

Translating the Gospel Back Into Tongues: **A Survey of Contemporary Arkansas Poetry**

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Abstract

The purpose of this essay is to introduce and characterize the work of a number of contemporary Arkansas poets, literary journals and related issues. Among the writers considered are Miller Williams, Paul Lake, Michael Heffernan, David Jauss, Terry Wright, C. D. Wright, Frank Stanford, Ralph Burns, Andrea Hollander Budy, and Redhawk.

Introduction

If any singular moment can be said to eclipse all others in the vastly underrated and underappreciated world of Arkansas poetry, it would have to be the 1949 [Pulitzer Prize](#) awarded to Little Rock resident John Gould Fletcher. But since then, several Arkansas poets have earned national reputations for their work: two have read at Presidential inaugurations, at least three have been granted fellowships from the [National Endowment for the Arts](#), and four have won the Porter Prize, the most prestigious literary prize within our state. Others have published in journals throughout the country and published collections that were distributed nationally. Yet contemporary Arkansas poets rarely are included in the literature courses of our schools and universities.

By "contemporary," I refer to poets publishing primarily in the past thirty years; hence, such prominent names as John Gould Fletcher, Lily Peter, and Edsel Ford will not be discussed here. By "Arkansas," I refer to poets who have published substantial works while living in Arkansas; hence, Maya Angelou is excluded from this study because she has never resided within the state since the advent of her illustrious publishing career. C. D. Wright and Jack Butler, although they reside in Rhode Island and New Mexico respectively, are included by virtue of the fact that they published entire collections while living here, and both retain strong ties to the Arkansas literary community.

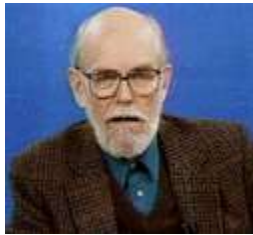
While one could easily categorize our local poets according to the current poetic movements occurring at the national level (New Formalism, L*A*N*G*U*A*G*E, and Slam, for instance), none of them seem to fit neatly or entirely into such categories. And so, while I shall refer to these movements when discussing certain poets, it should always be assumed by the reader that the poet in question exists beyond the walls of whatever structure I tend to place around the poet's work. Categories are useful in helping one understand certain aspects of a poet's work, but should never be used to label the work as a whole. Miller Williams has said that "poetry is a big room," and in our case, it is well-furnished.

The New Formalism

In the introduction to *Strong Measures: Contemporary American Poetry in Traditional Forms*, co-edited by Philip Dacey and David Jauss, the editors announced:

The revolution is over. The war has been won. As Stanley Kunitz has said, "Non-metrical verse has swept the field." A casual survey of our country's leading journals, prize-winning collections of poetry, and the annual Pushcart Prize selections will reveal how overwhelmingly successful the free verse revolution has been.... Given this fact, it is easy to understand why the young poet Barton Sutter has said, "the most radical poem a poet can write today is a sonnet." Radical or not, sonnets and virtually every other kind of formal poem have been written, and written well, throughout the contemporary period. Free verse may have "swept the field," but many poets have continued to write in traditional forms.

And, indeed, so have a number of Arkansas poets. Furthermore, two of the most influential texts in the creative writing market today are Jauss and Dacey's anthology and Miller Williams' encyclopedia on forms, *The Patterns of Poetry*. Jauss resides in Little Rock and teaches at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock; Williams resides in Fayetteville, teaches at the University of Arkansas, and founded the University of Arkansas Press.



Miller Williams

Easily the most decorated poet in the state, Miller Williams gained national prominence long before the general public was made aware of him during Clinton's second inauguration. In his long and prolific career, he has published over twenty-six books ranging from a history of American Railroads to translations of Spanish and Italian poets, critical and encyclopedic works, and ten collections of poetry. He is the only Arkansas poet to have received the Prix de Rome prize from the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

Although a good portion of his poetry is free-verse, a good amount of it conforms to traditional poetic devices, including rhyme, steady meter, and set forms. In fact, while writing the inaugural poem, Williams set out to write a poem that rhymed. And in *Living on the Surface*, his selected poems, one finds a variety of forms and defined stanza patterns throughout. In "A Little Poem," for instance, Williams is writing in long hymnal measures:

We say that some are mad. In fact
if we have all the words and we
make madness mean the way they act
then they as all of us can see
are surely mad. And then again
if they have all the words and call
madness something else, well then
well then, they are not mad at all.

