

# The stagnation of American poetry: The Best American Poetry 2018

James McDonald  
20 April 2019

*The Best American Poetry*, New York: Scribner, 2018, 240 pp.

The seventy-five poems in *The Best American Poetry 2018* (*BAP*), selected by Dana Gioia—former chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts and currently California State Poet Laureate—provide little of the sustenance and exhilaration that, at its best, poetry is capable of. In fact, they are characterized by nothing so much as their sameness—the sagacious pose, the personal lyric form, the compulsory box-ticking of extended metaphors. Further, with the exception of a pervasive Gothic foreboding, more about which later, these are eminently safe poems, carefully dressed, peer reviewed and scrupulously attentive to contemporary cultural regulations of taste.

As with America, so with American poetry. The past four decades of American life have suffered from an increasing precariousness, with workers finding it more difficult to receive a living wage and those still earning a middle-class salary growing acutely conscious of their own vulnerability. Among this salaried-but-vulnerable layer of workers are today's published poets, who for the most part teach in colleges and universities and compete with each other for official approval and the diminishing resources of English departments and creative writing programs.

At the same time, American culture has registered the effects of the declining US empire's overt turn to militarism and authoritarianism. American good versus alien evil—terror—dominates the movies, where today's youth are fed a diet of superhero spectacles. To the extent social criticism is allowed into official culture—Hollywood and the university—it is mostly in the form of a reactionary identity politics that serves to classify and divide people based on their race and sex. It is no accident, then, that Hollywood and the university are the incubators of the virulent “Me Too” movement.

It is difficult to create forward-looking art while looking over your shoulder. For this reason it would be a mistake to lay all the blame at the feet of the poets for a certain stagnation of American poetry. After all, it stands to reason that today's poets are as talented and as gifted with creative energy as poets have ever been. To be sure, there is talent on display in the pages of *BAP 2018*. Remarkable imagery, original phrases, emotions bodied forth and subtle patterns discerned in the profuse interplay of individual and world. There is good poetry among the best.

The purpose of this review is not to celebrate the artistic achievements to be found in the anthology, however, but to assess the preconditions of artistic *marketability* among the contemporary liberal middle class—that is, the preoccupations and anxieties that govern today's published American poetry and the resolutions toward which that poetry gestures. What we find then is not primarily discrete works of art but a collage of pessimism and escape into irrationality. It is the bankruptcy of an ideology in a period of transition.

Over two-thirds of the seventy-five poets represented in *The Best American Poetry 2018* are academics. At least forty-five teach or have taught at colleges or universities while others are students in M.F.A. or

Ph.D. programs. This preponderance is the result of Gioia's selection process, detailed in his preface, in which he reasonably chose to read thousands of poems published in poetry and literary journals published in the US, which themselves overwhelmingly publish the work of academics.

Notably, it was Gioia himself who, in a famous 1991 essay “Can Poetry Matter?”, recounted and mildly bemoaned the professionalization of poetry. The proliferation of poetry journals through the '70s and '80s, he observed, was a direct market response to the dire need of young academics, including teachers of creative writing, to publish. The result was an insular affair in which poets wrote primarily for other poets, and all of those poets were vying for tenure.

“The problem is not that poets teach,” Gioia explained. “The campus is not a bad place for a poet to work. It's just a bad place for all poets to work. Society suffers by losing the imagination and vitality that poets brought to public culture. Poetry suffers when literary standards are forced to conform with institutional ones.”

Enter the digital age. In his 2018 preface, Gioia celebrates “the new bohemia,” the democratized literary landscape where aspiring writers can e-publish and where social media “connects people more effectively than any faculty lounge.” At the same time he takes note of the deflating arts budgets and evaporating tenure-track positions of today's academy, a state of affairs that, he blithely observes, has made baristas and lawyers of the poets.

Gioia also acknowledges “large parts of the population unlikely to participate in academic literary life because they are blocked by poverty, education, language, and race.” His inclusion of “race” in this list of academic disqualifications, however, is a telling, if disoriented, reflex. All American institutions of higher learning discriminate to some extent on the basis of one's ability to pay for tuition. In 2018, on the other hand, Gioia would have been hard pressed to find one that “blocks” participation in academic literary life on the basis of race.

