same season worried the long shift from orality to literacy. The question sharpened as PennSound and the sound-archive came into view ([January 2006](#)): is the poem the score or the performance, and what does a reading lose when it becomes a recording? Sound poetry and homophonic translation kept the ear in the argument to the end. The room tested whether meaning lived in the mark or in the mouth, and never chose.

The founders: Olson, Creeley, and the Black Mountain line

This was a Buffalo list, and it never forgot whose house it stood in. Charles Olson presided over it as a first principle — the poem as an extension of the body, the open field, proprioception — and the room turned back to him at the very end, in its thinnest months, as if to a source ([September 2013](#)). Robert Creeley, of Buffalo’s own faculty, was the living link to that inheritance until his death, and the room’s grief for him never wholly closed. The Black Mountain past was both a measure and a reproach: in [January 2010](#), deep in the decline, a member asked whether anything like it — “*Can anything like the Black Mountain School ever expand our possibilities again?*” — could ever come round a second time. The answer the archive gives is no, and the asking is the whole pathos of the late years.

The poem as transmission

The most metaphysical current, and among the most durable, treats the poet as a receiver — taking dictation off the air. It begins in the early years with Jack Spicer’s ghosts and Martians, the voice of the dead and the voice from outside, and it returns whenever the room doubts its own originality: the poet-as-radio recovered in [January 2013](#) beside the first poem ever sent by optical telegraph, the small crowd-funded survivals of [June 2013](#). That Robin Blaser, of Spicer’s own circle, is mourned in [May 2009](#) gives the late run a quiet frame of ghosts. The room never resolved whether the poem is made or merely heard, and it was most itself when it left the question open.

Ezra Pound, and the poisoned inheritance

No figure troubled the room more, or more honestly, than Ezra Pound — the modernist master whose fascism and antisemitism could not be quarantined from the achievement that had shaped nearly everyone in the room. The list took him up as its hardest case in the early years (**March 1996**), reckoned with the fascist sympathies of poets at large in **September 2004**, and returned to him as a standing wound, most fully in **February 2008**, when a member framed the only honest teaching position as teaching Pound “*as an abomination*”. The question was never whether the work was great and the man monstrous — both were granted — but whether the greatness can be received without laundering the monstrosity, and the room, to its credit, never let itself off the hook by settling it. (That thread reproduces Pound’s own worst lines; this edition does not.)

What a poem can do: power and futility

Older than any of these, and never settled, is whether a poem does anything at all. Auden’s verdict that poetry makes nothing happen hangs over the whole run: the room asked, as early as **January 1995**, whether poetry makes anything happen, and kept asking after every defeat — most starkly the morning after the **November 2004** election, when it weighed futility against rebellion and one member answered that “*The Bushes of history come and go, while Whitman remains singing.*” When the stakes were highest the question turned concrete: the **August 2007** thread on the Poems from Guantánamo asked not whether verse is powerful in the abstract but what a poem written from a cell could be made to do. The room never decided, and went on writing as though it mattered, which may be the nearest thing to an answer it had.

The other arts: image, music, and silence

Poetry on this list was never alone; it was always being measured against its sisters. The room argued poetry and the visual — ekphrasis, concrete and visual poetics, the poem set beside the painting — from the early exchanges on poetry and visual art (**February 1994**) to the question, in **May 2008**, of which poets had come closest to the mid-century abstract expressionists. It argued poetry and music constantly, from jazz to the John Cage of **February 2005**, when a thread on 4’33” drew the confession that it was “*the only piece which I literally can’t live without*”. Film-poetry, puppetry, the poem as musical score: the room used the other arts the way it used everything, as a mirror in which to ask what, if anything, belongs to poetry alone.

New media, and the digital poem

These editions live at the Electronic Poetry Center, and the list never forgot that the electronic was not merely its address but one of its subjects. It took up hypertext and Web poetry early ([December 1995](#)), argued code poetry and the poem built to be read by a machine, and dreamed, in [December 2005](#), of an authorless communal poem — one member wanting the wiki simply “*to expand the definition of what poetry is*”. By [December 2010](#) the digital had turned archival, mapping Creeley’s world onto a screen. The room was never sure whether the new media were a new poetics or only a new means of delivery, but it was, fittingly, among the first rooms anywhere to have the argument at all.

