

THE SRPR REVIEW ESSAY:
THE GOLDEN AGE OF AMERICAN POETRY IS NOW

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I Am Your Slave Now Do What I Say

Anthony Madrid

Canarium Books, 2012

132 pages; paperback, \$14.00

Bad Bad

Chelsey Minnis

Fence Books, 2007

128 pages; paperback, \$15.00

Sermons and Lectures Both Blank and Relentless

Matt Hart

Typecast Publishing, 2012

102 pages; paperback, \$16.95

Introduction

It can scarcely be doubted, now, that we are in the midst of a Golden Age of American poetry. Lest that claim seem preposterous to those rightly exasperated with the flood of mediocre verse now filling up the nation's real and virtual bookshelves, consider this: The absence, presence, or incipience of a literary-arts "Golden Age" is best determined through horizontal analyses of the prevailing "culture of poetics," not a vertical analysis of canons and canonization practices. That is, as the abiding merit of an epoch's poetry can only be seen retrospectively, and canon-making is still typically the business of only a privileged and blinkered few, one is foolhardy to trust the canonic pronouncements of others or render final judgment, oneself, on the achievements of contemporaries. What we may do, instead, is

assess the geographies and methodologies of literary production and compare these with those of past periods.

Imagine an America in which tens of thousands of young citizens decide, on the brink of manhood or womanhood and entrance into the national workforce, to forestall the benefits of daily employment—a livable wage, a means of transportation, property ownership, the many existential comforts attendant to starting a family—to struggle in the literary arts for several years. Imagine an America in which tens of millions of dollars are annually funneled to creative writers by state and federal governments; in which untold hundreds of small presses and magazines flourish overnight, staffed by unpaid volunteers voracious for new literature; in which the points of production, sale, and consumption of poetry are exponentially greater in number than ever before; in which, owing to the number of poets having increased at a far faster pace than even the number of markets for literary work, poetry publishing is now more generatively competitive than ever; and in which even cranks concede that there are more poets capable of producing at least mediocre verse today than at any other time in American history, not merely in absolute terms but as a percentage of the national population. If we approach these phenomena not as a matter of what sort of poetry individual poets produce, but what sort of national literary culture they promote, it is easy to see that—in light of the impossibility of accurately canonizing contemporary work *in situ*—the written word has never seen a confluence of events and circumstances like the one it now enjoys right here in the United States.

Market-Model Poetics: Origins

To read literature as culture as well as art is to risk envisioning contemporary poems and poets as commodified and pre-packaged late-capitalist bugbears. And to an extent, it would be fair to say that any Golden Age situated in contemporary America is destined to be permanently inflected by marketplace ideologies. But it would be unfair to allege that the commodification and packaging of poetry in our time is the first such treatment of language, let alone the first such treatment by a movement which is, as this essay will contend, best described as experimental in both instinct and execution.

If we permit ourselves the fallacy of hindsight, we find that the passion of the historical avant-garde for both objectification and commodification of the written word now seems an incredible embarrassment. Everyone knows, of course, of the Italian Futurists' noxious fetishization of new car models and the machinery of war, and if seminal Futurist Filippo Marinetti also facetiously proposed, in his "Futurist Manifesto," the burning of museums, it was hardly on account of any distaste for consumerizing the past. In fact, the danger of the museum to the archetypal Futurist was that its objectification and commodification of the past preempted an even more cynical and intemperate objectification and commodification of the present. Marinetti's essay, "Destruction of Syntax," is so wedded to the object that it seeks to eviscerate adjectival language via "semaphoric adjectives"—in simpler terms, nounal descriptors.¹ French Surrealism deeded us, almost exclusively, the Surrealist image; the reason no one speaks of Surrealistic *rhetoric* is that the benefit of "absolute reality" (or "surreality"), per seminal Surrealist André Breton, is that it can be filled with all sorts of interesting *stuff* readily reified in nounified imagery. And even if Ezra Pound hadn't been a risible fascist, we might still have noted the materialism of his "Vorticist" coinage, as it too—in one of its few overlays with Surrealism—considered the noun-circumscribed image the seat of poetic authority. That the Imagists of Pound's time agreed with that proposition need not be expounded upon; just so, that the Objectivists of the early twentieth century disagreed with the Imagists on many things but not the latter's worship of the image-deployed "object-in-itself" is settled literary history. Tzara's invigorating "Dada Manifesto" seethed with contempt for theory, ideology, indeed sentiment of almost any variety; meanwhile, it spawned a series of compositional methods that required objective correlatives and eschewed *thinking* altogether. We can more easily imagine a Dadaist wildly waving accoutrements of the *I Ching* about, or a hatful of newspaper clippings, than sitting rapturously in a field dreaming of new languages. Never mind the "dropped strings" of the Dada-influenced Duchamp, or the devoutly

1. Filippo Marinetti, "Destruction of Syntax," in *Futurism: An Anthology*, ed. Lawrence S. Rainey, Christine Poggi, and Laura Wittman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009): 148.

procedural and resolutely structure-free writings of John Cage, whose mid-century work privileged transactional intersections rather than logocentric imagination.

At present, the experimental poetics deemed most notable by literary critics is “Conceptual writing.” Conceptual writing, at least in its twenty-first-century incarnation, is the by-product of Kenneth Goldsmith’s “peak language” theory: The idea that the surfeit of poetic language in America today means there is no longer utility in producing new poetic language-cum-“creative writing.”² Goldsmith’s consequent term for an appropriately reactionary poetics, “uncreative writing,” treats language merely as material ready for repurposing. As the poet and professor wrote in “Flarf Is Dionysus, Conceptual Writing Is Apollo,” the omnipresence of language—poetic and otherwise—in American culture permits us to “hoard, store, mold, squeeze, shovel, soil, scrub, package, and cram the stuff into towers of words and castles of language with a stroke of the keyboard.”³ This is, of course, merely more of the same; Goldsmith is simply more honest about his objectifications and commodifications than most.