In any event, while Gioia goes on to praise the popularity of “spoken poetry” and hip hop, he regrets that they are not included in *BAP 2018* because “those auditory and performative modes lose impact when transcribed.” It is a strange thing for an editor of a volume of poetry, let alone a poet, to claim. The long and the short of it is that Gioia's preface presents a confused and confusing mishmash of liberal happy talk, complete with the requisite lauding of “diversity,” “new perspectives and new energy” in the American poetry scene, all the while introducing a volume of mostly ordinary poems in a nearly exhausted vein.

*BAP 2018* features poems from some of our more celebrated poets, such as Julia Alvarez, Joy Harjo, former poet laureate Kay Ryan and Gary Snyder. Alvarez and Harjo each contribute an able piece—“American Dreams” and “American Sunrise,” respectively—reminiscences of youthful confrontations with racism. Snyder writes a melancholy meditation on the transience of American culture, “Why California Will Never Be Like Tuscany.”

Ryan's “Some Transient Addiction to the Useless” valorizes an

idealized intransigence in great art. This idea is echoed in Anne Stevenson's enjoyable "How Poems Arrive," in which she writes,

But poems, butch or feminine, are vain  
And draw their satisfactions from within

These are the satisfactions of form, of "silver *els* and *ms*."

In these few pieces by a set of American poetry's elder statespersons can be found some of the best writing the anthology has to offer. Taken collectively, one also finds in them the thematic circumference of *BAP 2018*.

Personal recollection, existential pessimism and some style of idealism characterize *BAP*'s celebration of American poetry in ways that reflect not simply "the times" but the current liberal culture from which the poems are produced. It is a culture in crisis, in which an accurate understanding of terminally decayed liberalism's contradictions and limitations would necessitate the rejection of liberalism itself.

Contemporary American poetry—to call it "bourgeois poetry" would be redundant—cannot transcend the time and conditions of its production any more than speech can transcend language. This poetry, it must be emphasized, is largely a product of the current professoriate, who face enormous pressures to publish, in journals edited by other poet-professors, all of them dependent upon the approval of the academy for their daily bread. This state of affairs, this market, all but guarantees that industry standards, market research and customer service infiltrate the world of poetry.

As a group, the poet-professors also tend to adhere to what passes today for liberalism—a habitual exposure to Democratic Party propaganda, including the anti-democratic tenets of identity politics, criticism of Donald Trump rooted in "human rights" militarism and palace intrigue, and a portrayal of real problems like economic inequality, when they are considered at all, as being just a little less malleable than the weather. It is not surprising that our poets, as middle-class consumers of this propaganda and witnesses to the economic, social and political crumbling of the American empire, should write a poetry of fear, loathing and escapism. But let us place today's poetry in a broader historical context.

Perhaps the finest poem in the anthology is the posthumous "Finishing Up" by A. R. Ammons. A stanza:

...is more missing than was never enough: I'm sure  
many of love's kinds absolve and heal, but were they passing  
rapids or welling stirs: I suppose I haven't done and seen  
enough yet to go, and, anyway, it may be way on the way  
before one picks up the track of the sufficient...

Born in 1926, Ammons carried forth the earlier Modernist expansion of the intimate in loose form and free verse, American poetry's most heavily mined vein for at least the past seventy years. By the 1980s, though it still yielded many sparkling gems (the robust work of Edward Hirsch and Rita Dove come first to mind), this vein had increasingly come to tend toward the preciousness to which it is vulnerable. Formally, the nadir of self-absorption was reached in the '80s and '90s experimental "language poetry," an artistic naked emperor if ever there were one. Thematically, the personal lyric can stray into the weeds of self-aggrandizement, amply on display at your local poetry slam.

