

The End of Verse?

A recent NEA report finds fiction reading on the rise, while readership of poetry has dropped significantly. Is an art form dying?

by Marc Bain, Newsweek

In January, the National Endowment for the Arts released a report titled "Reading on the Rise," announcing that the number of American adults reading fiction had increased for the first time since the NEA began tracking reading habits in 1982. According to the report, 50.2 percent of adults had read a work of fiction in the previous year, compared with just 46.7 percent in 2002. The results were greeted with a mixture of excitement and caution by education experts. Some saw them as the long-awaited reversal of the trend toward a dumber, TV-obsessed United States; others, more wary, called them a statistical blip. Almost as an afterthought, the report also noted that the number of adults reading poetry had continued to decline, bringing poetry's readership to its lowest point in at least 16 years.

The dismal poetry findings stand in sharp contrast not only to the rise in general fiction reading, but also to the efforts of the country's many poetry-advocacy organizations, which for the past dozen years have been creating programs to attract larger audiences. These programs are at least in part a response to the growing sense that poetry is being forgotten in the U.S. They include National Poetry Month (April); readings, lectures and contests held across the country; initiatives to get poems into mainstream publications such as newspapers; and various efforts to boost poetry's presence online (poets.org, the Web site of the Academy of American Poets, even launched a mobile version optimized for use on the iPhone). Yet according to the NEA report, in 2008, just 8.3 percent of adults had read any poetry in the preceding 12 months. That figure was 12.1 percent in 2002, and in 1992, it was 17.1 percent, meaning the number of people reading poetry has decreased by approximately half over the past 16 years.

Sunil Iyengar, the NEA's director of the Office of Research and Analysis, says the agency can't answer with certainty why fewer adults are reading poetry. He and others believed the opposite would be true, largely because of poetry's expansion onto the Internet. "In fact," he says, "part of our surmise as to why fiction reading rates seem to be up might be due to greater opportunities through online reading. But we don't know why with poetry that's not the case."

Dana Gioia, who was chairman of the NEA when the new report was released but has since stepped down, credits the rise in fiction reading to a number of things, including more reading online; initiatives like the NEA's "Big Read," which began in 2006 and seeks to have whole communities read a literary work together; the efforts of educators; and the success of series such as the Harry Potter books and Stephenie Meyer's "Twilight." He also mentions Oprah's Book Club as a catalyst.

Poetry, for all its merits, has no program or volume to rival the current popularity of Oprah and Harry Potter, but even so, the decline of its already modest following is

noteworthy. Some critics and readers claim that most poetry today is too cloistered and inaccessible, or that it is just plain bad. Yet a telephone survey conducted in 2005 by the National Opinion Research Center on behalf of the Poetry Foundation found that only 2 percent of respondents said they didn't read poetry because it was "too hard." And Donald Hall, a former U.S. poet laureate, points out that most poetry in any age is bad, and that hasn't kept people from reading in the past.

There might be other factors at work. According to the NORC survey, which included about 1,000 adults who read for pleasure primarily in English, people who don't like poetry—and therefore don't read it—are typically those who haven't been exposed to much of it. "Their in-school experiences were fairly limited, and most of them first read classic poetry, poetry which may be less accessible and which may seem less relevant to teenagers than might contemporary poetry," the report concluded. "It seems likely that people's perceptions of poetry are the greatest barriers to participation."

Exposing more people to poetry is exactly what advocates have been trying to do, and evidence suggests they've done quite well. National Poetry Month, for instance, which began in 1996, has become a fixture in thousands of schools and is celebrated in communities all over the country. Poets.org had more than 10 million visits last year, up from about 4.5 million in 2001, and Poetry magazine, one of the form's oldest and most venerable outlets in the U.S., has seen its circulation triple to 30,000 since 2003.

Perhaps the most successful, and forward-looking, program of the past few years has been Poetry Out Loud, a recitation competition for high-school students that is often compared to the Scripps National Spelling Bee. It was created by the NEA and the Poetry Foundation, and in 2006, its first year as a national contest, about 40,000 students participated. This year, nearly 300,000 students are taking part, reciting both contemporary and classical poetry. Stephen Young, the Poetry Foundation's program director, says the event was devised as a more lively way of engaging a young audience. "I think the timing seemed good because, in the years that memorizing and reciting of poetry had gone off the pedagogical map, the slam movement and hip-hop poetry and performance poetry had hit the scene," he says. "We conceived of Poetry Out Loud as another approach to teaching poetry, but perhaps more pleasurable than [how] poetry was taught when I was a high-school student."