It’s hard to escape the conclusion that nearly all of the above movements and artists gave as much or greater credence to the foundational dictates of the material arts than those of the literary ones. If one delves deeper into the ranks of mid-century, second-wave avant-gardistes—particularly the art-world aficionados of the New York School—this trend is only underscored. We can be certain of two things, then, in seeking an avant-garde in our present “Golden Age” literary culture: first, that if an avant-garde’s means merely mimic those of the past, it is no avant-garde at all, for Gertrude Stein reminds us that changes in context necessitate changes in method⁴; second, that if any avant-garde takes the *opposite* approach—discarding the stated ends of the historical avant-garde—it likewise must relinquish its claim to familial relation to the likes of Breton, Marinetti, Pound, Tzara, Duchamp, and Cage.

2. Kenneth Goldsmith, “Flarf Is Dionysus. Conceptual Writing Is Apollo,” *Poetry* 194 (July/August 2009). <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/article/237176>.

3. *Ibid.*

4. Gertrude Stein, “Composition as Explanation,” *Selected Writings of Gertrude Stein*, ed. Carl van Vechten (New York: Vintage, 1990): 511-23.

The Program Era in Context

One doesn't have to read very far in contemporary literary theory to know that the historical avant-garde, however it objectified or commodified language, was typified by a single aim: To return art to the praxis of life. (Or, differently stated, to reorganize the praxis of life through art.) The Futurists sought abolition of the past to better celebrate the instant; the Surrealists sought a truer and even more mimetic reality in the dream space; the Vorticists, Imagists, and Objectivists hoped to use a poet's eye to more accurately see the object world; the Dadaists wished to replicate in literary compositional process the same chaotic opposition of polarities they observed in an increasingly industrialized and militarized Europe. It is thus impossible to imagine a "Golden Age" poetics in the lineage of the historical avant-garde without presuming, too, that such a poetics hopes to "return art to the praxis of life" in ways commensurate with the Internet Age and modern living.

The historical avant-garde's concurrent aim of destroying "art-as-institution" has too often been read in crippling narrow fashion. This hampers contemporary avant-gardistes' willingness to see a new avant-garde in the institution-driven Program Era (a term coined by Stanford University professor Mark McGurl in his *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing*). Facts, however, are facts: The salons of Paris, avidly patronized by the historical avant-garde, were institutions; the small magazines and small presses that gave the historical avant-garde its birth were likewise institutions; the pipelines of public patronage, with which the historical avant-garde was by no means unfamiliar, attach, at their farthest end, to public and private institutions; and the painters and sculptors and architects so often idolized by leading lights of the historical avant-garde were, in many instances, the products of Continental arts academies no one would ever have dared call non-institutional. Thus America's 243 terminal-degree graduate creative writing programs—the overwhelming majority of which were founded in just the last quarter-century—are merely the continuation of a decades-long institutionalization trend in creative writing, not its origin-point. Indeed, literary scholarship has thus far so lightly theorized Program-Era "institutionalization" that when discussed in academic circles the term more often refers to

the historic boom in avant-garde-friendly small presses and magazines in the early twentieth century than the rise of the MFA.

The sleight-of-hand we've been subjected to by writing-program detractors, then, is one that drops from the historical avant-garde's second principle—the destruction of “art as institution”—the phrase “art as,” and then, preposterously, conceives of university settings as the only possible referents for “institution,” that signifier-cum-bogeyman. In fact, the grave fear of the historical avant-garde, as the writings they've handed down to us attest, was that art would become detached from daily living, from those tangible and intangible spaces the bulk of us now inhabit for most of our waking hours. To accuse graduate creative writing programs of detaching young poets and writers from daily living is to profoundly misread the history, development, and operation of such programs.

Market-Model Poetics: From Ancient to Contemporary Practice

Our times inundate us with *objects*, and more often than not these objects have been troublingly commodified and packaged pre-consumption. We may be slaves to our wireless devices, but most of us—poets, our most self-conscious citizens, especially—find this sickening. So to propose a contemporary avant-garde dependent upon the “materiality”-driven objectification of language, as do Language poets and their successors, is not merely a denial of our collective emotional reality but also, our national culture considered, a cruelty. It may be sound theory, but ultimately it perverts the historical avant-garde's attempts to synchronize the praxes of art and life.

The literary material of the generation coming up will not be the so-called “machine-made-of-words,” or twenty-first-century Conceptual writing's parodic rediscovery of the *objet d'art*—we have too many machines already, and too many objects—nor will it be the ideology of commitment, now that the failures and violences of ideology are so readily evident in all corners of the globe. Shall we return, then, to the Romantics' watchword, emotion? No, we're too jaded. Perhaps Freudian, Jungian, or Lacanian self-diagnosis? No, the era of psychobabble is over; Phil Donahue has hung up his mikes. So where do we find the building blocks for a kind of truth in this once-Aristotlean, now post-Aristotlean world?