*BAP 2018* is largely a selection of such intimate lyrics, voiced in the first person, often narrative and realist in style. A few are beautiful (notable examples are Nausheen Eusuf's "Pied Beauty" and "Sono" by

Suji Kwock Kim), many are good, some merely plausible. Taken as a whole, the first-person poetry in *BAP*, even that by relatively young poets, evokes younger days and attempts a reconciliation with death, positioning the poet in a present both reliably tranquil and, at the same time, tottering on the brink of extinction. It is to be expected, perhaps, that the culture that has made a common suffix of *-pocalypse* should generate a poetry of last things.

The poem that most explicitly juxtaposes nostalgia with pessimism is R. Nemo Hill's "The View From the Bar," which opens,

So much of the coin of youth was spent  
while leaning here, with smoke and brew,  
my back half-turned to face a view  
beyond this room's brief consequence.

This "view beyond" is of the bar's television set, which, like the Nietzschean sea, "holds translucent evidence/of what has come again to pass." It seems that the "weight and mass" of the bodies in the bar must succumb to the doom of this eternal return, "this screen of calm abstraction." Hill depicts the patrons,

drinking their sloe-gins and rums,  
picking daisies, snorting roses,  
practicing Pompeian poses--  
at least until the lava comes.

And so, one lives and longs for youth until one dies a death that will make one's life—that is, history—uncanny. At the same time this death is imagined as communal, a barpocalypse:

For when it comes, we'll *all* be frozen,  
some on the dance floor, some in the street

The lava is coming to get us, as our personal death but also as some historical malignance that will, it seems, be televised, again. Like Vesuvius, though, its approach will be sudden and catch us unawares. This poem indulges in the irrational to the extent that it renders history uncanny and immutable, a force of nature suffered passively by humanity.

Another poem, this one pernicious, that approaches history from an irrational perspective is Jacqueline Osherow's "Tilia cordata." The title is the Latin name for the linden tree. The poet has a linden, an aromatic tree when in flower, in her yard and is surprised and unnerved to encounter the scent of linden on a visit to a park in Darmstadt:

I—unhinged already—was undone,  
as if the trees themselves were in collusion

The source of Osherow's distress (in her biographical entry she acknowledges the poem as autobiographical) is her very presence as a Jew in Germany. Osherow's recorded feelings are certainly understandable, and the reader is sympathetic toward her disorientation upon visiting Germany. These are emotional responses, and their representation in poetry is one of the tasks of art. Far more problematic, however, is that the poem, which also undertakes a distanced reflection upon these emotional

responses, ultimately equivocates on the implied issue of an inherent barbarism in the German people and language. In Osherow's choice in the poem to conjoin blood and land is the rejection by an educated adult—a professor at the University of Utah—of a historical, rational understanding of fascism and the horrific irrationality of Nazism.

Amid the vaguely-grounded pessimism and irrational sentimentality, the question arises whether *BAP 2018* offers any historically informed awareness of the immense class conflict that is taking place all around us. Unfortunately, this official anthology of the state of American poetry provides no glimpses of an art energized by the accelerating struggle of workers and the optimism that struggle portends. That poetry will come in time. *BAP* does, however, include a few poems that protest, if too little, current objective conditions.

The most trenchant and moving of such poems is Alexandra Lytton Regalado's "La Mano," dedicated to "the more than 60,000 children from Central America who cross the border unaccompanied." The poem, set in San Salvador, tells of "a flock of wild parakeets" coming to roost outside a family's window and of the young son's response to the birds.

We are living in tumultuous times. Global capitalism has entered into profound crisis, imperialist nation-states are on a dangerous collision course, and workers worldwide—from teachers and autoworkers in the US and plantation workers in Sri Lanka, to workers in Matamoros, Mexico, and the Yellow Vest movement in France—are emerging as an increasingly self-conscious class against their employers, their unions and their governments. American poetry seems to register these historical realities only obscurely, when at all, but this situation cannot persist. Already the liberalism of the professors is in crisis, and at the fork in the road between socialism and barbarism the irrationality of identity politics and self-absorbed escapism will be exposed for the selfish, reactionary phenomena they have always been.

It is impossible to predict the characteristics of the poetry that will escape the conceptual confines of today's academic milieu and reflect these developments. It may even emerge in the form of the personal lyric. In any event, there is reason to be optimistic about "the best American poetry" of the future.



To contact the WSWs and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)**