(from *Living on the Surface*)

Furthermore, this poem demonstrates Williams' exuberance for sheer word play and his love for making jokes. But perhaps Williams is at his best working in longer forms which enhance his natural tendency toward narration.

On the Way Home from Nowhere, New Year's Eve

For papers I think I need, we bump off
the street and stop. I leave the engine on,
mean to make my way to the buzzing light
above the back door, but the door is dark.
Old Main's a hulking, dull, uncertain form,
no windows and no size. Then I remember

one small truth I didn't mean to remember,
that all the lights at ten would be turned off
for somebody's purpose. I enter the hollow form,
try one time to flick the light switch on
and shrug my way into the seamless dark.
What outside seemed scattered, useless light

would be a brilliance here. Reflections. Moonlight.
Sensing my way between the walls I remember
old mythologies of daytime and the dark
spun by gods and monster movies, cast off
with ignorance. My fingers stumble on
another switch. Nothing. I feel my form

falling away into another form.
I hear the hound, look for the quick light
glancing out of his eyes and imagine my own
open, aimless, milky. I remember
what children think of when the lights are off.
Something brushing the hand. To fit the dark

I tell myself I am blind. In such a dark
I could be moving down the spaceless form
of time, a painted tunnel. I twist off
my shoes and walk in deafness. Leap. Grow light
for one slow moment, then loose parts remember
gravity. I twist the sounds back on.

I'm over a million years old and going on
thirteen. I've always been afraid of the dark.
There truly are warlocks, witches, and I remember
banshees, saints and the always shifting form
of Satan himself. I feel a fly light
and crawl across my forehead. I brush it off.

Going on, I grab some papers off
some desk in the dark and turn back toward the light
I barely remember, running, hungry for form.

(from *Living On the Surface*)

Popular with medieval troubadours, the sestina form adapts well to the contemporary poet's sense of diction and pacing, but most of all, it lends itself to a kind of multi-layered story telling. In this case, a routine stop by an office at night veers off into lyrical observations about the nature of light and dark, triggering childhood superstitions and paranoia.



David Jauss

Best known as an O'Henry Award-winning short story writer and as the editor of both *Strong Measures* and *The Best of Crazyhorse*, David Jauss is also a gifted poet and a strong advocate of traditional forms. His collection of poems, *Improvising Rivers*, while primarily free verse, contains a number of metrical poems as well as sonnets.

Star Ledger

in memory of L.H.

A dozen years ago, my student still,
you watched streetlights and stars mottle
your rainstruck windshield into waterlilies
and drove through that dream of Giverny

into a parked car. When you woke, headache
stitched into place, you knew how much beauty
could hurt ... For years I told this story
to the students who followed you, to make

its easy point. What did I know then
about beauty, the pain of words colliding
with desire, the shattered glass and twisted steel
of loss? Today I read your poems again.
Lynda, I wish I could tell you how beautiful
their light is through the killing rain.

(from *Improvising Rivers*)

A Petrarchan sonnet, "Star Ledger" manages to be both traditional and experimental at once as it alters the normal rhyme scheme. And though not as ambitious as his sonnet sequence, "Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue," Jauss further explodes the form here by turning the traditional love song into a requiem.

Paul Lake

A professor of English at Arkansas Tech University, Paul Lake is well known within the circles of New Formalism, not only for his poetry (which includes two collections and inclusion in the New Formalist anthology, *Rebel Angels*), but for his outspoken views among the pages of several prestigious literary journals, including the *AWP Chronicle*, where he recently declared, "It turns out that writing formal verse is not at all like pouring water into a vase, but, rather, like the growth of a tree—far more so than writing free verse, which, except in special cases, is too ruleless, arbitrary, and mechanical to produce the organic integrity of a good sonnet." And, true to form, Lake's own poetry delves heavily into traditional cadences, stanza patterns, and forms.

Introduction to Poetry

She comes in late, then settles like a sigh
On the first day, returning every week
Promptly at ten, each Monday Wednesday Friday,
To study Shakespeare, Jonson, Donne, and Blake;

Enters the room to an approving murmur,
Straightens her dress, then, brushing back her hair,
Arches her body with the slightest tremor,
And sits, while the room grows breathless, in her chair;

Sits for an hour, while busy sophomores worry
Each turgid line, a Botticellian smile
On her rapt face, who's learned how little study
Love involves; who, walking down the aisle,

Knows in her bones how little poetry
Words breathe, and how—on turning to go home—
All eyes will watch her rise above her "C"
And walk off, like a goddess on the foam.