I propose here that we are returning—and indeed, in the nation’s most vigorously innovative poetries, have already returned—to the *real* historical avant-garde: The Sophists, those pre-Aristotelean thinkers vanquished by the canny business tactics of Plato, Socrates, and Aristotle himself. The Sophists were indeed so deeply reviled by Aristotle and his peers that they were, with the help of these intellectual luminaries, written out of the histories altogether. The reason for this was that the Sophists sold but two goods: language and persuasion. The language (as would make twentieth-century avant-garde poets proud) was handled as material available for purchase; the persuasion (as would make twentieth-century avant-garde *theorists* proud) was autonomous. That is, the services of a Sophist could be bought to argue either end of a dispute, and thus it was qualities innate to discrete speakers, rather than to language itself, which were presumed to carry the day. Under such circumstances, language could be reduced to its smallest unit, *attention*—posited here as an inherent rather than instrumental quality.

What the current Age wants, one feels, is attention. We are told we have so much of it that we’ve put it in too many places and in too many of the wrong places, but in fact the one characteristic trait of the postmodern era is that there’s no *excess* attention available at all. I speak here not of the mass attention of the mega-church or an MMORPG’s virtual lobby; nor do I speak of the attention we daily pay to friends, family, our jobs, our goals, and our communities. A simple course in ethics might direct us well in improving our attention to these spheres; we need not resort to poetry. Instead, the fundamental tenet of what I call here “autonomous attention” or “autonomous persuasion” is quite a different one: Namely, that the “object-in-itself” is the subject, that is, the subject-in-itself. When we sit on the therapist’s couch, or medicate our emotional ailments, or simply resolve to do better next year than this year, we are doing important work—but work that operates on each part of the self in turn, rather than the entirety of the subject-in-itself. We compartmentalize our attentions to the point at which no language-constructed entity—literary, organic, or otherwise—is permitted to take our attention whole. So what if a contemporary avant-garde were to emerge, sensitive to the culture of the day, that had precisely that historic capacity? To consume the entirety of our attention in one go? With such a poetics contemporary

poetry might, at once, retrieve the goodwill of a generation lost in packets of digital information; complete the avant-gardiste project of returning art to the praxis of life; and herald, in our present historical moment, an opportunity to expand the roster of possible poetics every bit as dramatically as the Program Era has expanded the ranks of working poets and poet-patronizing institutions.

Such a “Golden Age poetics” reeks, surely, of a desire for *wholeness*—precisely the desire so many literary critics generally, and post-structuralist poets and poet-critics specifically, have been up in arms against for decades now. “Theories of unification” are a non-starter in such circles; the desire for unity in political, cognitive, and ethical discourses gave us Nazism, we’re told by such conglomerates of the literary intelligentsia. Communism is a by-product of unification, we’re reminded, as is jingoistic neo-conservatism. The fear encoded in such remonstrations, and it’s not an unreasonable one, is that certain types of institutions, when and where they achieve a degree of permanence, foster a stultifying rigidity of thought that does little more than reaffirm conventional thinking. Of course, we’ve all seen the same thing happen, again and again throughout twentieth-century literary history, in non-institutional, bohemian communities of literary artists. Often, such communities fall apart under the weight of their own prejudices and orthodoxies, even as they propound the gospels of tolerance and innovation. What if the Program Era offers us, now, a series of time-restricted, ephemeral quasi-bohemian communities immune to this sort of psychosocial half-life? What if graduate creative writing communities are the natural successors to those institutions long considered critical to avant-garde literary production? And what if these new institutions are uniquely positioned to produce the sort of art capable of commanding unified attention in a harried and distracted populace?

This premise, to the extent it has been discredited, has most often been maligned by naysayers who read community and poetics as not merely interactive but indistinguishable. Indeed, even so-called “mainstream” poets like Donald Hall and Dana Gioia have adjudicated the Program Era merely an aesthetic movement.⁵ Yet that there should

5. Donald Hall, “Poetry and Ambition,” *Kenyon Review* 5, no. 4 (1983): 90-104; Dana Gioia, “Can Poetry Matter?” in *Can Poetry Matter? Essays on Poetry and American Culture* (Saint Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 1992): 1-21.

be a single aesthetic enterprise coordinated by tens of thousands of creative writing students and creative writing faculties in every corner of the United States—given the absence of any standardization of curriculum or abiding consensus on pedagogy amongst same, beyond the bare fact of letting one poet read and remark upon another’s work, as poets have done for centuries—is farcical. There can be no statistical or even anecdotal substantiation of such claims, and so these arguments make their home, instead, in the realm of demagoguery.

If, however, we assay a horizontal mode of criticism rather than a vertical—if we analyze the means and spaces of contemporary literary production rather than *only* making self-aggrandizing stabs at permanent assignations of value—we really *can* see the Program Era as a phenomenon that has changed, and will continue to change, American poetics. It may not (and certainly need not) occlude the abiding utility of qualitative judgments of literary merit, but it will almost certainly inform literary production at the level of the poet and poem, and at the more important register of poetics rather than aesthetics. And it is through the Program Era, and the Golden Age of American poetics with which it is concurrent, that the aims of the historical avant-garde can best be advanced in the present. Indeed, the confluence of pre-Aristotelean thinking and Internet-Age culture that marks the Program Era and our current Golden Age of contemporary poetry is best regarded as a new solution to an old problem.

From Workshops and Conceptual Writing to a Golden Age Poetics

Of all the cultural-capital detritus of the Program Era, the creative writing workshop is certainly the most maligned, though in its most compelling aspects it heralds a generative generational shift in how poetry is written and consumed. While the conventional workshop structure may stifle organic debate by limiting each classroom discussion to its specific occasion—analysis of a single contemporary poem—this “clock orientation” often prompts workshop participants to see their individual critique sessions as performances rather than mere teaching moments. Such students, knowing the talent of their classmates and realizing their time in the classroom’s bright spotlight

is brief, may present in class significantly more polished work than workshop pedagogy ordinarily calls for; may see pre-critique readings to classmates as opportunities to impress and entertain intimate peers; and may take the workshop's juxtaposition of imaginative, performative, social, and critical spaces as a signal that one never entirely escapes one's community, whatever one's psychosocial or aesthetic inclinations with respect to art and its practitioners. It is not insignificant, either, that the intensely juxtapositive space of the workshop, inasmuch as it is replicated whenever and wherever MFA students congregate, is also the space in which MFA-seekers use social media, non- or quasi-academic program events, and impromptu social gatherings to share their other artistic obsessions—be they musical, dramatic, studio-art, couture, or literarily "off-genre."

