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*For however insignificant a role the word "poet"
may play in the intellectual history of our time,
future generations will find its unexpected, albeit
inextinguishable, traces in our economic history.*
—Robert Musil

One day, towards the end of the 1980s, Eliot Weinberger picked up a copy of the *Directory of American Poets* to find a disquieting statistic:

4,672 poets, all of them published, and all of them, incredibly, approved by a committee which determines that they are, in fact, poets. To read only one book by every living American poet — at the rate of one book a day, no holidays — would take 13 years, during which time another few thousand poets would have appeared.¹

Weinberger was struck by the difference between the rates of publishing during his own post-modern moment at the close of a dark decade and the height of high modernism two generations earlier. Looking back at a survey by the journal *Accent*, which had set out to take stock of the literary 1930s, he discovers that "there were only 151 American poets, and they published 264 books of poetry. If one read only two books a month in that decade, one would have read every new book of American poetry."² Times change, but neither of the periods Weinberger focuses on were exceptional; the publication of poetry increased steadily and exponentially — year by year — over the course of the 20th Century, and that trend continues, unchecked, into the new millennium.

Some of the force of Weinberger's rhetoric depends on the absurd precision of his figures, but the comparison of even roughly figured quantities — or simply orders of magnitude — is worth considering. While any precise statistics are in fact quite difficult to correlate, given the number of variables and the assumptions made by different sources (above all, what counts as "poetry," as well as what kind of publishers or publications are included), the general outlines are strikingly clear, and the consequences for any consideration of what "contemporary poetry" might mean are unavoidable. In the period since Weinberger's essay was published the number of poetry books in print has doubled, the number of publishers has increased by almost 80%, and there are nearly half again as many

poetry magazines in circulation. None of these statistics accounts for the explosion in on-line publishing.³ Which means that the practical task of thinking about "contemporary poetry" is even more daunting now than it was for Weinberger. The Poets House (New York), which aspires to acquire every book of poetry published in America, excluding vanity press publications, has shelved over 20,000 volumes from between the years 1990 and 2006.⁴ According to Bowker, the leading data provider to the publishing industry (and the same company that assigns ISBN numbers), there were 37,450 poetry and drama titles between 1993 and 2006. Considering only books published during the last year: Poets House catalogued 1,971 titles with a 2006 copyright; Bowker registered 5,486 new titles under the category of poetry; and Amazon lists 9,444 poetry titles with that publication date for sale.⁵ As they stand, these numbers are significant for anyone interested in the rhetoric of "poetry"— that is, in the range of quite different texts that fall under that single capacious category — but they are easily reduced, at least to some degree, for the reader not interested in certain genres: nursery rhymes and children's books; "inspirational" verse; collections of song lyrics; reissues of public domain classics; thematic collections of light verse (there are hundreds of titles, for instance, that feature poetry about cats). Even after eliminating what Weinberger terms "nonliterary poetry," and discarding reissues or reprints of older texts, one is still faced with a staggering number of new books of poetry. A thousand new poetry books a year? Two thousand? Ten? As we'll see, the difference —for all practical purposes — is moot.

Whatever the exact numbers, their implications are startling. Perhaps most surprising is the deduction that in an economy of massive production without mass consumption, many more people write poetry than read it. Or, to be more cautiously precise: more people submit their poetry for publication than purchase the publications of others. Charles Molesworth long ago noticed that even "a small magazine of modest reputation, *Poetry Northwest*, considers forty thousand poems a year, though the magazine has fewer than one thousand subscribers."⁶ In the decades since, that discrepancy has become standard. Submissions to *Poetry* magazine are approaching one-hundred thousand per year, some ten times the journal's circulation, and the same ratio holds for first book contests: the number of manuscripts submitted to such contests is far greater — by an order of magnitude — than the number of copies sold by the winner. If other cultural spheres behaved like the poetry world, it would be as if the only visitors to art museums were themselves exhibiting painters, the only radio listeners were themselves recording musicians, all filmgoers actors. The

practice of publication aside, the psychological economy of poetry under conditions of such excess pits reading and writing against one another; the activities —once two sides of the same commitment to poetry — are now in competition with one another. Given that simply keeping abreast of new poetry publications requires an all-consuming dedication, every minute spent writing a poem is time that the conscientious poet could be using to read.