(from *Another Kind of Travel*)



Michael Heffernan

In 1987, Michael Heffernan became the first Arkansas poet to receive a fellowship from the National Endowment of the Arts and remains the only Arkansas writer to have received the full allotment of three NEA grants. While his current work leans toward free verse, his earlier poems were often

set in forms, the sonnet in particular.

Fishing Cow Creek During the Grenada Invasion

Whiskey light is flickering opposite
the sun. Our spinners whistle in the stream
like schoolgirls on streetcorners. It is late
enough to be drunk like this. This daydream
says we have been here in another life.
Over the low-water bridge an open jeep
pokes among shadows glinting from the bluff
like dancing dragonflies. If ever we sleep
and dream of a place like this, it is that other
life we are dreaming from. Across on that side
the top floor of a shop has fallen over
in somebody else's war. The neighborhood
deadbolts its doors against the glint of gun
or handgrenade flickering in the sun.

(from *The Man at Home*)

Also: Jack Butler, John Crawford, and Johnny Wink.



The Oral Tradition

The oral tradition in English is at least as old as the language itself. The Beowulf poet wandered from village to village reciting the epic story in four-beat, alliterative lines; Whitman encouraged the poet to sound his "barbaric yawp over the rooftops of the world." And despite the ethereal stance of some, poets have, likewise, long sent their verses into the throes of competition, as evidenced by the sonnet contests of John Keats and Leigh Hunt. And so the current trend of oral competition known as poetry slams appears to have developed naturally as a hybrid of these two traditions.

Not content with the mundane standard of poetry readings in the 1980's, the Chicago poet Marc Smith invented a competitive structure by which a poet could read in a setting which prizes not only brevity in the work, but unbridled and instantaneous judgement of the poem. Essentially, the rules of the slam are that the work read be an original piece performed by the author, that it not exceed three minutes, and that it not be accompanied by props or instrumentation of any sort.

Five judges are selected randomly from the audience and each poem is judged Olympic-style, with scores ranging from zero to ten. The top five competitors then compete for prizes in a second round. Audience members are encouraged to shout their approval or disapproval not only of the poem but of the judging of the poem.

The popularity of poetry slams throughout Arkansas is nothing less than phenomenal. Little Rock, Fayetteville, and Hot Springs hold monthly slams with audiences often exceeding a hundred in the Little Rock venue— a far cry from the dozen or so individuals who might attend a local bookstore reading. Hot Springs also hosts the largest cash prize slam event in the country, the Arkansas Grand Slam, with a first place award of one thousand dollars.

This past summer, Hot Springs and Fayetteville sent two teams of poets to the National Poetry Slam in Austin, Texas, where both teams finished among the top twenty (Hot Springs finished eleventh; Fayetteville, nineteenth) in a field of forty-five. Featured on the Fayetteville team were Lisa Martinovif and Brenda Moossy, who have toured extensively together.

One interesting side effect of the slam phenomena is that poets who compete regularly have committed a large number of poems to memory (virtually a lost art by the mid-80's) in order to better perform the poems. Indeed, one could easily argue that the slam poets have done as much to retain poetic tradition and integrity as the New Formalists.

In that the national slam encourages poets to work together in teams, poetry has drawn heavily from the world of drama and, specifically, from the tradition of acting troupes. The SanKofa Poets, a poetry troupe out of Little Rock, is comprised of three young, black poets who perform individual poems and group pieces, or "poetic skits." One of their members, Harold Moses, has won first-place twice in 1998 at the Little Rock Poetry Slam.

Also: Maria Kuntz and Bud Kenny.

The Avant-Garde

Experimental poets have, perhaps, always had the most difficult time gaining acceptance from their peers, yet their work is often the most influential. Picasso said that masterpieces are rarely original and, contrarily, original art is rarely judged to be masterful. Nevertheless, any serious attempt to comprehend the art of an era must include attention to those who sought to expand or even erase the barriers of any given art form.