In short, it's not just that the Program Era has spawned bohemian writing communities in towns and cities across America that previously had no literary scenes to speak of, but also that these communities differ dramatically from mid-twentieth-century urban enclaves in the way their permeable boundaries permit a heretofore unimaginable degree of cross-fertilization between and amongst individual authors. Such communities are not, like many of the most celebrated bohemian enclaves were and are, relatively static in their composition; they do not exclude members based on the whims, artistic or otherwise, of individual influential members; they do not require a panoply of interpersonal skills for the maintenance of good standing; they rarely offer sufficient laurels to warrant consequentially destructive competition among members; they are more apt to promote aesthetic diversity—in part to stave off boredom, in part because members need have no emotional stock in peers' work to participate—rather than functioning as aesthetic moments posturing disingenuously as community-oriented cohorts; and, with a national trend toward full-funding schemes evident, they are increasingly accessible to those from all geographic locales and socioeconomic classes.

Still, one must not romanticize graduate creative writing program communities, let alone the workshop environment they—albeit only as a small percentage of their curricula—explicitly endorse. Besides "clock orientation" and the sort of "peer orientation" exemplified by using the classroom as a performative space, the workshop undercuts its own pedagogical aims by depriving students of the sort of

vocabulary-building exercises that make subtle discussions of poetry possible. Whereas the New Critics, those early- to mid-twentieth-century academia-dwelling poet-scholars, believed, above all, in legitimating writers' peculiarly non-academic perspectives on literature by building a new language for such discourse—those who attended high school in the 1980s and 1990s will be familiar with phrases and terms like “the affective fallacy,” “the intentional fallacy,” irony, paradox, ambiguity, and so on—proponents of graduate creative writing programs have historically resisted attempts to standardize creative writing pedagogy. The result is that many MFA students have precious little of what T.S. Eliot termed “the historical sense,” that is, the ability to see in each poem the reification and culmination of all the writing that has preceded it, and not merely the ephemeral *cri de coeur* of a single author. Workshop participants thus too often assume that poems set before them have been written from emotional rather than intellectual seats; more broadly, workshops deal inflexibly with non-lyric poetry, while even their lyric attachments are generally dehistoricized.

The question, then, is not whether conventional workshop pedagogy itself produces a new experimental poetics in America—that's too tall an order for any non-standardized academic pedagogy that is not militaristically didactic about aesthetics and poetics—but whether individual students of such graduate creative writing programs have found a way to translate the Program Era into a novel and indeed experimental poetics. The question, too, is whether we can recast debates over the significance of the Program Era to include acknowledgment of an essential fact: Participation in the cultural phenomena produced by the Program Era in no way requires a terminal degree in creative writing. What is required, instead, is the capacity to celebrate and generatively exploit the present era's numberless opportunities for literary expression, rather than couching them as oppressive or useful only as rhetorical foils. What is required is a twenty-first-century ethos as to genius—namely, that genius is a naturally *social* condition—rather than Conceptual writing's implicit adoption of the archetypal nineteenth-century genius, who isolates himself from Society to better hear his Muse. This Romantic capital-p “Poet” often suffered for his self-imposed, even haughty isolation: penury, cultural alienation, addiction, depression, and suicide were the prescribed career touchstones for English-language poets prior to the Program Era.

Today, the archetypal Golden Ager is not an *isolato* hammering away at a keyboard in a dark bedroom—nor even, as Conceptual writing’s kissing-cousin “flarf” imagines, a distance-learning Googlist drowning in undecipherable snippets of “found” language—but a social media-using extrovert determined to project her creative self into previously untapped spheres of interaction and influence.

In light of the above history, how might we describe the “Golden Age poetics” produced by the children and step-children of the Program Era? What might we expect to find in poets whose work encapsulates this singular moment in the historicity of letters, and how do such expectations translate into a realization of avant-garde principles and a production of what has here been termed “autonomous attention”? Certainly, at a minimum we’d expect the following: An understanding, acceptance, and even celebration of the surfeit of language in contemporary society; an aspiration to unify literary arts communities with those of other art forms already admired in the bohemian enclaves poets increasingly live and write in; an embrace of the performative and psychosocial elements of the written word, including a new (or, rather, returning) emphasis on elocution both in and out of graduate creative writing programs; a willingness to break the shackles of provincialism and embrace contemporary poetry as a cross-national rather than merely coastal phenomenon; an especially vigorous willingness to produce collaborative works; an interest in integrating literary production with other elements of modern living, that is, to indulge art-as-daily-practice rather than merely art-as-canon; an acknowledgment, in the biography if not the art of the poet, that among the many institutions through which contemporary poets move are “creative writing”-sponsored institutions defined by their juxtaposition of “workshop” and non-workshop spaces; a desire to produce mixed-genre or non-generic artifacts, by way of acknowledging that the sociocultural and curricular spaces of creative writing programs and non- or quasi-institutional literary communities are often mixed- or non-genred spaces; that the “literary artist” has supplanted the generic specialist as the principle figure in American letters; and a sensitivity to the costs and benefits of social media. In short, just as workshop spaces must increasingly be contextualized within the ambit of creative writing programs whose curricula and non-academic benefits are only fractionally defined by the workshop

pedagogy, and just as graduate creative writing programs must be contextualized within the long history of breakthroughs in Advanced Composition Studies and the failed provincialism of coastal literary enclaves, Golden Age poetics cannot be treated primarily as a locus for canonization practices. It is, instead, an opportunity to witness poetry as practice, as culture, as civic engagement, as way-of-life. One cannot speak of a Golden Age of poetry, now or at any other time in history, in the United States or elsewhere, in any other fashion.

