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Poetry as the Scholar's Art

An Interview with Poet Amy Newman

JULIE L. MILLER

Amy Newman is the author of five collections of poetry, most recently *On This Day in Poetry History* (Persea Books, 2016). Her other books include *Dear Editor*, winner of the Lexi Rudnitsky Editor's Choice Award, *fall, Camera Lyrica*, winner of the Beatrice Hawley Award, and her first book, *Order, or Disorder*, which received the Cleveland State University Poetry Center Prize. She's won a fellowship to the MacDowell Arts Colony and recently was awarded the Friends of Literature Prize from *Poetry* for her poem "Howl." She is a board of trustees professor at Northern Illinois University.

Your new book On This Day in Poetry History uses details from the lives of famous mid-20th century American poets such as Elizabeth Bishop, Robert Lowell, and Sylvia Plath. In his review for the New York Times Book Review David Kirby (2016,17) states, "This is the only poetry collection I can recall in recent years that has the same sort of 'Works Cited' page and notes you'd expect in a scholarly study." Did you begin this collection as a scholarly study? If so, when did you realize the research about these poets was finding its way into your poetry?

It began as a study into T.S. Eliot's influences and ended as poetry. Like most poets, I've always got one ear open to the world hoping to be influenced by something that I can eventually explore in poetry. In this case I was doing research on Eliot for a class I was teaching. I'd just completed a collection of poetry that had, itself, begun with my decision to try to figure out what makes a poem a *poem*. I had wondered about that essential element that creates poetry: It isn't just the appearance on the page that defines what makes a poem poetic, is it? It can't be just the line break that separated poetry from everything else; there's something in poetry, a kind of energy, what R. P. Blackmur [(1987, 247)] calls its "animating presence." My wondering about this presence ultimately became *Dear Editor*, a book of cover letters to an imaginary editor in which the writer doesn't turn off the poetry mind when she turns to the task of writing the cover letters that accompany her submissions.

I was about to teach my usual survey course on poetry, and my mind was focusing on the Movement poets in England and the poets commonly referred to as "Confessional" in America. That poets of both schools responded to their time with a more personal tone—though distinct, of course, the British poets like Philip Larkin and Thom Gunn more inclined to work within restraint, the Americans more wildly personal—I could

see as in part a strategy against Eliot's influence on the poetry of the time. To wildly oversimplify, Eliot's theory of impersonal poetry in part contributed to the idea that the poet's life was not a fit tool for reading the poetry: "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality" [(Eliot 1974, 58)]. Critics forwarded this idea, and we had a New Criticism that looked instead for a cold study of, say, tension and release of tension in poetry (and a number of New Critical readings that advanced the idea of the death of the author). But I've always felt that this theory of Eliot's was really a dissembling on Eliot's part, and that it's impossible to keep the writer out of the work. Just one look at "The Waste Land" or "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" in conjunction with any of Eliot's biographies knocks that pose down a bit. Further, my students blossom when we read, say, Sylvia Plath or Ted Hughes, with biographical information. The poetry is no longer a cold hard object to be studied for tensions but artifacts of lives lived by human beings made dimensional by the sources from which they grow. I had decided that bringing biography back to poetry would be my disruption.

I began to just marinate in the lives of these poets I'd be teaching the following semester; instead of the usual biographical details, I explored at a more atomic level. For some reason Eliot's power has always bothered me, and I focused on the poets whose response to Eliot was revolutionary. I was planning on teaching Robert Lowell's collection *Life Studies*, (of course even the title tells us that Lowell is craftily rejecting Eliot's dictum), and I began to enjoy this task I'd given myself to read all the biographical materials over, to spelunk into every poet's life. As I looked at these lives, at these people becoming poets, my mind returned to that open question: what makes poetry *poetry*?

Lowell writes in the shadow of Eliot; when does his tree limb, seeking light, twist out from under the bigger limb towards its way into its own way of seeing the world? I was studying for my class, but my mind started to wonder: Is there a way to note a moment in a person's life when he or she becomes a poet? What if we could see American poetry coming into being? In the midst of this thinking, I came across a minor detail in a biography of Elizabeth Bishop: as a child, after a major fire in her town, she picks up a stocking, diverted by it [(Miller 1993, 5). I came across a startling detail in a Lowell biography: he breaks Jean Stafford's nose not only the first famous time, but a second time [(Mariani 1994, 91)]. All these moments could be the moment when the poet *becomes*. No detail of a life is so trivial as to not have potentially widespread consequence, a kind of butterfly effect.