Terry Wright

Perhaps the most notorious and inventive poet in the state, Terry Wright is truly experimental in every sense of the word. The only writer to win first place in both the fiction and poetry categories in the annual open competition sponsored by WORDS: *The Arkansas Literary Society*, Wright has distinguished himself in literary journals across the country and in his public readings which often turn into mind-boggling, multi-media events incorporating voice modulators, still images, and even silent scenes from movies. Wright's theatrical training is clearly

evident in these literary performances, as is his drive to explore poetry beyond the boundaries of tradition.

Valentine Graph

Cupid must be stupid to shaft you. Soon the stems start to droop and the yard sale vase leaks from a crack. I snack on candy samples hawked at the supermarket. You get a water bill in the mail. Nobody cares if the stars come out tonight. My one wish is that they won't. But the moon plods along full of itself. Waves of blood lap my brain eroding thoughts to a flat silt. My picture of you is a fish carcass. In it, you dissolve and drift out then tumble in. Your hair is stranded with green weeds. Foam bubbles between your pale pink lips. I never can think of an opener. You flip over on your back and look black and charred. I reach for you with smooth driftwood arms before your fragments are sucked by eddies under the surface. You become a memorandum, a shape that glides along the bottom of my meditations like a ray. But after several lunar cycles I become less thoughtful. I carve my broken heart into patties, fry the scraps, set them under heat lamps. My all-you-can-eat needs are my concerns, and I now court only amusement. I buy a season ticket to Oceans of Fun. I love the waves because they're fake. I love the sun because it kills me. Children around me splash and play because they are not ours, and I am not thinking of you even as I write this line about you. I float alone on a former tire that goes nowhere but away from you.

(from *Several Lunar Cycles: Winners of the 1996 WORDS Open Competition*)

Not even love poems are safe from Wright's desire to subvert old standards and transform them into something new. Here, the love song is set not as a sonnet, but as a paragraph; and the object of the speaker's love is not something to commingle with, but to escape.



C. D. Wright

Currently a faculty member at Brown University, C. D. Wright's connection to Arkansas remains, without a doubt, among the strongest of our expatriate poets. Her book, *The Lost Roads Project: a Walk-in Book of Arkansas*, is perhaps the strongest testimony to date of a poet influenced by the natural beauty of our state, as well as by a wide variety of our writers. Wright's first several collections, including "Translating the Gospel Back into Tongues," were published by the Lost Roads Press while she lived in Fayetteville. After Miller Williams, C. D. Wright is probably the most well-known

Arkansas poet in the country, having appeared in PBS's *The United States of Poetry* and by virtue of the critical acclaim which has grown around her last three collections.

With Grass as Their Witness

Not more lonely than the road
the women that loved him
Not more beautiful than the road
the men that loved him
He came in behind the rain
seated himself under your trees
Clutching his genitals in one hand
he emptied his green mind
How beautiful were those men
whose tongues went over the ridge
of his balls How lonely
the water left standing in the road

(from *Tremble*)

For Wright, the controversy which surrounds Whitman (even in his own day, contrary to the claim that Whitman's sexuality was never an issue until recent literary critics made it so) pales in comparison to the man himself. Whitman touched deeply the lives of those he came into contact with: the hundreds of boys he nursed during the Civil War, his lovers and, of course, his poetic audience. Wright captures well the artistic existence of the great poet's life in its own unrelenting terms.

In her own way, Wright is just as unrelenting, as her poems turn harsh and loving, dark and light, simultaneously. The deft quality of her syntax alone is enough to set her apart from most poets, but her ear is remarkable, capturing not only the rich noise of great poetry but of the common vernacular as well. At the end of "And It Came to Pass," she states, "Something else is out there/ goddamnit/ And I want to hear it." And hear it she does.



Frank Stanford

When he fired three bullets into his own heart in 1978, Frank Stanford cut short what many saw as the most promising career of any Arkansas poet since John Gould Fletcher. Stanford was stunningly prolific (his publications included a 500+ page epic entitled, *The Battlefield Where the Moon Says I Love You*) and was just gaining national attention when this occurred. Twenty years later, his terse, violent, and often dialectic poems continue to influence poets and even songwriters around the country.

The Light the Dead See

There are many people who come back
After the doctor has smoothed the sheet
Around their body
And left the room to make his call.

They die but they live.

They are called the dead who lived through their deaths,
And among my people
They are considered wise and honest.