Translation, and the outward reach

The list’s healthiest instinct, and its least self-regarding, was to reach past its own borders. Its best late months are often the ones that carry something in by hand — a translation, a foreign tradition, a poet the room had never read. It argued translation and its ethics, and who can be said to own a translated line ([October 2003](#)); it turned outward again and again as it thinned — to Celan read from the South Pacific, to the Bengali avant-garde that Ginsberg had carried home ([April 2013](#)), to six decades of Cuban poetry that left one member admitting, in [October 2013](#), that until then “*I knew almost nothing about Cuban poetry*”. The room was provincial about a great many things; about the map of poetry it was not.

Appropriation, originality, and the machine

The list argued the century’s central question about originality more fully than any journal did. Collage, citation, theft; Flarf surfacing publicly in [August 2003](#); a machine-written fake anthology passed off as real in [October 2008](#); one poet appropriating another poet’s act of appropriation in [October 2009](#); a hundred-dollar prize offered, in [April 2010](#), for the best explanation of “Art is theft.” Against all of it the room kept a counter-faith: that witnessed, lived, unrepeatable work — the kind that cannot be scraped or forged — is the one thing appropriation cannot take. Conceptualism found in this room its fiercest advocates and its most stubborn resisters, often in the same week.

II · THE ARGUMENTS ABOUT ITSELF

The room that could not keep a word

The list's truest signature was that it could not hold on to its own vocabulary. It could not define the avant-garde (**March 1996**), the sonnet (**May 1996**), or voice (**May 1997**), and could not name Language Poetry until a stranger renamed it (**October 1997**). Ken Edwards once begged the room never to open a thread on what Language Poetry was; they opened it on schedule — in **October 1997**, **September 2000**, and **April 2002** — by which point the truest answer anyone could give was a jazz shrug: *"If you can't hear it, baby, I can't tell you."* A room of poets is one that distrusts its own definitions, and this one distrusted them for twenty years.

A different ledger than the news

The list kept its own calendar, and it was not the world's. Elections, impeachments, a machine beating a grandmaster — mentioned in passing or not at all; the world got in only when a poet carried it. The Starr Report entered **September 1998** smuggled under Whitman's name; the Florida recount of **November 2000** went all but unspoken in the weeks it consumed the country. The habit broke only under direct fire, and then completely after the towers fell — **October 2001** is the one month the room could speak of nothing else. The war that followed would not leave: the march of **February 2003**, the invasion month of **March 2003** that produced the list's largest volume ever, and then **May 2004**, when the photographs from Abu Ghraib did what no poem in the room could.

Who is in the room

Beneath the standing claim that the text came first ran the harder truth that who was present governed what could be said. The question was first put as a matter of gender — who had gone silent, and why — and the room kept taking its own census: counting subscribers against women's names in **December 1999**, concluding in **February 2000** that *"maybe women don't feel invited"*, arguing an all-male best-of list in **November 2009** and Wikipedia's thirteen-percent problem in **February 2011**. Its reckoning with race came slower and cost it members — a poet leaving over it in **March 2005**, the room turning to examine itself after the election of **November 2008**. These were the arguments the list was worst at, and could least stop having.

What a poem is worth

Cut off from the market that priced everything else, the room argued endlessly about a value it could not measure. The whole of the year **2000** is the list taking

its own price — asking what poetry is worth (**April 2000**) and recoiling from the answer that the market is the *“ultimate and only judge”*. It set the hundred-million-dollar bequest to a single magazine against the rooms where poets went unpaid (**November 2002**); it fought prize-culture for years; and it watched, with complicated feeling, one of its own Language poets crowned with the Pulitzer in **April 2010** — *“little thought-bombs detonating in the mind long after the first reading”*.

The infrastructure of poetry

Beneath every argument about value ran a plainer one about rent and postage — the material base that keeps poems in the world at all. The list watched the small presses that sustained it falter and fall: the University of California cutbacks (**May 2002**), the Black Sparrow archive sealed (**June 2003**), a university press killed by its own institution (**August 2012**). Against the losses it improvised mutual aid — the Poets in Need fund of **November 2006**, one recipient saying plainly that it *“bailed me out of a cold-sweat fiscal crisis”* — and wrote the open letters that defended the distributors nobody else would. The room could not price a poem, but it knew exactly what it cost to keep one in print.

The academy, and the fear of being kept

The list’s oldest dread was that its opposition could be absorbed by the institutions it opposed. It asked in **September 2000** whether Language poetry had simply gone academic and answered with the colder joke that the real buyer had been not the university but the business school. It watched the MFA come under fire in **February 2004**, weighed poems counted as tenure credit in **April 2011**, and named the whole anxiety plainly at last — “The Academisation of Avant-Garde Poetry” — in **June 2012**. Domestication, the room decided again and again, was a form of death.