Whither Language Poetry in the Golden Age of American Poetry?

Language poets and their successors have argued that as we live in a commodity culture, it is only by commodifying literature in painfully literal terms that we return art to the praxis of life in the way historical avant-gardistes had once hoped to do. (See, for instance, Kenneth Goldsmith's *Day*, a word-for-word transcription of an edition of the *New York Times*.) Yet this is a surprisingly sterile reading of the very Marxist theories Language poetry and its offshoots rely upon in defending themselves against charges of commitment-phobia and (consequently) decadence. Conceptual writing's concretization of our commodity culture might be appropriate to what Marxists term "second-stage capitalism"—the "market" phase extant at the time of the historical avant-garde—but if, in fact, we are now in the third and possibly final stage of capitalism (the "international" phase, or "late capitalism") we would expect today's young avant-gardistes to instead self-identify as only semi-discrete players in an international schema transcending and thus complicating the archaic boundaries of time, nation-state, and ideology. In other words, contemporary capitalism does not localize commodification as a series of concrete goods and transactions, but rather expands it to include a network of associations that are neither concrete, discrete, nor mappable. Whereas in second-stage capitalism economic activity is a cultural artifact, in late-stage capitalism it is a culture in itself.

Both Language and post-Language poetries misread not only Marxist theory but literary history as well. Inasmuch as they constitute the nominal avant-garde of our times, these literary enclaves push off

primarily from the New Critical gloss on modernism, rather than the full panoply of modernisms abidingly evident in the United States and abroad. This reactionary position is explained in part by the fact that Language poetry was ever and always primarily a reaction to, and a revolt against, the academy itself (as was New Criticism) rather than a generative reconfiguration of linguistic practices. Evidence of this odd form of projection may be found in signs of its transference: Language poetry claims to have been birthed, in the early 1970s, in response to a creative writing complex that didn't, in fact, actually exist at the time.⁶ Indeed, there were fewer than a dozen terminal-degree graduate creative writing programs in the world at the coinage of the term "Language poetry," and only a handful of well-developed undergraduate creative writing programs.

As a preliminary fallback position, certain Language poets have claimed, instead, to be reacting to the self-expressive lyric "I" promulgated by an entirely notional pre-Program Era "school" of fifties and sixties poets called Confessionalism. That "Confessionalism" falls apart as a coherent "school" upon even the barest historical or aesthetic investigation undercuts this secondary explanation. As a final redoubt, Language poetry locates its justification for being in poststructuralist theory, though the historical avant-garde it idolizes—but, importantly, was not directly activated by—was resolutely and even violently anti-theory.

Golden Age Poetics in Practice

While this essay focuses in detail on only three poets, and only on recent collections by these poets, it should be evident from the above description of Golden Age poetics that many other poets, many other collections, and indeed many other non-literary endeavors engaged by contemporary American poets could neatly be dovetailed into this discussion of American poetry's Golden Age. Similar phenomena to those described below—all of which reflect and enact the Golden Age values discussed at length above—may be found, for instance,

6. Bob Perelman, *The Marginalization of Poetry* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996): 11-13.

in Abraham Smith's inimitably performative, warbling Americana⁷; Ariana Reines's deadpan self-referentiality (her "Sucking" begins, "My name is Ariana Reines. // I wrote a book called THE COW, which won the Alberta Prize and was published by FenceBooks in 2006"⁸); the po-biz needling of Aaron Smith (from "Fat Ass": "Robert Pinksy, / Rita Dove, Billy Collins: fat ass, fat ass, really / really fat ass. David Lehman: Best American / Fat Ass"⁹); and the snarky anonymity of "Refried Bean" (whose "I am going to beat everybody at poetry" boasts of doing precisely that).¹⁰ Still, the poems of three literary artists—Anthony Madrid, Chelsey Minnis, and Matt Hart—are particularly serviceable as exemplars of the many manifestations Golden Age poetics has thus far exhibited.

In keeping with our general expectations for a Golden Age poet, Anthony Madrid, an Iowa Writers' Workshop graduate and author of *I Am Your Slave Now Do What I Say* (Canarium Books, 2012), is by any account a maximalist. His first collection is comprised of more than a hundred pages of ghazals, a fact which calls to mind immediately the exercise-driven poetics of those poets with limitless time (such as the ample free time available in a graduate creative writing program) to refine or merely fetishize a single approach to poetry. The ghazal, a received form consisting of a series of ostensibly unrelated couplets that are often found, ultimately, to bear some thematic relation to one another, is not the sort of form one expects to arise organically in the imagination of a twenty-something. It is, rather, precisely the sort of received structure one expects students in academia to encounter while under the influence of in-class pedagogies. It is also the ideal literary artifact for workshopping purposes: It's frenetic enough to

7. Abraham Smith, *Whim Man Mammon* (South Bend, IN: Action Books, 2007).

8. Ariana Reines, "Sucking," *Action Yes* 1, no. 12 (Winter 2010), <http://www.actionyes.org/issue6/reines/reines-sucking.html>.