They float out of their bodies
And light on the ceiling like a moth,
Watching the efforts of everyone around them.

The voices and the images of the living
Fade away.
A roar sucks them tinder
The wheels of a darkness without pain.
Off in the distance
There is someone
Like a signalman swinging a lantern.

The light grows, a white flower.
It becomes very intense, like music.

They see the faces of those they loved,
The truly dead who speak kindly.

They see their father sitting in a field.
The harvest is over and his cane chair is mended.

There is a towel around his neck,
The odor of bay rum.
Then they see their mother
Standing behind him with a pair of shears.
The wind is blowing.
She is cutting his hair.

The dead have told these stories
To the living.

(from *The Light the Dead See*)

The eerie quality of Stanford's work heightens the often brutal delivery of his material. Although here the language softens the view, the typical Stanford poem more often than not is a glimpse into the violent innerworkings of the human nature, spoken through a multitude of voices. Stanford is a virtuoso when working in personae, a chameleon slithering through the linguistic landscape.

Also: Sandy Rankin and Michael Karl (Ritchie)

The Mainstream

In between the New Formalists and the *avant-garde*, lie the practitioners of free verse, still the primary form of the 20th Century. The vast majority of well-endowed literary journals and university presses publish lyrical and narrative poems based in strong imagery and evocative language.



Ralph Burns

As the editor of *Crazyhorse* and the author of five collections of poetry, including the Iowa Prize-winning *Swamp Candles*, Ralph Burns' reputation and influence extend well beyond the borders of our state. The poet who finally appears in *Crazyhorse* (often after years of trying) can truly be said to have "arrived." And the poet who wins the annual prize awarded by the press connected with the most well-regarded writers' workshop in the country can be said to have achieved prominence. Among his numerous awards, Burns has been awarded two fellowships from the N. E. A.

Stella, 5

There is the sound
Brando makes under
the wrought iron balcony

in New Orleans in summer
and Stella sweats
in her nightgown

and Desire runs
along its length
but all you hear

is Stanley— everybody
knows— one word, two
syllables, and even the space

between the stars is awestruck
that a man can feel such
stubborn, stupid language

crawl out of his brain,
into his mouth, and scrape
the ceiling of heaven—

Stella— you are beyond.
Stella— knock, knock.
I tap the limousine glass

like an ape, like Stanley Kowalski interdicting silence.
Stella— the lights come on

in rooms 3 and 12, a hot
humid air turns to pink smoke
against the cool adobe wall.

(from *Swamp Candles*)

When he is writing at his best, Burns' poems can be extremely moving, such as here where *A Streetcar Named Desire* somehow connects, in the poet's mind, to the death of a loved one. Seemingly simple in their direct approach, the poems in *Swamp Candles* (and in *Mozart's Starling*, as well) are often quite complicated in the emotional tension beneath the surface.



Andrea Hollander Budy

Winner of the Porter Award and a fellowship from the N. E. A., Andrea Hollander Budy maintains a strong following throughout the state. She currently teaches at Lyon College in Batesville.

When She Named Fire

it was a sound
she uttered, not a considered thing, nothing
her mind did. It was a sound
which burned her throat to come out
and announce itself for the thing

that was burning outside her
where the trees had been down
for years and which lit the sky
then disappeared and changed
to something black.

When she named the sun, she didn't think
of fire at all. *Sun*, she claimed,
because it was huge and unexplainable,
a oneness that she loved
for its ability to command
the whole sky and the earth, too;
and because it was the warmest thing
she knew, and she sang
its tunes and missed it every night.

She didn't name the moon at all. That was
the name it gave itself At night she heard
it call. To her it was
another kind of sun, still white
but cold, an icy light
that narrows as it grows, that is
not light at all.

She thought she gave love's name
to love, that beating thing she could not
still. She might have called it
bird. Or fire again
for fire inside that gives no light
but burns and burns and does not
stop until she touches
what she loves, and then it only burns
again and makes her want
to name it something more.

(from *House Without a Dreamer*)



Redhawk

In some ways, Redhawk remains the most controversial poet in the state, but his numerous critics are offset by his large and loyal following throughout the state. His second collection was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize, and for a year he held the Alfred Hodder Fellowship in Humanities at Princeton University. Redhawk currently teaches at the University of Arkansas at Monticello.