So, the shorter answer is the project began when, in studying for my upcoming class, I let my mind wander around, and it started to wonder: what if I explored these parts of American poetry happening, in poems? To consider writing about Lowell breaking Stafford's nose a second time, I'd have to read everything I could get my hands on; the biographies, the letters, Stafford's stories (my research taking me to her marvelous, essential short story about her post-broken nose surgery "The Interior Castle," for example [(Stafford 1986)]). And that's the first poem I tried to write. It went on from there.

I am interested in the mix of resources in the bibliography of On This Day in Poetry History. You used primary resources such as correspondence, newspaper articles, a memoir, and the creative works of the writers. You also cite critical biographies and other secondary works. What are your go-to sources for finding the information you need? Are you on a first-name basis with the interlibrary loan staff at your library? Do you work with a reference (or liaison) librarian when you run into research problems?

Interlibrary Loan wrote this book, mostly. I mean, they were a major supplier of necessary materials. I have never met a source I didn't like, so anytime I saw any reference anywhere, I wanted to have it in my hands and read it. Our library has some good materials, and those materials led me to others, so I would say the folks at my interlibrary loan know me very well.

Some of my favorite pieces were the obscure ones. I chased down a reference in a John Berryman biography to a nun who left the convent for the summer to take a writing workshop taught by a young John Berryman; this yielded a beautiful article about Berryman written by that nun, who turned out to be the poet Madeline DeFrees (1996). I mean, she wasn't the poet Madeline DeFrees at the time she took the class, and she wasn't cited as anyone but a nun in his class; that there would be a nun in a Berryman class was too interesting not to look into. I love big biographies, letter collections, all hard copy books that may be in any way related to my project; books are like fields with millions of seed in them, and though it's impossible to gather every seed, I am obsessed with trying. I am, further, happy for JSTOR and Project MUSE, databases I can access through Northern Illinois University's libraries, with which to locate some materials.

The reference librarians at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin were great. I travelled there to study Anne's Sexton scrapbooks and correspondence, her personal effects. The reference librarians were patient with my obsessions. It's a revelation to see the actual materials and visualize, realize the correspondences: a ticket from the Ice Follies, a green swizzle stick, and then an ad for Librium a bit later; a brief clipping, with a page from a doctor's prescription pad attached, signed by the therapist with whom Sexton was having an affair, the note a little too professional and cold; the notes in her diary, in her lovely vulnerable script, in beautiful lines. And I was able to see some of her paintings. Did you know Sexton practiced painting? She did, a little, and they are very, let's say, of the period. The librarian at the Ransom Center set them out on a special room for me to study (but of course not to touch). I noted that the library had had to make titles for the works I saw based on their subjects, like [*Landscape with purple mountains, water and trees*]; [*Still life with white penguin and deer figurines*]. Just being able to sit with these paintings and to study them was an experience that gave me insight into her days and her ways of seeing the world.

One of the jacket blurbs for your third book fall describes the book as "drunk on the dictionary" because it uses definitions of the word "fall" as a springboard for exploring the themes of grief and loss. How would you characterize a poet's relationship to her dictionary?

I would bet that most poets have a great affection for this room where they can find so many tools. But I have a complicated—a respectfully complicated—affection for the dictionary, a book that pretends to hold the meanings of words but is really just trying. Every definition of a word is an attempt to convey something, a kind of condensed sign for something other than what it is: a string of letters, little shapes made of ink on paper, unequal to what it represents. I get the feeling the dictionary is aware of its failure, of its inability to contain everything. But as a poet who is aware that it's impossible to effectively convey things with words, I appreciate the effort.