Another implication of the trend in contemporary poetry publishing bears on every reader, poet or not. Poetry faces a Malthusian limit. Bound by discrepant rates of production and consumption, the readerly economy of poetry in the twenty-first century cannot avoid a catastrophic calculus: the rate of consumption quickly hits an arithmetic limit (any one person can only read so much), but the rate of production is increasing geometrically. Even the partisan reader who wants to keep up with a particular niche within the broad field of contemporary poetry faces an overwhelming task. Consider, for instance, a reader interested in the kind of poetry published by Roof Books. The distributor for Roof, Small Press Distribution, handles around six-hundred new poetry titles a year. Excluded from that figure are chapbooks and "little magazines," which happen to be the venues for some of the most innovative new writing, and which would add at least five-hundred other relevant titles. University presses publish another several hundred new titles annually. The larger independent and commercial presses add far fewer, perhaps another hundred. So without bothering to look on-line, and without worrying about books from other countries, or in languages other than English, or anything published last year, the reader in search of one slice of new American poetry has to sift through well over a thousand relevant titles — a number already narrowed from the five to ten thousand published annually. Part of Weinberger's incredulity at the fact that those in the *Directory of American Poets* had been "approved by a committee " is clearly disdain at the bureaucratization of poetry, but part is also surely the realization that those thousands of poets had *already* been winnowed from the tens of thousands of people writing poetry and not publishing in sufficient quantities or in the proper venues to be confirmed by the *Directory*. The hypothetical reader interested in the kind of poetry published by Roof faces the same realization; even after substantially narrowing the field by some kind of editorial vetting — whether it be Small Press Distribution's decision to adopt a press or the vote of the board of a university press to publish a manuscript — the number of relevant books is staggering. Now admittedly not all of those books need to be read very carefully to have a sense of what they are like (though even a quick glance at a thousand books is no small commitment—the cost alone would be

prohibitive for most readers), but one could expect the serious and dutiful student of contemporary poetry to read two to three poetry books a day.⁷ Every day. And then, if trends continue as they have for over a century, to read even more next year— just to keep up.

Whether one views these conditions as a glut or a renaissance, the corollaries are worth considering. To begin with, it follows that views of the contemporary are necessarily narrow, and only ever partial. Quite simply: no one knows what is going on. There are no experts in contemporary poetry, no one with a clear overview of the field or the range of current trends. However little Weinberger could have learned about the poetry published in 1990, we know even less about the poetry of our current day, and can expect to know still less about whatever is published next year. Or, to be more optimistic: even assuming that somewhere— with lonely bloodshot eyes — a handful of obsessive readers are in fact managing to keep up with their two or three books per day, they have precious little time to do the additional reading that would put those books in context: no time to read up on poetry from the previous year, or the previous decade, or the last century, or from other traditions — no time for reading in any other genre, or, moreover, for communicating what they have learned from their intensely myopic study. Even if there were experts in contemporary poetry, that is, they could not put their expertise into context, and they would be hard pressed to find the time to write about what they knew.

The problem is certainly not unique to contemporary poetry. The scholar of Victorian literature, for instance, faces a similar dilemma. Tens of thousands of novels were published in Britain during Victoria's reign. One figure widely cited by historians estimates as many as sixty thousand novels in volume format alone, with far more appearing in periodical installments.⁸ Whether surveying twenty-first century poetry or nineteenth century fiction, the difficulties involved in reading so many books are the same, but the differences are telling. Most importantly, the dissimilarities between undertaking contemporaneous and retrospective projects — that is, between trying to come extemporaneously to terms with the literature of one's own time and looking back over more than a century's intervention of scholarly, commercial, and popular vetting — has allowed the institutions and disciplines that emerged around the two literatures to develop quite differently. Despite the vast number of titles, the canon of Victorian fiction is relatively small and enjoys a broad consensus about its core texts. A comparison of Ph.D. exam lists and syllabi from various literature departments reveals a surprising constant roster with only minor fluctuations (*Tess* rather than *Jude*, Stevenson rather than Stoker, *et cetera*). Reforms

and upheavals certainly occur over time; Olive Schreiner, for instance, was absent from such lists not long ago but is now a mainstay and more likely to appear than Trollope. But at any given moment the sense of the field, presented by Victorianists *as a field*, is consistent. For contemporary poetry, the inverse holds: from course to course or list to list one or two authors might haphazardly repeat — the only statistically probable name turns out to be John Ashbery—but the rosters are otherwise unpredictable. To put this another way, a graduate reading list in twentieth century poetry which does not include Gertrude Stein or Charles Olson or Bruce Andrews can still seem unremarkable and responsible, whereas an exam list in nineteenth century fiction that did not include Thackeray or Eliot or Brontë would seem radical. The former seems to merely make assumptions, while the latter seems to be making a point.⁹

Moreover, debates about modern and contemporary poetry display a far more contentious set-theory mentality. The Victorian canon (to stay with that comparison) is of course open to revision and reassessment and idiosyncratic emphases: should religious tracts be included in a consideration of Victorian fiction? should one read Charles Kingsley's *Hypatia* rather than Charles Dickens' *Bleak House*? Lady Jane Wilde rather than Oscar Wilde? However heated such debates might be, no one opposed to replacing Edward Bulwer-Lytton with Wilkie Collins protests by dismissing *The Moonstone* with the declaration "that's not fiction!" In contrast, works that leading scholars of poetry would hold to be key canonical texts might not even qualify as "poetry" for others: is *Tender Buttons* the foundational poem of modernism or not poetry at all? Is John Cage one of the central figures of post-war poetry or not a poet at all? I remember leaving a reading by Kenneth Goldsmith (one of the contributors to the present volume and a writer discussed in the essay by Sianne Ngai) and overhearing a conversation in which one of the most prominent critics of American poetry was asked what he thought of the poetry reading. His reply: "What poetry reading?" Such disagreements are one distinctive facet of the discourse around contemporary poetry, which lacks consensus not merely on critical assessments, aesthetic valuations, and canonical choices, but on the very contours of the field from which a canon can begin to be drawn.