I Break All the Rules at Ben Franklin Elementary

I am talking to a hundred of them
about death, God and the Indians
when one of them farts loudly

and time stops;
the silence and the stink hang there.
All of the scoldings and whippings

and public humiliations are not enough
to stifle the low wave of giggles
and then I say, Who farted?

All hell breaks loose.
The teachers are lined up along one wall;
their faces freeze over.

The principal rises, her jaw set like iron pipe.
Jeffrey, she intones in an icy rage,
you go wait in my office. NOW.

The little boy rises from the sacred circle
I have so carefully made. No, I say,
able to save only one face, hers or his.

I put my arm around him and sit him
up front, next to me. When I am done
she comes up to me with a look that

would bring God to heel.
3 things you never do in a school,
she says handing me my \$50 check,

Talk about God or death
or violate a teacher's authority.
I give her back the check,

which stops her in mid-reprimand.
She seems pleased and dumbfounded.
As I walk to my car, the students along

one side of the building bang the windows
and wave to me. They do not know
I have just purchased Jeffrey's redemption,

all they know is that here is a man
who laughs at farts and
does not like the principal.

(from *The Way of Power*)

One of Redhawk's consistent strengths is his ability to balance both anger and humor within short narratives. His poems vary widely in subject, and his readings are powerful and well-received by many established poets as well as high school and college-aged readers.

Also: Rick Lott, Jo McDougal, Kyran Pittman, and Conrad Shumaker

Literary Journals

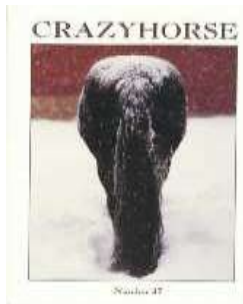
In Arkansas, literature fans have access to at least four literary journals with stellar national reputations. Poetry readers, in particular, will find much to hover over as three of these journals, *Slant*, *Voices International*, and *Crazyhorse* are strictly poetry journals. *Slant* (from the Dickinson line: "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—"), a product of the University of Central Arkansas English Department, publishes one issue a year, approximately one hundred pages of verse from poets around the country, including some of considerable reputation (Leonard Nathan, Marge Piercy, Lee Upton) as well as various members of the UCA faculty (which includes some excellent writers, most notably, Terry Wright). But *Slant's* strong suit lies in its commitment to publish *a lot* of virtual unknowns, poets who have yet to publish a book or chapbook. Founded in 1987 by Richard Hudson, *Slant* is currently edited by James Fowler, assisted by several members of the English department who screen manuscripts and recommend or reject poems for consideration.

Voices International is solely the vision of Clovita Rice, a well-regarded and active member of the Arkansas poetry scene. Edited from her home in Little Rock, each issue features a "command performance," by a specific poet: a picture, biographical information, a statement about writing and a generous serving of poems. Like *Slant*, *Voices International* also publishes several unknown poets in every issue. Rice's journal is probably the most conservative of the magazines discussed here, but the reader drawn to conventional forms and strong imagery will not be disappointed. A magazine currently in its 30th year of publication, *Voices International* lives up to its name, publishing not only poets from around the country, but from around the world.



Nebo, a product of the English department at Arkansas Technical University, bridges the gap between the undergraduate journal and the national journal, a unique undertaking in the literary world. Edited by undergraduate creative writing students, *Nebo* publishes its own students alongside writers of national reputation. Furthermore, *Nebo* regularly publishes more Arkansas poets than any other journal in the state. It reviews

books, like national journals do, and will occasionally include literary-minded essays. Founded in the early 1980s by poet-novelist Paul Lake, *Nebo* provides an exceptional reading experience: a whirlwind of poetic voices, quirky but gripping stories, and tight, informative reviews.