9. Aaron Smith, "Fat Ass," *Ploughshares* 36, no. 4 (Winter 2010-11), ed. Terrence Hayes. Accessed November 22, 2012, <http://www.tumblr.com/tagged/ploughshares>.

10. Refried Bean, "I am going to beat everybody at poetry," in "Five Poems from the April Open Reading Period, Part I," Wave Books' Tumblr (press website), accessed November 22, 2012, <http://wavepoetry.tumblr.com/post/34588113859/five-poems-from-the-april-open-reading-period-pt-i>.

capture and hold the attention and imagination of a classroom of restless fellow poets; it's austere enough an inheritance from our poetic forebears that its use is likely to impress the professorial class of which academia is largely comprised; it requires the inclusion of the poet's own name, the better to satisfy the ego of the author-poet without requiring the faux pas of so-called "confessionalism"; it acknowledges the existence of a global literary tradition without requiring of the poet an abandonment of tones and rhythms usually associated with Americana; it encapsulates the passions of youth while retaining a clearly defined historical sense; and, as the unit of measure in a ghazal is the sentence, it's the perfect form for a young writer as interested in the parataxis of poetry as the hypotaxis of prose, in description as declamation, in obtuse renderings of image and diction as in the clarity of a structure to readily contain them. Madrid uses the form well, and in keeping with the spirit of free association implicitly encouraged by the ghazal's internal structure. There is a kinetic quality to this verse that belies its strict coupleting and forced anaphora. Madrid uses this license to cover a wide swath of compositional territory, veering from one line to the next between tones, rhythms, lexicons, allusions, and sonic schemes.

As with much verse of the Golden Age, the question for both the critic and reader of *I Am Your Slave Now Do What I Say* is one of accumulation: Do these lines accrue meaning as they pile one atop the next, or do they merely entertain, as the average workshop participant feels compelled to do when faced with a room full of peers not easily impressed or amused? We must also ask: Does any of it *matter*? When poets write primarily for their peers, they are more likely, one imagines, to skip those easy sentiments regarding the state of one's being and the state of the world that younger contemporary poets already are intimately familiar with from their own lives; they are more likely, too, to privilege exhibitions of skill within their prescribed limitations, the better to impress both peers and professors. We might note, also, that in a world in which only trade presses have access to a steady stream of publishing resources, it would be nearly unthinkable to publish a tome of ancient forms written by an unproven twenty-something. The mere fact that a first collection like this one exists is proof that publishing in the Golden Age is nothing like publishing was in the decades preceding it.

Madrid is representative of his generation in ways other than the formal. In many of the ghazals of which *I Am Your Slave Now Do What I Say* is comprised, Madrid can be seen searching for answers amidst an intellectual culture that has assured him, both within its academic corridors and without, that no such answers can, should, or will be forthcoming. Consider Madrid's opining, in an early poem:

For, if I do not solve, within the next few hours, the eternal
tormenting mystery of love,
Then let herds of city buses packed with foreigners drive over my
hollow corpse.
("Beneath Your Parents' Mattress," 4)

There is an aching sincerity here of the sort too often dismissed as mere gesture; one tenet of Golden Age poetics is that while sincerity must, in poetry, necessarily abide in artifice, it is never, itself, artificial rather than organic.

Elsewhere, Madrid poses as the embittered young man for whom no amount of consolation will suffice, given the avalanche of nonsense and indifference beneath which he finds himself. Whereas the traditional ghazal emphasizes romantic passion, Madrid is here beholden instead to that egoistic form of passion that is typified by a young man—call him a recent creative writing graduate student—whose passions are not, at least contemporaneous to the moment of authorial production, matched with the responsibility of civic action or technical polish. Certainly, if the ghazal as a received form is to be criticized, it is inasmuch as it requires of its author no plan of action, no hope of resolution, and no need for self-reflection. If it assures its author of anything, it is that each line of thought has its terminus just a few words away. So it is that Madrid, like many Golden Agers, gives us much inquiry and emotion but few answers and even less resolve for the big fights. Consequently, the work is invigorating without being satisfying, articulate without being pragmatic, lush without being consequential. But as a reflexive artifact of American poetry's Golden Age, it is superlative.

The same may be said of Chelsey Minnis's *Bad Bad* (Fence Books, 2007), whose ostensible topic is the Iowa Writers' Workshop graduate herself. Minnis is most immediately invested, in *Bad Bad*, in a likely faux self-analysis of what it means to be a contemporary American poet. It's a canny emphasis, however, as it permits Minnis to ruminate

concurrently on the joys and anguishes peers in other graduate creative writing programs have likely also experienced. The subject of *Bad Bad* is, finally, what it means to occupy the post of poet in a contemporary culture that implicitly excoriates the poet for her self-indulgences, even as it elsewhere celebrates identical impulses in non-literary spheres. *Bad Bad*, filled as it is with loose, diaristic, prosaic verse intermittently interrupted by ellipses—as though the book were a non-reflexive chronicle of a Freshman Composition free-writing exercise—never quite aspires to art, aiming instead at the sort of community-building exercise that assures its listener that both she and the author occupy the same contingent spaces. If a good deal of *Bad Bad* is, from the standpoint of craft, terrifically bad, it thereby reveals itself not as amateurish hot-dogging but an artful critique of the Program Era's professed emphasis—often honored in the breach—on technical perfection over atomized self-identity. It is hard to imagine any other generation of poets being so self-conscious of their own irrelevance; *Bad Bad* is not the *ars poetica* of the Romantics, it is distinctly the *res publica* of the Golden Age. These poems are not poems about poems, or poems about poetry, they are poems about poets and poems about the poetry in poetry written by poets for poets.