That fundamental divide — or rather, merely the reader's knowledge that such categorical disagreements exist— points to another difference between contemporary poetry and other fields: how genres and subgenres come to be mapped. New titles in the various categories of genre fiction ("horror," "science fiction," "westerns," "romance," *et cetera*) are

also published annually in the thousands. Film genres are another case in point. While the reviewer of commercial Hollywood studio films could watch a movie every other day and easily keep up on all the new theatrical releases, the viewer interested in Bollywood films would need to watch two or three films every day (assuming that screenings could be found); but for the cineaste interested in the type of independent films submitted to the Sundance Film Festival there are simply not enough hours in the day: the Festival received over 8,000 films last year. Contemplating such figures reveals the assumptions and prejudices we have about different cultural categories. Genre fiction, by definition, is formulaic; one assumes that variations among the several thousand "fantasy" novels published each year will be minor. Sub-genres of poetry are presumably equally formulaic, but the category as a whole is far too broad to be handled in the same way as "true crime." Similarly, do we imagine that the conventions of Indian cinema are more strict than "indie" film conventions? Does the viewer who sees only a fraction of Hindi releases have a better sense of that genre than the viewer who sees a similar percentage of documentaries? And which viewer is closer to the position of the reader of contemporary poetry? The point is that no one will ever know: a claim for the vast uniformity of contemporary poetry could never be confirmed, just as, conversely, Bollywood cinema might display a radical formal diversity unseen by any given viewer who just happens to see the hundreds of films that are very much alike but who has missed the hundreds of others pioneering unimagined new cinematic directions.

One obvious implication of these considerations is that the umbrella term "poetry" may not be very useful. Worse yet, it may well lead to the kind of confusions Ludwig Wittgenstein termed "grammatical errors." Because we have a single term, we imagine that all of the things designated by that term share a family resemblance. The category of "poetry" inclines us to forget that one "poem" may have much more to do with a film, or a musical composition, or something else entirely than with another text that also happens to be called a poem. More troubling, a further implication of these figures is that the models we have for literary knowledge and expertise, as well as the kinds of activities that we imagine to constitute scholarship, need to be radically revised or entirely replaced. Surveys, broad synoptic claims, arguments based on norms, strong accounts of large-scale historical change, and other modes of inquiry by individual readers based on comprehensive knowledge and global perspectives can no longer be maintained. At least two alternatives present themselves.

On the one hand, even greater distance and further abstraction: rather than a series of evaluative close readings, critics might assemble data about work that could be analyzed

—either collectively or mechanically — at some remove. Instead of attempting to account for individual books, the task would be to graph and model the complex poetic ecosystem itself, or to map data in ways that their composite assembly would reveal new information. Rather than look at discrete texts, criticism would turn to charting the relations among texts and visualizing those networks themselves. Franco Moretti has suggested a similar solution to the problem of trying to come to terms with the field of nineteenth-century European novels: "a field this large cannot be understood by stitching together separate bits of knowledge about individual cases, because it *isn't* a sum of individual cases: it's a collective system, that should be grasped as such, as a whole."¹⁰ Such an approach is analogous to what Lev Manovich has called the database logic of new media, where the focus is not on the production of new data, but on new ways of accessing, ordering, and displaying large quantities of already accumulated data. Close readings and explications would give way to an activity more like tagging.

On the other hand, criticism might abandon the dream of comprehensive knowledge altogether, as well as the values of totality and mastery it implies. Surrendering to the impossibility of understanding any field so vast, critical inquiry would be confined to those singularities, exceptions, idiosyncrasies and minute particulars that can only be understood in isolation. A criticism ever more local, focused, specialized, and *ad hoc* would allow scholars to continue to read texts in more or less the same ways, but require that they be careful to frame their readings in very precise terms, without making more generalized claims. Furthermore, part of the task of criticism under these conditions would shift to more emphatically communicating the essence and necessity of poems that the critic's audience may never have heard about, much less read. Not just analyses and readings of particular passages or poems, but quick and rich descriptions of what it means for the text in question to be considered a poem; not just a persuasive argument about a text but a persuasive evaluation of its urgency: given all the other poems one might instead be reading, why this one? Without needing to convince people to think in new ways about a poem they know and have already read, the force of critical rhetoric comes to bear instead on the value of talking about a poem, *any poem*, at all. Instead of being organized around common texts, discussions of poetry would have to cohere around a common interest in the critical arguments that can be made about poems, around a commitment to speak to the contemporary. Without shared assumptions, canonical texts, coherent traditions or standard references, the critical discourse around contemporary poetry would thus become not so much a traversal of common ground as

reports from distant frontiers that define a foreign, uncharted space; an aggregation of distinct, discontinuous and widely separated points rather than a congruence of overlapping planes; pizzicati rather than chords. The character of critical conversations thus transforms from more public to more private discourses, from continuous dialogue toward a series of discrete monologues, from the mode of debate toward the mode of the manifesto. Criticism in this new dispensation would be all the more intently focused on the specifics of the individual, particular poem, but with no regard for "poetry" *en masse* —even as a commitment to "contemporary poetry," in the abstract, and as an ideal, must come to supercede collective allegiance to any particular canon of poems.