The taming, the blogs, and the long decline

Two structural events shaped the room more than any argument. The first was the taming of 1998–99, when the list passed from open posting to full moderation; by **April 1999** it was learning to live under its own new law, quieter and never as wild again. The second came slower: from **March 2003** the list lost its writers to their own weblogs, until one poet’s blog set the room’s agenda from outside it (**December 2003**) and a coarsening commons drew a formal flame policy (**March 2004**). The volume only thinned after, the room naming its own decline aloud by 2005 and dwindling toward a near-silent noticeboard. The late anxieties

— permission, ownership, who may speak — all descend from that first structural fact.

Grief conducted at one remove

The most reliable note in the whole run is elegiac, and its strangest feature is distance: the room argued without end and fell silent for the dead — especially the dead outside the guild. Paul Metcalf's death in **January 1999** drew the truest line anyone offered about the enterprise — "*who will notice, outside this list? Hardly anyone.*" So many months close not on a poet but on a musician mourned in a few lines. The one death the room could not hold at a distance was Robert Creeley's, of Buffalo's own faculty, who died in **March 2005** and kept returning for years after — misspelled on a reissue, his memorial snowed out, his *Collected* coldly reviewed and hotly defended. The list's loyalty to Creeley was its surviving soul.

The satirical vein

Running crosswise through all of it is the room's comedy, which was never decoration but argument by other means — the weapon the list reached for whenever a point could not be won head-on. It invented a nonsense-word and was using it in earnest within weeks (quertzblatz, **April 1996**); it answered a generational taxonomy from a parody space capsule; and when Billy Collins was named Poet Laureate in **June 2001**, it refused the honour not with a petition but with a year-long carnival, electing its own Anti-Laureate and filing mock-decrees in his name, styling itself gleefully after "*the anti-popes at Avignon*". On a list forever failing to define its own terms, comedy was the one argument that required no conclusion; the room laughed exactly where it could not agree — which is to say constantly — and the slow loss of that comic nerve is one way to date its ending.

III · THE COMPANY

A room is its voices, and a handful of these gave the run its recurring weather. I have not tried to be fair to all seven hundred subscribers, only to catch the ones whose habit of mind left a mark on the record — and a few who left theirs in a single post and were, otherwise, almost silent.

The systematiser was Ron Silliman, who sorted the field into generations, kept the running lists and taxonomies the room could never quite disown, and, from **December 2003**, set its agenda from a blog outside it — flat and unanswerable

whether the subject was the war (“*a thug state committed only to bullying the world*”) or a cable host absurdly poised to “*go after Bruce Andrews for assigning*” a syllabus (**November 2006**). Against his taxonomies stood Charles Bernstein, the founder and the room’s presiding wit, who argued by play on the faith that a joke could carry a thought no essay could, and who was capable, at Creeley’s death, of the plainest grief in the whole run — Creeley gone “*as the sun rose over Odessa, Texas*” (**March 2005**). Above both, when she chose to descend into a thread, was Marjorie Perloff, the scholar among the poets and the nearest thing the list had to an authority; she could end a discussion of herself simply by arriving in it, once signing on as “*From Evil Twin Numero Uno*” (**March 2000**).

If Silliman kept the room’s ledgers, Maria Damon kept its conscience, asking more insistently than anyone what a poem does to the person on the other end of it and reading outward when the room read only among itself — so that the Poems from Guantánamo could strike her as “*a knockout. super-powerful*” (**August 2007**) while others still wondered how one reviews a censored book. Aldon Nielsen kept its dead, posting more of the run’s obituaries than anyone and finding, for Octavia Butler, the elegiac line that doubled as verdict — “*and now it’s winter in America*” (**February 2006**). Alan Sondheim, the highest-volume voice in the whole run and its resident net-artist, kept its noise and defended it as such, holding the list to be “*a place of vulnerability as well as advertisement*” (**March 2004**) — a treatise one hour and, the next, simply “*Please help me, what are these fish?*” (**September 2007**). And Jim Behrle kept it honest by clowning, the one willing to name the coarsening aloud even as he added to the comedy.

