Robert Frost once famously remarked that he regarded the practice of free verse as akin to playing tennis with the net down. The New Criterion has been publishing poetry since 1984. From the start, we have endeavored to assure that the nets on our courts were in good repair and stretched at regulation height. When we began publishing poetry, technical incompetence and what Brad Leithauser, writing in these pages, called metrical illiteracy reigned well-nigh supreme in most fashionable poetry circles. In part, this technical poverty was yet another unfortunate legacy of the 1960s: its attack on tradition and its ideology of untempered freedom naturally took aim at the metrical and formal heart of poetical achievement in English. If by 1980 there were few poets still insisting that writing in iambic pentameter was tantamount to abetting political repression, that was chiefly because such souvenirs from the Kulturkampf of the 1960s had already done their damage. Readers interested in current examples of the wreckage will wish to peruse the damage report that John Simon furnishes in his review of the 1996 edition of The Best American Poetry in this issue.

Mr. Simon concludes his essay on a melancholy note, wondering whether poetry has come to "the end of its tether and whether all, or almost all, poems have been written." Certainly, there are ample grounds for concern. The performance of most of the poets in the volume that Mr. Simon reviews—which alternates mostly between pseudo-vatic bilge and adolescent politicized whining—is an incentive to despair. Nevertheless, we firmly believe that "the end of poetry is no more upon us than its much ballyhoed cousins, "the end of art" and "the end of history": all seem obstinately persistent notwithstanding the dire proclamations of their would-be coroners.

If we are cautiously optimistic about the future of poetry, it is partly because we have over the years managed to attract so many talented poets—both new and established—whose work forms an effective antidote to such pessimism. Daniel Mark Epstein, Dana Gioia, Rachel Hadas, Donald Hall, Donald Justice, Jane Kenyon, Brad Leithauser, Frederick Morgan, Herbert Morris, Mary Jo Salter, Elizabeth Spires, Timothy Steele: the work of these and other poets who have appeared in The New Criterion testifies to a continuing resiliency in at least some strains of contemporary poetry.
Di
erent as these poets are from one another, what they have in common is an abiding scrupulousness about poetic meter and poetic form. In helping to raise the banner of what has come to be called the new formalism in poetry The New Criterion has in the poetry and the criticism of poetry it has published played a significant role in fostering a return to seriousness in this realm of cultural endeavor. Our achievements in this regard have been widely recognized by friends and enemies alike, and have been celebrated or disparaged accordingly.

It was with as much surprise as gratitude, then, that we found The New Criterion singled out in the latest volume of The Cambridge History of American Literature, which is devoted to Poetry and Criticism 1940–1995. The general editor of the entire history is Professor Sacvan Bercovitch of Harvard University, a longtime radical who whose name, Sacvan, was given to him by his Communist parents to commemorate the martyrdom of Sacco and Vanzetti. Nevertheless, in a section on Poetry, Politics, and Intellectuals written by Robert von Hallberg, Professor of German at the University of Chicago, the new formalism promulgated by the New Criterion is identified as an influential force in contemporary poetry and criticism of poetry that stands in opposition to the intellectual ascendancy of the Left since the 1960s. Professor Hallberg goes on to observe that no journal of the Left or Center has made a similar commitment to serious coverage of the arts.

Of course, we are inclined to agree. But it remains to note that, in championing formal poetry, The New Criterion has intended to advocate not an airless aestheticism but a view of poetry and of cultural endeavor generally that recognizes the deep connection between formal excellence and artistic potency. Indeed, it is in this sense that The New Criterion is a partisan of tradition. As T. S. Eliot noted in Tradition and the Individual Talent, tradition is more than just a repetition or handing down of the past. Tradition, he wrote,

is a matter of much wider significance. It cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour. It involves, in the first place, the historical sense; … and the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence. This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his own contemporaneity.

Thus the cardinal artistic truth only seemingly paradoxical that the most genuinely individual artist is also the one who has most assimilated himself to tradition. The formal resources of any art are the most tangible tokens of its spiritual itinerary. Which is why, to quote Frost again, the figure a poem makes begins in delight and ends in wisdom.

This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 15 Number 1, on page 2
Copyright © 2019 The New Criterion | www.newcriterion.com
newcriterion.com/issues/1996/9/poetry-tradition