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But wait a minute. Too *much* poetry? This vision of excess runs diametrically counter to one of the first *idées reçues* of contemporary literature: that there is not enough poetry; that its miniscule share of the cultural landscape renders it insignificant and invisible— that poetry is so marginal it doesn't matter. "'The Marginalization of Poetry' — it almost/ goes without saying," as Bob Perelman acknowledges.¹¹ And indeed, statistics also support this view of draught and scarcity. In comparison with total book production, poetry accounts for only about one percent of all new titles. A National Endowment for the Arts survey in 2004 found that only 12% of adults had read any poetry in the previous year.¹² These statistics of fractions and modesty can be reconciled with the sense of excess if one remembers the absolute terms of their scale (12% of adult Americans is still some 25 million readers), but looking at any particular book, the picture is inescapably bleak. The typical print run for a book of small press poetry, somewhere between 200 to 1,000 copies, is almost always optimistic, determined more by volume breaks in production costs for cover printing and binding than by any realistically projected sales.¹³ Only a very small handful of those poetry books, somewhere less than half of one percent of one percent, will ever sell more than a thousand copies, or go into a second printing. To assign a book of small press poetry in an undergraduate class can instantly double its sales. Repeating the class once or twice can send that title out of print. Under the best conditions (a publisher able to both sell directly and also through a reliably accessible, stable, well advertised and easily found distributor willing to warehouse a title for more than a decade), the typical book of small press poetry — over the course of ten or twenty years — will sell a hundred copies. Which returns us to the same

predicament in which excess left us. Not only could no individual read all of the books of contemporary poetry, but any individual book of contemporary poetry is likely to have been read by only a very few people. The dream of a common text has long been lost to poetry. If you have read a book of small press poetry, you are likely to constitute one or two percent of its total readership. Moreover, with a print run of a thousand copies, a book of poetry aims, hubristically, at around .008% — *less than one percent of one percent* — of the American poetry-reading public.¹⁴ An exceptionally successful book of contemporary poetry might attain a readership equivalent to a mid-sized high school. The most wildly popular, runaway bestseller might aspire to the readership of a billboard in a small rural town.

As with the figures of excess, these numerical indications of scarcity and scatter have implications as well, especially for attempts to measure the value of poetry. In an economy predicated on mass consumption and subscribed to the neo-liberal ideologies of a *soi-disant* "free market," the easy reasoning surmises that if poetry is so little read, it must not be very good; if poetry were better, some suspect, it would be more popular. A quick look at the *most* popular might raise some suspicion about that logic — *American Idol*; the *High School Musical Soundtrack*; *Pirates of the Caribbean 2*; *The Da Vinci Code*; *Morrigan's Cross*— as should any specific comparison (was Super Bowl XVI better than Super Bowl XVII because it was watched by a larger percentage of households, or was XVII better because it had a larger total number of viewers?).¹⁵ The absurdity of bluntly equating popularity with value does not really need emphasizing, however much the recurrent suspicion unconsciously lingers, but the point is that such comparisons immediately throw one back onto the definitions of "value" itself — a category, like "poetry," that is too various and broad to be used without qualification or explanation. When the fundamental character of works is radically diverse, criticism needs to make not only its argument, but also a case for the value of its selective attentions. Depending on assumptions about what films ought to do, for example, *Pirates of the Caribbean* is obviously a much better film than, say, Nathaniel Dorsky's *Song and Solitude* (one of the less commercial and more critically acclaimed films of 2006). *Pirates* is clearly better at exploiting conventions of novelistic narrative, exploring the limits of celebrity appeal and traditions of the stage, employing illusionistic sound and availing itself of special effects, generally offering itself to escapist fantasy entertainment, and so on. *Song*, on the other hand, is clearly the better film when judged on other criteria: exploiting the meditative potential of projector mechanics (the work is shot on 16mm film and meant to be projected at 18 frames per second); exploring the logic of the shot rather

than the scene; capturing and printing the nuances of light; generally offering itself to formal analysis and intellectual reflection; and so on. Questions of value always return one to further questions, which cannot be indefinitely postponed and which cannot, in any event, be answered by the number of books or tickets sold.¹⁶