The century’s hardest question about originality had its house radicals in Kenneth Goldsmith, Kent Johnson, and Christian Bök, who between them pressed uncreative writing, appropriation, and the poem a machine could make — Bök putting the dare most starkly when he defended poetry as an “*inevitably impossible, doomed, or failed endeavor*” (**July 2009**); the room gave them its fiercest advocates and its most stubborn resisters at once, often on the same afternoon. And where the room hedged, CA Conrad — the moral shout, frequently in capitals — refused to, turning it toward the injustices it might otherwise have quietly filed away and pressing the incoming inaugural poet, in **December 2008**, to “*consider saying No*” over Rick Warren and Proposition 8.

But a listserv is not only its loud regulars, and some of the record’s most valuable things came from people who otherwise said almost nothing. When NATO bombed Belgrade the room heard from inside it: Djuric’s “*i hope i will write*”

(**March 1999**) outweighed a hundred posts on whether poetry does anything. When the levees broke in New Orleans the list became, for a fortnight, a switchboard — Skip Fox promising to *“post as I might hear”*, Camille Martin writing in from refuge as things kept *“worsening as levees continue to be breached”* (**August 2005**). From Genoa in **July 2001** came Vidaver’s account of a summit whose policing *“left one protester dead”*; and near the end, almost from nowhere, Switaj put the question the room had spent twenty years failing to answer — *“Why must rigor be expressed in terms of conflict?”* (**December 2009**). These were the lurkers, and the room was the better for the days they broke cover.

. . .
Envoi

I have set these twenty years down as the archive delivered them, in order and unabridged, because a room made entirely of talk leaves nothing behind but its talk, and this was the talk. The list could not keep a word, could not price a poem, could not settle who belonged in it or what to do with the poets it could neither honor nor disown — and it did all of this at a volume that thinned, month over month, from hundreds of voices to a bare handful; by **December 2013** a single month held fourteen messages. Then, in **January 2014**, the traffic surged one last time, from fourteen to two hundred and sixty-nine, as the whole diaspora came back to say goodbye, and the founder who had opened the room in 1993 closed it, calling it *“great company and the origin of friendships”* and asking only that *“The archives should remain in place.”* They have. This is them.

Afterword — The Form of the Room

It is worth ending on the form itself, because the form was half the argument. The Poetics List ran on LISTSERV, the mailing-list software Éric Thomas wrote in 1986 for the BITNET academic network — a push medium in the strict sense: one address at the University at Buffalo, and every message it received was pushed into the mailboxes of all seven hundred-odd subscribers, to be answered with a keystroke. Charles Bernstein, in his 1999 preface to the list’s first anthology, remembered explaining the mechanism to friends as if describing a marvel — you write once and everyone has it, almost at once — and thought the genre that

resulted was “*a cross between letters and essays*”, quick prose improvisations with the reach of print and the intimacy of a note.

This was not the only form on offer. Usenet, the distributed discussion network built in 1980, ran in parallel for the list’s entire first decade, and its poetry groups — rec.arts.poems, the alt. hierarchy — were everything Poetics was not: pull rather than push, threaded, wide open, effectively anonymous. Anyone could post; no one was quite accountable; the signal drowned. The founders chose the subscription model precisely against all this. Here you were a name and a known quantity, the list carried a declared editorial focus, and you could not simply decline to see what was said. The intimacy was the virtue and the vulnerability at once — which is why the room could sustain a single argument for weeks, and why, once its openness was abused, it had to be placed under moderation in 1998–99.

The blog undid the arrangement from the other direction. When Blogger launched in 1999 and Movable Type followed in 2001, they gave each poet a room of their own — owned, designed, permanent, addressed to whoever chose to come. By 2002 Ron Silliman’s blog was among the most-read pages in the field, and the effect on the commons was immediate: the best talk migrated to a hundred private pages, and the shared table emptied. The list registered the loss as it happened, meeting the coarsening with a formal flame policy in 2004 and, after that, a long thinning. What the blog gained in autonomy it surrendered in congregation, and a network of monologues is not a conversation.

The feed finished what the blog began. Facebook’s News Feed arrived in 2006 and Twitter the same year, and between them they replaced even the blog’s modest coherence with an algorithmic scroll — no thread to follow, no archive one could keep, no editorial project of any kind, and attention itself reengineered as the product. The Poetics List closed in **January 2014**, at nearly the exact moment the feed consumed the attention the room had once held; and what ended was not only a list but a form — bounded, named, self-governing, archived — that the newer forms were built to be the opposite of. Part of what these editions preserve, then, is not merely what was said but a way of being together in writing that the room outlived by only a little, and that has not since been rebuilt.

A Table of Currents

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