Attracting young readers who haven't yet formed an impression of poetry has been a particular focus of the foundation. The recent successes of poetry advocates on that front are generally not reflected in the NEA numbers, which looked only at the reading habits of those 18 and older. Anne Halsey, the Poetry Foundation's media director, says the group is confident that its efforts will eventually become more broadly evident. "We're a young organization," she says. "We're taking the long view of this."

Still, despite the anecdotal evidence that interest in poetry is on the rise, at least among some parts of the public, the NEA numbers are difficult to discount. The report is based on "The Survey of Public Participation in the Arts," conducted in partnership with the U.S. Census Bureau. The survey's sample was more than 18,000 adults, which the report

points out is "roughly 20 times the size of the average media poll," and it was balanced by the Census Bureau to "reflect the present U.S. population." It is by far the largest recent study on reading in the U.S.

Even if readership is down, not everyone is concerned. In fact, popularity is itself a fraught subject in the poetry community. In an address to the Association of Writers & Writing Programs this February, the president of the Poetry Foundation, John Barr, described how the popular poet writing for the common reader essentially disappeared with the advent of Modernism. The 19th-century model of poets publishing in mainstream venues such as newspapers was replaced by the 20th-century model, in which the increasing fragmentation and difficulty of poetry required specialists to discern it, moving it into the college classroom. Today, to call a poem "accessible" is practically an insult, and promotional events like National Poetry Month are derided by many poetry diehards as the reduction of a complex and often deeply private art form to a public spectacle.

A few years after the launch of National Poetry Month, poet Charles Bernstein wrote in a caustic essay that April is now when "poets are symbolically dragged into the public square in order to be humiliated with the claim that their product has not achieved sufficient market penetration." He added that "National Poetry Month is about making poetry safe for readers by promoting examples of the art form at its most bland and its most morally 'positive'."

Barr, who presides over an organization that tries to represent poets—even those who say they don't need or want publicity—while broadening their readership, says it's "not necessarily a bad thing" if fewer people read poetry. The goal is to find each poem "its largest intended audience," he says. Tree Swenson, executive director of the Academy of American Poets, says, "Because of the nature of poetry, it's not just 'more people, more people, more people,' but deeper engagement and more kinds of poetry and moving people along to interest in poetry that might be more challenging."

Of course, poetry has been supposedly dying now for several generations. In 1934, Edmund Wilson published an essay called "Is Verse a Dying Technique?" Fifty-four years later, Joseph Epstein chimed in with "Who Killed Poetry?" and former NEA chairman Gioia gained fame with a 1991 piece titled "Can Poetry Matter?" In answering their titular questions, all three to some degree concluded that poetry's concentration in the hands of specialists and the halls of academia was bad for the art form's health.

Former poet laureate Hall, who published an essay called "Death to the Death of Poetry" in 1989, has heard it all before. "I'm 80 years old," he says. "[For] 60 years I've been reading about poetry losing its audience."

Despite what national surveys may suggest, and despite rumors of its demise, poetry seems likely to persist, in one form or another.

Related comments from “Harriet”, the Poetry Foundation’s Blog

Ian:

Dead is certainly the wrong word to use (portrait painting, for instance, is obsolete, but not "dead"). And it's not poetry that seems to be becoming obsolete, it's just poets. Poetry is thriving.

And let's be clear: we're just talking about print poetry. I mean, I can hardly throw a book of obsolete poems toward the garbage without hitting someone who either does Hip-Hop, slam, talks in spontaneous haiku, writes lyrics, participates in the almost liturgical word games that happen constantly on message boards, or posts their emo poetry to their Myspace, LiveJournal, or DeviantArt page. Sure, no one reads poetry, but more people are participating in poetry than ever before.

Martin Earl (Canadian poet):

Ian, I agree with everything you say (especially the way you put the printing press into perspective - as an historical phenomenon). My only doubt is with your play on "dead" and "obsolete"...neither of them quite do. And I'm sure Lucien Freud, one of the most powerful painters at work today, would not choose "obsolete" to describe portrait painting. David Hockney would also take exception.

The backdrop to all this poll-taking and audience puffing is: how can artists continue to make their living. (Vide my comment above on John Suau's current struggle to make a reasonable living.)

The internet, as it's supposed to do - since its codification of content doesn't distinguish between this or that, but rather uses this or that as its basic algorithm - inevitably reduces poetry to content, like the downgrading of the photograph to the image, the physical to the digital. As for painting, I, for one, still need oil painting more than I need, for example, "The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living."

Cathy Halley:

I'll bet you half the people they asked said they hadn't read any poetry because they were afraid of the next question about what it meant. I'd argue that poetry and poems--especially talking about them--makes many people incredibly anxious. So much so that a) they don't read and b) when they do, they don't like to talk about it for fear of sounding stupid. In my experience, people feel ashamed when you ask them to talk about poetry, and apologetic that they don't get it.