The converse assumption —whether it takes the form of a smug coterie belief that the small audience for poetry certifies its value, or the presumption that a small audience condemns poetry as elitist — is no more tenable and no less persistent. One scarcely needs to refute the first version of that assumption, familiar in its inverse formulation from Chamfort's maxim, wittily presented as a widely held received idea in its own right: "Il y a à parier que toute idée publique, toute convention reçue, est une sottise, car elle a convenu au plus grand nombre [one wagers that any popular idea, any received wisdom, is a stupidity, because it is held by so many]."¹⁷ The second version of the assumption, the sanctimonious charge of elitism, however, has been recently taken up not only by the enemies of poetry, but by its supposed defenders as well. Among the spokespeople for dominant cultural institutions, one of the catchphrases of twenty-first century poetics has been "accessibility." Trumpeted most loudly by the new century's Poet Laureates (Billy Collins [2001-2003] and Ted Kooser [2004-2006]), "accessible," "democratic" poetry — an invitingly familiar, plainspoken, pre-modernist lyric — has been pitted against the perceived elitism of restive, cryptic, experimental, incoherent, or formally challenging texts. Contemporary poetics has thus returned to a version of the twelfth-century contest between the *trobar leu* and the *trobar clus*. Echoing the mantra of the National Endowment for the Arts Chairman Dana Gioia, whose widely cited and reprinted 1991 essay "Can Poetry Matter?" ends with a plea to "expand the art's audience," these Laureates bemoan the small readership for poetry, and they have paradoxically sought to "expand the art's audience" by denigrating one entire segment of readers and dismissing the traditions of the difficult.¹⁸

The virtues of competing aesthetics (not to mention the validity of characterizations such as "accessible" and "difficult") can of course be debated, but rather than take up the argument at those levels I merely want to point out the fundamental difference between the Laureate's strategy and other attempts to reconcile issues of audience and difficulty in other cultural spheres. Contemporary physics, for just one comparison, is notoriously difficult and has a noticeably small audience of initiates and enthusiasts; the response, however, has not been to call for a return to simplified Newtonian mechanics because they are more "accessible" than sub-atomic models, just as no one would accuse the calculus of being

"undemocratic" because it is more difficult and less popular than simple arithmetic. In the spheres of math and science, the response to questions of audience and difficulty is educational. The call has been to better educate students, training them to have the requisite skills for understanding more advanced concepts. Or, similarly, rather than scrap String Theory as a mandarin pursuit in which physicists are writing only for other physicists, science writers are tasked with better explaining the relevance and workings of the theory to non-scientists. Accordingly, those concerned with the challenging difficulty of some poetry might make it more accessible not by changing the poetry itself, but rather by changing the education of its potential readership and honing the critical discourse about poetry.

The second discrepancy between the recent discourse around poetry and the discussion of other topics is the assumption that a small audience implies elitism. Once again, the simplistic equation falters under even cursory analysis. Relatively few people, as it happens, are involved in milkweed research (to take a truly random comparison); indeed, there is only a single researcher in the country, Win Phippen, an Associate Professor of Plant Breeding at Western Illinois University at Macomb, who is investigating milkweed as a crop.¹⁹ Nonetheless, I am confident that few would accuse either milkweed or Mr. Phippen of being elitist on that account. That's not to say that elitism does not often attempt to police its subject, seeking to transform a small audience into a coterie ("it's a milkweed thing, you wouldn't understand..."), but automatically mistaking the statistically unpopular for the elitist fatally confuses the "popular" and the "populist." Worse yet, that parapractic slip masks the monopolizing and totalizing politics of the mass market. Entailing large-scale asymmetrical flows of capital, the logic of mass consumption inclines economies toward predictably stable, laminar, homogeneous states, and it represses genuine difference and diversity, masking uniformity under shallow skeins of false or meaningless choices (Coke or Pepsi?). Offering alternatives without distinction, the conformity required by mass consumption replaces real choice—decisions entailing some irreversible consequence or requiring irreconcilable and irrevocable stands—with barely distinguishable and equally divided options. In a country where "democracy" has come to mean the contest of two increasingly similar parties each equally indebted to multinational corporations, the resistant experiments of unpopular poetry may indeed be "undemocratic" after all. *Contra* Gioia & Co., subcultures and small audiences are not lamentable or problematic signs of elitism, but rather encouraging indications of diversity in a healthy literary ecosystem. Moreover, regardless of the scale at which particular poems are read or ignored, the presumptuous

assertion that a populace cannot understand or enjoy sophisticated writing is itself baldly elitist. As Geoffrey Hill writes, riffing on Elias Canetti in a poem that is not itself particularly difficult: "that which is difficult/ preserves democracy; you pay respect/ to the intelligence of the citizen."²⁰ Better yet, one might also pay respect to desire and necessity as well: "if they don't need poetry," as Frank O'Hara gamely shrugged, "bully for them. I like the movies too."²¹