The idea that each word is trying to explain itself is actually what got me started on *fall*. I was interested in exploring the reason for grief in this world and, since many people use the word "fall" as a signifier for the fall of Eden and the loss of perfection—understanding grief as the result of our fall, say—I thought I'd look up the word "fall" to see

its definition. I saw that this little word had 72 definitions, and that the definitions seemed to be trying to tell a story of how grief came into the world [(American 1976)]. It was striking, intriguing, and I thought I'd try to write a poem to explore each definition.

And I'm sure, too, that this idea of how the dictionary tries without success to tell each word's story carried over into *Dear Editor*, the book I wrote after *fall*. In *Dear Editor*, a collection of cover letters written to an unseen editor, the letter writer, an aspiring poet (who is also named Amy Newman) has her own complicated relationship to the dictionary which she describes as "a glum book disguised as enough language, within which I can't find one word to describe the look on the face of St. Anne de Beaupré..." [(Newman 2011, 56)]. I like the failure of words. It suggests that failure is a part of trying. That sounds like a downer, but it sustains me. Trying is everything.

Aside from writing poetry, you are also a prolific writer of book reviews, essays, and profiles of other writers, all of which are informed by research. Does the research process for this more scholarly writing differ substantially from the research process that informs your poetry? How does your participation in scholarly communication contribute to your creative writing practice?

In Wallace Stevens's *Adagia* (1997) he says, "Poetry is the scholar's art" [(1997, 906)]. This resonates with me. There are differences in degrees between and among the work that is not poetry that I produce, I don't think there is a marked difference in the amount of research, but there is a difference in the way I use the materials I find.

For me writing poetry is, at its heart, a process of learning; I think that's what separates poetry from verse. Verse says what you know, in clever ways; with poetry, the writer doesn't know everything beforehand. Wondering and exploration are part of the poem project. Scholarly work is pretty much part of the creative writing practice for me. Often, when I have found myself pursuing something because I'm about to teach it or I have a scholarly interest in it, I feel like I'm picking up Ariadne's thread and that eventually it's going to be attached to a poem draft.

In a recent interview in Fifth Wednesday Journal, you said that for a long time you were more interested in studying poetry than in writing it and that you think "reading about literature is as intense as writing it, maybe even more so." How do you introduce this intensity into the classroom?

I don't know if this is the answer to the question, but I feel as though being honest about reading, and being patient with students and their fear of and/or resistance to literature, I can create a place that allows them to discover that they don't hate it. I get the feeling more and more that any literature they've come in contact with via education has been given to them only for a test or something: take this story and boil it down to a moral or an aspect to be memorized that the teacher can ask you about on an exam. They come into class feeling like they have to know: what is the message this book is trying to convey? Can I distill it down to two sentences to remember for the exam? And so literature, which isn't trying to convey any message, but is only being, and opening the world, and inviting them into a landscape ... many of the students haven't been exposed to just reading for pleasure, which leads to thinking, which leads to the kind of depth and increased feel for reality that we read for. Students initially feel compelled to reduce to a nutshell-type summary, resisting any part of the literature that might allow them to imagine, to wonder, to *not know*, because they read to accumulate data for the test. But literature, poetry, fiction are there to do exactly the opposite of that. Eudora Welty said,

"There is absolutely everything in great fiction but a clear answer" [(Welty 1978, 149)]. So how would a test work with that? Literature is not for testing.

I ask for the students' patience as we scratch through something difficult, like Faulkner. I certainly avoid lecture, and instead create opportunities for what we used to call group work: getting students into small groups to discuss the literature among themselves. It's an insider secret that students learn more in class when they are listening to their peers as well as the teacher. If the teacher is up at the front of the classroom dispensing data, the students become passive, as if they were watching a television program. If their peers are speaking, it's much more of an active discussing, a learning situation for them.

And then, there's the plain fact that I can't not get choked up sometimes—which is embarrassing, but whatever—when I read something as beautifully written as the ending of James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues" or Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, say. Or Stevens or Larkin. I am frank with my students about literature. I teach things I love, and I also teach things that I don't love. I don't hide my frustrations with it, and I don't hide my love. I don't know if this frankness helps, but I think it does. My students are surprised when I tell them I have times when I love T. S. Eliot's work and times when I really dislike it and him. In a recent discussion about the character Edna Pontellier in Chopin's *The Awakening*, I said, "I tell you what; I just don't get Edna a lot of the time. I can see how some see her as a woman out of place, but she can be irritating." There was visible relief on the faces of some students. It's okay to have a visceral response to a character that goes against the standard reading. My mind changes every time I read a book, and letting students feel the way they want to feel—informed at the very least—fosters a place where they can express themselves, and think, and change.