If there is a cloying sameness in *Bad Bad*, it is predicated upon the poet's insistence on either—depending upon one's interpretation—never breaking character or never *entering into* character. One feels oneself in conversation with the poet, if "conversation" were akin to being cornered at a fraternity party by the event's most self-absorbed and self-interested soul. In this respect Minnis turns poetry on its ear, exposing its indulgences even as she perpetuates them mercilessly. It's a coin toss whether this is an aching "social" poetics or an entirely hermetic one, which confusion is itself both typical of, and a byproduct of, the Golden Age and Program Era as they are currently constituted. Consider: "My last book was very bad! I wrote it just for showing off..." ("Preface 63," 26); "I like to write poems and I like to get drunk..." ("Preface 64," 26); "I can fail to be loved but I can't fail to write this..." ("Preface 65," 27); or near-obsessive references to banal contemporary slang (for instance, the verb-phrase "rocking the" (92) in the second half of the collection. Really, one could put a finger down on any single word in this collection and be annoyed by it. Minnis so artfully and artlessly collapses living and art one can't help but wonder

if *Bad Bad* could itself—on its merits—give the historical avant-garde second thoughts about its defining mission. In Minnis’s world there is no demarcation between poetry and personality, between authorship and community. Goldsmith’s “peak language” theory is taken, here, to its logical conclusion, which is that when there is too much poetic language there is, invariably, no poetic language at all. This book begs to be reviled in the same way contemporary American poetry begs to be appreciated: As a distinctly human act roped to its historical moment and in no way cordoned off from other American indulgences.

At times—amidst all the too-cute-by-half, diction-driven pop-culture noise—Minnis permits a brief reveal: Usually, the poet’s (or speaker’s) drooping spirit over the impossibility of sincerely abiding in language for any duration. In “F-lute” the poet writes, “I have my eyes on you...but my lips are only for the flute...” (105). The poet-speaker’s voracious autoeroticism is here cast as possibly self-defeating; she can see what she deserves but can only speak of it—or to it—in the benightedly smug language of self-emulation. In more than 120 pages of poetry (by its prodigious length alone, *Bad Bad* would announce itself, like Madrid’s nuclear stockpile of ghazals, the baroque product of a Golden Age) Minnis rarely finishes a thought, which alternately calls to mind the irrelevance of the individual and the impossibility of commitment in the Internet Age. Still, readers of *Bad Bad* owe Minnis a debt of gratitude for so exposing herself in the pursuit of a concept-driven declaration: Within a collection this defiantly indulgent (even the book’s blurbs name it so, noting also that it contains “moments of extreme morbidity and anger,” and that “many won’t find [Minnis]...acceptable at all”) is encoded a statement on the culture of poetics so profoundly important and utilitarian that equally a scholar or poetry-lover could consider it braver by half than even the times’ most assiduous *objets d’art*. Minnis is by no account whatsoever a bad poet, however she may strive to write what in a workshop setting would be deemed objectively “bad” poetry; she is, instead, one of our most brilliant literary critics, simply one whose acidic pen spills poetry rather than prose.

If the archetypal creative writing MFA workshop constitutes a pristine juxtaposition of compositional, didactic, performative, and social spaces—that is, if it is a unique confluence of the many different functions of a contemporary poet—we may conclude that Matt Hart is

as pure a Golden Ager as one could hope to encounter. Hart, a former professional rock musician and a Warren Wilson College MFA graduate, must literally be heard to be believed: As intermittently effective as Hart's poems are on the page, it is on the stage that his unique poetics truly announces itself. In his activities as a teacher, editor, and poet, Hart is Exhibit A in any defense of the value of literary community, of forging connections amongst and between authors that do not merely enrich the social lives of all but positively inform the poetics of each.

It is no coincidence that Hart's most recent collection of poems is entitled *Sermons and Lectures Both Blank and Relentless* (Typecast Publishing, 2012), for Hart's poems, at least in performance, achieve a religiosity bordering on the holy and an aggressive pedagogical aspect consistent with academic scholarship. He is, too, both blank and relentless: Each poem is written (one presumes) and is delivered (one Googles and YouTubes) with unrelenting and occasionally noisy energy, even as one detects in the poems as they appear on the page little abiding interest in form or structure. Yet in an American literary community estimated at more than 70,000 working poets, many of whom exhibit the basic competence generally associated with terminal degree-holders, it takes more than mere compositional competence to distinguish oneself; it takes, too, the sort of personality that naturally rises above crowds of fellow-travelers. Thus it is hard to tell, with Matt Hart, as it is with so many Golden Agers, whether the poems would be half as effective divorced from their public presentation. Hart's performance of his work generally involves the poet half shouting his poems into a microphone while swaying rhythmically forward and back in the manner of, say, Johnny Rotten; whether every poem ever written by the poet deserves or calls for this dramatic delivery is an open question, but what is certain is that Hart is mesmerizing to watch and that his poems are imbued with sufficient performativity that they will outstrip most others on the stage—unless and until they are matched against the work of any performance (“slam”) poet worth her salt. Still, this is no small feat, and one that few of the nation's most universally celebrated poets can claim for themselves or their work. Academic-poetry audiences unprepared for such explosive passions are certain to be awed.