Indeed, standard assumptions about what "they" want have been recently challenged by the sales statistics of digital retailers. The conjunction of two technologies — databases linking vast numbers of products in geographically dispersed warehouses and collaborative filtering software, which analyses patterns of customer behavior to provide recommendations and links to other products — has led to sales records that reveal what Chris Anderson terms "the long tail." Before such innovations, to paraphrase Anderson, stocking unpopular products made little economic sense for a rent paying store with limited shelf space patronized by a small population willing to travel only so far to shop. Under those conditions, a title that sells a large number of copies makes the most profitable sense: the slot on the shelf devoted to *The Da Vinci Code* generates revenue every few days; the slot given over to the small press poetry chapbook might generate revenue once a decade, and only then if one of its sixty potential readers happens to live nearby. Under the new digital dispensation, however, those sixty readers need only be able to get on-line, where the works that would never be acquired by a typical retail store are just another offering among the bestsellers and the non-sellers, each equally profitable. As it turns out, the long dwindling tail-end of the curve that charts the sales of all those titles trails for such a distance that the number of unpopular works along its parabolic decline add up to a bigger market share than even the biggest blockbusters combined. Successful retailers such as Amazon and iTunes aggregate the bottom of that statistical graph, and with recommendations and user reviews they help consumers to find their way among the unlit niches of unusual, unadvertised and forgotten products. Part of Anderson's insight into these developments bears on economics, with lessons for contemporary retailing strategies, but part of the lesson of the long tail is about popularity and elitism. The curve of the digital retail sales graph also reveal that when given a real choice among a truly large number of titles— whether movies, songs, or books— cultural consumers are far less mainstream in their tastes than the more familiar patterns of mass consumption would lead one to suspect. "Many of our assumptions about popular taste," Anderson argues, "are actually artifacts of poor supply-and-demand matching

— a market response to inefficient distribution." Despite the power of marketing, and when left to their own devices, cultural consumers are in fact adventurous, idiosyncratic, and diverse. Moreover, contrary to the culture-war mindset that imagines a mainstream opposed to the margin, the statistics of the long tail suggest that consumers typically purchase *both* popular superstar titles as well obscure niche titles. Tastes turn out to be far less exclusive than partisans on either side of the popular divide suppose. Not only are the purchasers of the most obscure products more enthusiastic about the mainstream products that still constitute the majority of their purchases, but habitual consumers of mainstream products stray increasingly from popular titles the more they are permitted to explore, and then the further they depart from short head of the sales graph the more obscure titles they purchase.²²

Assuming that poetry follows the same pattern as other cultural commodities, one might thus predict that the Laureates — rather than pushing for more popular mainstream poetry "hits" to replace unpopular experiments under the false impression that unpopular works diminish the readership for poetry— would be better off advocating the obscurities of the long, tapering small-press tail. The lesson for poetry, in the event, is to make a greater variety of poetry both more easily available and more easily discoverable. Digital distribution aids the former task, and my own experience with archiving digital versions of out-of-print books indicates that at the very least there is an audience for the most restive poetry that the initial print runs of those books did not exhaust.²³ The task of making the varieties of poetry more discoverable, however, has been rendered all the more difficult and necessary in the 21st century, not only because of the geometric increase in publication but because in just the last few years, for reasons Jed Rasula identifies in his essay for this volume, the traditional indicators of aesthetic affiliation —such as publishers with aesthetically consistent and narrowly edited lists — have become increasingly blurred.

So once again, the conditions for poetry in the twenty-first century put increased pressure on its paratexts, those extra-poetic texts that can filter and link even part of the bewildering precession of published titles. That pressure comes to bear on criticism as well —a criticism, as we have seen, that needs to adjust its focus (whether closing in on the linguistic surface of a discrete text or pulling out to view the system of literary activity as a whole), to address the uninitiated, to educate as well as persuade its readers, and, more than ever, to stake its claims with a scrupulously open clarity. The aim of this collection, which gathers essays from the last decade about poetry from the last decade, is to present versions of such criticism. Because they are coeval with their subjects, these essays are like topographies

of actively volcanic islands; the ground they map will undoubtedly look very different in even the near future, perhaps disappearing altogether, as the genuine eruptions and terrain changing earthquakes come to be distinguished through the sound and fury of what is otherwise so much steam and sulfurous smoke. Real-time satellite snapshots rather than retrospective documentaries, they are, however, no less accurate for that.

Most of the writing about contemporary poetry takes the form of short reviews, often no more than extended blurbs, or artists' statements about their own practice. In selecting the following essays I have avoided both genres, though with obvious exceptions; the rule of thumb was more prejudice than stricture. Although the collection was not intended to be thematic, I was interested to find that critics have recently returned again and again to issues of gender, technology, and politics—often, indeed, the interrelation between the three. Nor was this collection meant to be a representative survey (a manifestly impossible goal given the publication statistics cited in the beginning of this essay), and it is frankly partisan in its limited scope. Partisan, but not necessarily advocating. While I predict that some of the poetry discussed in the following pages will eventually be considered defining events of literary history, massive Krakatoas of the word, others will turn out to be no more than small tremors of tectonic quirks, hazards thrown up as the plates of literary cultures collide and readjust, soon to be submerged and forgotten—seamount atolls of colorless reef sunk back beneath the sea of irrelevancy.

Above all, the selections were made with the hope that they would be of use and interest to readers who are *not* necessarily so partisan— a choir of voices singing to outriding circuit preachers rather than preachers turning to the choir. Instead of seeking the last word on any particular poet, I looked for essays that would open the way for the *first* words on some of the hundreds of thousands of poems from the last decade never mentioned in the following pages. My hope is that readers will be able to take these essays as models for engaging those works, as well as future works, and further, as a spur to keep reading deep into the immense expanse of uncharted publications, knowing they are unlikely to ever meet the handful of others who might have chanced to open the same book.