Of all the literary journals in Arkansas, however, *Crazyhorse*, is in a class of its own. Voted in 1987 as one of the "best twenty literary journals in the country" by *Library Journal*, this product of the UALR English department has a history and tradition unrivaled in Arkansas. Founded in 1960 by poet extraordinaire Thomas McGrath, *Crazyhorse* was born in Minnesota and, plagued by financial difficulties as most literary journals are, later moved to Murray State University in Kentucky before settling down for good in Arkansas in 1982. Well-known and highly-regarded by writers all over the country, *Crazyhorse* continuously publishes a mixture of the best writers the United States has to offer, both known and unknown. John Ashbery, Robert Bly, Raymond Carver, Andre Dubus, Carolyn Forché, Thomas Lux, Denise Levertov, Bobbie Ann Mason, John Updike, Miller Williams, and James Wright have all, at one time or another, graced the pages of *Crazyhorse*. Pulitzer and Pushcart Prize winning authors galore. And countless numbers of exciting young writers have marked the beginnings of their careers with a story or poem in its pages. *The Best of Crazyhorse*, edited by David Jauss, celebrating its first thirty years of publication, offers a glimpse of just how far-reaching this journal has been over the years. The current editor, Ralph Burns, continues to improve upon an established tradition, and has determined at least one radical change: beginning this year, *Crazyhorse* will become strictly a poetry journal.

One obvious advantage *Crazyhorse* has over other Arkansas journals (aside from longevity) is money: UALR provides enough of a budget to produce a beautiful, 175 page journal twice a year, pay its editors small fees for their services, and even indulge in small stipends for the writers (the vast majority of literary journals pay no real money; contributors typically receive two copies of the journal as payment). *Slant*, *Voices International*, and *Nebo* all function on shoe-string budgets.

Arkansas Writers & the NEA

Judging by the intensity of anger directed at the [National Endowment for the Arts](#) by conservative politicians (not to mention letter writers to several Arkansas newspapers), the arts in general would not seem to be favored these days. As the federal debt continues to bloat beyond all worldly proportions, the taxpayer has to wonder, "Where does it stop?" Republican leaders have promised to stop funding any and all programs they deem unessential to taxpayers, and the NEA is often cited as the most expendable government program of all.

In a recent article in *Poets and Writers*, poet R.T. Smith points out that "historically, the arts have provided one significant arena in which a tribe, a village, or a congregation negotiates and examines its values." Beyond the money, Smith's statement hits at the heart of the controversy: whose values are being explored? After all, when ordinary citizens hear of their tax dollars going to some strange performance artist in New York City who crams fruit into every orifice in her body and calls it art, some are going to be offended. But what about the work of the other 99.9% of the NEA funded artists who did not make the evening news? Smith further argues that

"although a few artists under the partial patronage of the NEA may ask their questions in an unsettling fashion, most composers, sculptors, and novelists are busy stimulating readers in Omaha, educating listeners in Sacramento, and inspiring museum visitors in Birmingham."

Indeed, the high quality of work funded by the NEA usually is overlooked by detractors and rarely discussed at all in the media. Yet an advertisement sponsored by The Literary Network reminds us that, so far in this decade, "18 of the 22 recipients of National Book Awards, National Book Critics Awards and Pulitzer Prizes in fiction and poetry have received Creative Writing Fellowships from the NEA."

I recently contacted eighteen writers around Arkansas for their thoughts on the NEA controversy, and while none of them outright opposed using tax money to support artists, their responses ranged from apathy to qualified acceptance to articulate, enthusiastic endorsements of the current system of individual grants.

Terry Wright raised another rarely mentioned point concerning elimination of the NEA, namely, the cultural options. "Any nation that truly cares about the condition of its culture can only evolve by generally supporting the arts. Lip service for the arts (or worse, permitting them to compete via the free enterprise system) is too easy and very unproductive. The Republicans' blatant hypocrisy of touting "family values" and denouncing Hollywood violence and rap music rings hollow when these same cultural standard bearers turn around and slash funding for the NEA and the NEH. So, instead of being able to take my daughter to see a traveling puppet theater troupe or dance company whose tours are made possible by NEA grants, I will soon be left with only *Die Hard with a Vengeance* (doing quite well via the free enterprise model) as an enriching and entertaining cultural experience."

But Wright's support of the NEA is not without its own concerns: "Yes, I am generally in favor of giving grants to writers, but only if such grants are not politically motivated, rewards among friends, or watered-down and 'safe'."

Dr. James Fowler (also a UCA professor and editor of *Slant*) shared Wright's concern that, in light of political pressure, the selection process might prove too politically correct. His preference would be for most NEA funding to go to arts groups rather than individuals: "Most writers would do well to support themselves, and write as they are able. To my mind, very few are talented enough to justify a full-time, grants-driven writing career."

Dee Brown (Arkansas' most famous and best-regarded author) agrees with both Fowler and Wright that governmental support of artists is fine as long as "the judges who select the grantees have no political connections and do not accept reciprocation in kind."