Hart's literary “career” is likewise an archetypal by-product of the Golden Age. Unlike the shy or even reclusive geniuses of the Romantic

Era (the rare exceptions notwithstanding), Hart's interconnections with the national literary community are seemingly numberless: he's edited a biannual literary magazine for the last eighteen years, and a second (undergraduate) literary magazine for some portion of the same period; he's published others' full-length poetry collections and poetry chapbooks via a DIY publishing venture; he maintains a dot-com website covering both his magazine and press-publishing operations; he teaches at an art academy; he adjuncts and often guest-lectures at various colleges and universities; as an educator he specializes not only in creative writing but also literary history and the even-more-esoteric/academic "history of aesthetics"; he publishes his own work widely in both online and print magazines; he mentions himself by name in his own work; he intermittently writes and publishes reviews of the work of others; he's applied for and received multiple patronage-enabled fellowships; he's published collaborative chapbooks and books on multiple occasions, including collaborative work with visual artists; he's repeatedly toured the nation reading his work; he works in genres other than poetry (most notably, songwriting, painting, and documentary); he's travelled overseas to promote American poetry abroad; he regularly gives wide-ranging interviews in print and online discussing poetry, poems, and poetics; he aggressively promotes the literary efforts of friends and editors via a personal blog; he speaks warmly of writing poems influenced primarily by non-literary sources (particularly post-hardcore music); he promotes his work aggressively via social media, including not only the aforementioned Blogger website but also YouTube and iTunes; he's organized both individual readings and an ongoing reading series; his public writings suggest that he often derives inspiration from contemporary work by individuals he's met and dialogued with in person or online; and, despite being only in his early forties, he's published collections or chapbooks or e-collections or e-chapbooks with no fewer than twelve different independent presses.¹¹

11. *While Hart's reification of Golden Age principles is not exclusive of other, equally exemplary iterations of the Program Era (e.g., non-Caucasian, non-male ones), and while the Program Era—with its need-blind admissions, diversity initiatives, and near-absence of barriers to participation beyond*

To quote from Hart's public pronouncements, on his blog and elsewhere, is to chronicle the unfolding of the Golden Age over the past decade-plus: From blogging that "readings force us to deal with the human aspect of poetry (and even—egad!—poetics) in a way that we might not be able to (or would avoid) on the page" to noting in a 2010 *Bookslut* interview that his books "pose questions about our responsibilities to ourselves *and others*..." (emphasis supplied); from noting, in the same interview, that "I definitely think of my readings as performances. I'd love for people to feel afterward more like they've been to a rock show than to some academic literary event" to observing, again to his *Bookslut* interviewer, that he wants his audience to "feel included in my poems...that's definitely something I'm always thinking about," Hart is forever reminding us that we cannot review his work in a vacuum—that is, addressing exclusively what sits on the page—without grappling with the many ways in which he uses poetry to project himself into and through various subsets of the national literary community.¹² Thus, while scholars may see in this essay's proposed critical methodology a benighted New Historicism, in fact it is better represented as a resounding rejection of New Criticism: A literary-critical movement with which the Program Era is often aligned by detractors, but which is incapable of providing coherent readings of poems produced under the Program Era's ever-expanding sign.

the production of poetry appealing to increasingly heterogeneous admissions committees—has brought greater access to the literary arts for women, racial and ethnic minorities, and LGBT authors than decades of avant-garde bohemia, neither it nor the Golden Age it heralds are without their troubling exclusions. Any phenomenon dependent upon the collapsing distances of the Internet Age (an Age in which technology expands our roster of potential "real-time" acquaintances) is likely to adapt poorly to the needs of writers whose resources or responsibilities are differentially constituted. Parents, full-time professionals, and non-citizens, for instance, may find the winsome features of the Golden Age harder to access than most. Future research must focus on how to better embrace these vital communities.

12. Matt Hart, "Clean Part Round-Up," Bewilderment Incorporated (personal website), October 31, 2006, accessed November 8, 2012, <http://sincerityinc.blogspot.com/2006/10/clean-part-round-up-etc.html>; Matt Hart, interview by Elizabeth Hildreth, "An Interview with Matt Hart," *Bookslut* (November 2010), accessed November 6, 2012, http://www.bookslut.com/features/2010_11_016792.php.

Context aside, the poems of *Sermons and Lectures Both Blank and Relentless* feature minimal punctuation, Beowulfian midline caesuras, frenetic rhythms, reflexive sonics, and a penchant for juxtaposition and disjunction. Half rhymes and puns abound. Hart has described himself as the metaphoric offspring of preachers, drunks, and rockers, and it shows: The individual pieces of *Sermons* are largely interchangeable ramblings whose adjectival proclivity foregrounds their sometimes hapless desire to entertain. One poem even ends with the exhortation, “Everybody / clap your hands Clap your hands” (“Both Blank and Relentless,” 67). This is not to say the work is limited or limiting; in fact, much of the collection is superlative as communal performance, as a symphonic collapsing of dreadfully sincere instincts into droplets of heavy artifice, as a conflagration of muchness entirely of and for its time.

As with Madrid’s *I Am Your Slave Now Do What I Say* and Minnis’s *Bad Bad*, Hart (and thus *Sermons*) is not only a “post-craft” but also a “post-criticism” phenomenon; he asks to be read not as art or artist but as a gloriously generous participatory act in the long history of bohemian and institutional literary communities. Hart may not be a particularly refined writer, nor one likely to be called out for his grace and wit and subtlety, but he is, nevertheless, something ineluctable to the present moment in American poetics: a hero, an icon, and a rock star whose manner of living as a poet—a manner by no means limited to literary production—is historically notable. Hart illustrates the bankruptcy of conventional literary criticism by carrying entire subcommunities on his broad shoulders rather than pinning away beautifully within the gilded cage of individual verses. His poems are, consequently, entirely successful by the terms of their own contract—and it is with consideration of these terms, if not these terms exclusively, that judgments of historical merit ought increasingly be made.