Knowing too that the vast majority of the publications they encounter will be inevitably unreadably awful. Most poetry sucks (to borrow *Coagula's* tag-line phrasing for their assessment of the art world), and this is equally true of small press poetry; the avant-garde, as Hugh Kenner once said, can be just as boring as anything else. On occasion, of course, some of it will be astonishing. But the gleam of the rare gem should not blind us to

the even more important and fabulous lesson of all the silted mud and gravel. That seemingly formless excess of endless granular particulates reveals, on inspection, infinite variations—pyrite and mica in quiet eddies at the bank, to be sure —fools' gold in glitter—but beneath them always another configuration of surface and structure, another shifting of metamorphic silicates in unstratified till, no matter how far down you dig or how vigorously you sift — the mere knowledge of those other, as yet uncovered grains, each with the unlikely but unshakeable possibility of taking some radical new form, however slight in its variance, should be seen as an incontestable proof that something else can always be done, the glint of difference giving onto a glimpse of the beach beneath the rubble of the paving stones. Proof, more importantly, that something else *is* being done, both far more inaccessible and much much closer than you think. And if most of that obscure and unseen activity experiments from known results with fabricated data, plagiarizes in order to be expressive, slavishly imitates under the banner of innovation, jockeys with naked careerism, ornaments itself to fads with no sense of fashion, and frantically waves the fallen banner of the very avant-garde it most basely betrays, it sometimes — if only for the space of a few words —gives way to the inassimilable: a barely audible glitch, a nearly invisible fleck of paint spackling in abstraction on an illusionistic canvas, a flicker in the frame, an anomalous phenomenon, a punctum. In an atypically optimistic passage, Paul Mann writes of those moments:

We must entertain—doubtless the right word—the sheer possibility that what we encounter here is not just one more margin or one more avant-garde, however impossible it will be to avoid all the orders and terms attendant upon those venerable and ruined cultural edifices. We must remain open to the possibility that this stupid underground poses all the old questions but a few more as well, that it might suggest another set of cultural arrangements, other topographies and other mappings, however unlikely that might be.²⁴

Or simpler still: one insists on alternatives — on revolution, to give it its fancy name — because the *status quo*, in whatever arrangement of our everyday life, is unacceptable. Refusing, safely complacent, to read beyond it is one small part of the unexamined pantomime of criminal silence. Heroic silence, in contrast, always refuses to speak from the wings: "seja marginal," in Hélio Oiticica's appositive imperative, "seja herói."²⁵

Notes & Acknowledgments

Thanks to Brent Cunningham, one of poetry's very best friends.

1. Weinberger, "Travels" 181.
2. *Ibidem*.
3. To be more precise, for anyone keeping score: the first two figures describe the period 1993 to 2007, and come according to R. R. Bowker. The doubling of titles holds for poetry books and not just the industry in general; according to Bowker 2,060 poetry (and drama) titles were published in 1993; by 2003 the figure was 4,391, rising to 6,920 in 2004. One should note that 2005 was an anomalous year, recoding "the first decline in U.S. title output since 1999, and only the 10th downturn recorded in the last 50 years. It follows the record increase of more than 19,000 new books in 2004" (Bowker). Lee Briccetti, Executive Director of Poets House in New York corroborates these figures: "This year [*s.c.* 2003], Poets House will assemble a record-breaking number of poetry books [...] the final count is not in yet, but we expect the number of poetry books published in 2003 to exceed 2,000 — more than double the number published a little over a decade ago, when Poets House began its annual Showcase" (Poets House Press Release, March 2004). Not only are more titles being published, but, according to a survey of publishing in the last quarter of the 20th century conducted by Gayle Feldman for *Publishers Weekly*, more people are buying them (quoted Smith).

The figure for small press magazines comes from comparisons of listings in the *Directory of Literary Magazines*; the 1990/91 edition lists approximately 500 journals; in the 2000 editions the number rises to approximately 600; the 2007/2008 edition includes almost 700.

4. Some random searches for relatively well-known small press authors reveals substantial gaps in the Poets House collection, suggesting that any projections based on its library holdings are significantly lower than the actual number of books published.
5. The figure from Bowker was cited by their media contact, Daryn Teague, to the Association of Writers and Writing Programs which reported it on their website page "May/Summer 2007 News" (retrieved 3 September, 2007). According to the same source, a total of 290,000 new book titles were introduced in 2006. The Amazon figure comes from an advanced search for the keyword "poetry" and the publication year 2006, run on 7 October, 2007.
6. Molesworth, *Fierce Embrace* 5; quoted by Kaladjian *Languages of Liberation* 25-6.
7. The pressure to quickly evaluate a large number of texts, even if they are not to be read with more than a cursory effort, favors texts that can in fact of practice be assessed at a glance. Works that require complicated formal analyses (to discover unannounced structural or procedural practices, for instance), or that repay repeated readings (because of recursive structures, say), or that assume

the reader will engage in research beyond the poem—all in order to merely gauge the scope of their poetic ambitions and categorize their poetic practices — are disadvantaged when reading time is at a premium.