In other words, among artists, the concept of "mutual grant giving" between friends and colleagues is as distasteful as sexually graphic art might be to a patron.

Another major point of debate among these writers, of course, is the actual financing of the NEA. Pattiann Rogers (University of Arkansas professor and recipient of two NEA grants in poetry) contends that she can support the grant system "only if the public supports the Endowment. I think when the NEA becomes a controversy, at the level it is now, that its

usefulness is questionable." But other writers view government funding of the NEA as a drop in the bucket from which our culture reaps untold fortunes. Dr. William Harrison (another U of A professor and recipient of an NEA grant) points out that "every civilized country in the world has an arts program and ours, currently, costs less than one long range, needless Air Force bomber." His colleague, Dr. John Duvall, concurs: "The NEA is an extremely inexpensive program, yet the encouragement and aid it has provided has contributed greatly to the high level of literature produced in this country."

Indeed, for most of these writers, the cultural rewards of a government which supports the arts is greater than any monetary concern.

Andrea Hollander Budy argues that "if we do not as a country support individual artists— and support them without strings attached— then we are failing ourselves significantly...During a dark time in our country's history, it was President Herbert Hoover who said that what this country needs is a good poem, and I know he was right. Nobel Prize winner Octavio Paz noted that a sure sign of the decline of a civilization was the waning support of the arts by the governing body of that civilization. Art is apolitical and should be well-supported and uncensored. If not in these free United States, then where?"

Hope Norman Coulter (novelist and artist-in-residence at Hendrix College) adds that "the arts teach lessons in creative expression, discipline, and tradition that are particularly important to children— especially poor children, whose parents cannot afford private art and music lessons."

Finally, as David Jauss explains, when a patron, be it a government or an individual, supports an artist, everyone wins. "Perhaps the best way to understand my argument is to watch one of my favorite films, *Babette's Feast*. Babette is a great chef, but she works for two very poor sisters and so hasn't had the opportunity to do more than cook what is necessary for physical survival. But then she wins a lottery and uses every cent to prepare one glorious feast for her employers and their quarrelsome friends. The feast is a kind of communion; it transforms friends, who have been squabbling over petty matters for years, and brings them together in a way that leads one of them to look up at the sky, later that night, and say "Hallelujah!" Thanks to the lottery, the two sisters and their guests receive a kind of spiritual nourishment that regenerates their lives. But what does Babette, the artist, get with her 'NEA grant'? She gets, as she tells her employers, what every artist wants more than anything else: the chance to do her best. Even with the NEA's support, there are thousands of worthy artists who never get the chance to do their best and, thereby, nourish us and our culture. But thanks to the NEA, we do get some feasts the equal of Babette's."

Conclusion

All in all, the prognosis regarding the state of poetry in Arkansas is good . . . very good. Not only are a number of our poets making their mark nationally, but the audience for poetry has been growing steadily for some time now. More and more Arkansawyers are attending and participating in readings and slams. The monthly slam at Vino's, for example, regularly packs in over a hundred people. The Wednesday night reading in Hot Springs has not missed a single week this decade; also, the yearly Celebration of the Arts has brought in several of the most highly-regarded poets in the country (Alan Ginsberg, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Rita Dove, Robert

Creeley, etc.) as well as audiences the size of which one would only expect to see at a musical event. Fayetteville sponsors weekly readings and slams and regularly fill that venue as well. Numerous bookstores and cafés around the state hold a wide variety of poetry events such as Banned Book readings, open mikes, and book signings. And a slew of small towns, such as Hope feature slams and regular readings. Organizations such as WORDS: *The Arkansas Literary Society*, the [Ozark Poets and Writers' Collective](#), and the Poets of the Round Table are flourishing. There are currently no less than three \$1000 literary prizes in Arkansas and two of them are strictly for poetry.

There is even a word for all of this: *renaissance*.

Biography

An assistant professor in the Department of English and Foreign Languages, Marck L. Beggs earned his Ph.D. at the University of Denver. The author of *Godworm*, a collection of poems, Beggs also serves on the board of WORDS: *The Arkansas Literary Society*. In 1997, he was awarded a poetry fellowship from the Arkansas Arts Council

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(a list-in-progress of contemporary Arkansas poets)

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