8. See Sutherland, *Companion* 1; and James, *Victorian Novel* 3; Franco Moretti speculates: "twenty thousand, thirty, more, no one really knows" (*Graphs* 4). Whatever the figure, it puts the scale of contemporary production into perspective; in merely the first decade of the 21st century we can expect the publications of American poets to match the total number of 19th century British novels. Fiction writers now do it every year; according to Bowker there were some 40,000 new adult fiction titles published in the United States in 2006.
9. The discrepancies are more subtle, but one could make the same argument staying within the canons of twentieth-century poetry. Where scholars of contemporary poetry might never have heard of Bruce Andrews, they would be likely to know Olson's name (even if they had never read any of his poetry) and equally likely to have actually read some of Stein's writing (even if they would not consider it for inclusion in the modernist canon). In short: consensus increases proportionally with historical distance.
10. Moretti, *Graphs* 4. See also Moretti, *Atlas*.
11. Perelman, *Marginalization* 3.
12. Bradshaw and Nichols, 3.
13. University press titles are printed in runs of one or two thousand, though there is no evidence that they sell at greater rates than small press titles. Because they have better bookstore distribution, initial sales often spike, but university press books face far higher returns, and are remaindered and pulped in greater numbers.

One should note that 21st century production practices are slowly changing; volume breaks in production costs have been giving way to other production and distribution models of more or less continuous rolling small runs shipped directly from the printer to the distributor.

14. One might compare these figures to other historical moments. Print runs for the first press printed books, for instance, were also very small; 15th century incunabula were produced in the low hundreds. The difference of course is that both the general population and the literate population have exploded over the intervening half millennium.
15. If you hadn't guessed: the most viewed television show, the best selling CD (assuming one ignores blank recordable compact discs), the top grossing movie, and the best selling softcover trade and mass market books in America in 2006, according to Nielsen, Nielsen SoundScan, and *Publishers Weekly*, respectively.

On 24 January, 1982 CBS broadcast the Super Bowl (San Francisco 49ers vs. Cincinnati Bengals) to 40.02 million viewers, or 49.1% of American households, a 73% share. On 30

January, 1983 NBC broadcast the Super Bowl (Washington Redskins vs. the Miami Dolphins) to 40.48 million viewers, or 48.6% of households, a 69% share.

In a 1998 print advertisement, the Burger King Corporation explicitly called this logic into question, though with a counter argument still based on demographics: "If McDonald's makes 'America's Favorite Fries,' how come our fries beat them in a taste test?" As Jim Watkins, Senior Vice President for marketing at Burger King summarized the distinction: "which would you prefer [...] America's best-selling french fries or America's best-tasting french fries? More doesn't mean better." (*PRNnewswire*, "Burger King Proclaims America's Favorite Fries... Based on Taste New Ad Aims to Set the Record Straight Versus McDonald's Claim").

16. For the record: *Pirates* opened at over 4,000 theatres; *Song* has been screened, however successfully, at a handful of film festivals and art centers (selling out the Yerba Buena Center For the Arts is still only filling a 92 seat screening room).

17. Nicolas-Sébastien Roch de Chamfort, *Maximes, pensées, caracteres et anecdotes* (Paris: Baylis, 1796).

One might, however, critique the system of objects into which the popular circulates. Consider, as example, the following passage from Guy Debord's *Société du Spectacle*. For "commodity" and "object" read "poem":

The image of the blissful unification of society through consumption suspends disbelief with regard to the reality of division only until the next disillusionment occurs in the sphere of actual consumption. Each and every new product is supposed to offer a dramatic shortcut to the long-awaited promised land of total consumption. As such it is ceremoniously presented as the unique and ultimate product. But, as with the fashionable adoption of seemingly rare aristocratic first names which turn out in the end to be borne by a whole generation, so the would-be singularity of an object can be offered to the eager hordes only if it has been mass-produced. The sole real status attaching to a mediocre objects of this kind is to have been placed, however briefly, at the very center of social life and hailed as a revelation of the goal of the production process. But even this spectacular prestige evaporates into vulgarity as soon as the object is taken home by its consumer — and hence by all other consumers too. For by this time another product will have been assigned to supply the system with its justification, and will in turn be demanding its moment of acclaim (Chapter 3, §69).

18. Collins has referred to "the sin of difficulty." For the guilty, see Bernstein.

19. Doran, np. With the expected conjunction of the random: an quick internet search reveals the imprint Milkweed Editions (Minneapolis Minnesota), which has apparently been publishing poetry since the late 1970s.

20. Hill, 439.

21. O'Hara, "Personism" 498.

22. Elberse, np.

23. See <<http://english.utah.edu/eclipse>>.

24. Mann, "Stupid Undergrounds" 2.

25. "Seja marginal / seja herói [be peripheral / be a hero]." Alternately the first phrase translates to "be criminal." The legend accompanied a silkscreen stenciled image of the assassinated cop-killing bandit Cara de Cavalo in a work exhibited as part of Oiticica's infamous 1968 installation *Homenagem a Cara de Cavalo* at the club Sucata in Rio de Janeiro; one of the texts included in the exhibition read: "Aqui está e aqui ficará. Contemplai o seu silêncio heróico [Here he lies and here he will remain. Contemplate his heroic silence]."

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