Do you have a favorite assignment that helps students connect research with the creative writing process? Any memorable classroom moments or writing break-throughs that have resulted from this assignment?

Research and poetry go hand in hand, in my opinion. Once you start looking into something that has been compelling to you, you discover intimate relationships, little correspondences. Books wherein the poet has explored this relationship become models for student research. I've used Natasha Trethewey's *Native Guard*, her book exploring a number of things—among them: the Louisiana Native Guard, one of the first black regiments; her mother's history; and her own complicated relationship to Mississippi—as a model for students. We study this technique of rescuing historical narrative (not many of us are aware of the story of Ship Island which forms a central sonnet sequence in the book), and also of examining one's correspondence with a past. In conjunction with that book we read Daniel Cross Turner's interview with Trethewey. We consider what Turner [(2013)] calls "the metaphor of 'crosshatching'" in Trethewey's sonnet sequence "Native Guard": a confederate soldier (formerly a slave) is writing in the lines of a journal he finds in the abandoned home of a White Southerner (the term also refers to this soldier's back crosshatched with marks from a whip). Turner asks Trethewey whether "crosshatching" may be read as metaphor for her technique of exploring history as a part of her writing search. She responds:

It's the integration of my personal story, my history, crosshatched, written over and within the public histories and more dominant narratives I have received. I like the idea of how these strands are interwoven, because our stories are never simply two trains running on separate tracks. They are much more like the basket weave of that crosshatching [Turner 2013, 160].

A number of poetry books rescue lost narratives, crosshatch this way: Martha Collins' *Blue Front*, Eavan Boland's *Outside History*, and recently Tarfia Faizullah's *Seam*; these books use a personal voice to explore, study, and rescue from the dustbin of history some event. The poets begin by exploring a historical event or time period, and find themselves immersed and obsessed and a part of the material. Writing into this subject, researching it, they rescue it from an obscurity. My students' responses to these books often begin "I had no idea that..."

Having long stressed that poetry isn't a relaying of what you know, but a kind of submission to what the world wants you to learn, I assign crosshatching to my poetry students: what event or issue, what history or interest, has tapped you on the shoulder, but you never explored it and its correspondence with you? That has yielded some beautiful work. One will note a compelling fascination with the mistreatment of whales at Sea World; one cites an interest in Egypt. Someone mentions hearing about the Spanish American war; another starts talking about the first women in prison. These sometimes become semester-long chapbook projects.

The publishing industry is undergoing tremendous change driven by the web and social media. How have these changes had an impact on your approach to publishing your work? What advice do you give to your students?

The web has generated many venues for publication. So in one way having these alternatives to place work means more publishing opportunities. But reading online doesn't feel to me the same as reading in print. I always have the feeling, when I read online, that the material is going to a different part of my brain than when I read hard copy.

A bit of the advice I give my students about publishing online or in print: look at the work you love, see where those poets you admire have published, look at the acknowledgments pages in book and the contributor's notes in journals to see where work that you think is similar in aesthetic to yours might find a home, and send there. This suggestion doesn't distinguish between print and online venues.

But in terms of reading, studying, and researching, I have found that students don't read as deeply when the sources are delivered electronically, unless they print them out. Our university is going through a budget crisis, as are so many universities. In an effort to reduce expenditures for my department, I no longer photocopy materials for students to study in classes, but instead scan and send them out electronically. My small and unscientifically verified study, which is only comprised of me comparing student response this year to years previous, shows that students just don't retrain, absorb, or even consult electronic materials. Maybe it's because the screen, which has the potential to offer so much, flattens whatever it offers.

We are still in the middle of knowing how we will feel about print in the years to come. Many university presses have been in danger of getting sliced and even closed. In the case of The University of Akron Press, public response restored the press when the university tried to shut it down [(Farkas 2015)]. So many readers are still clamoring for print and the kind of experience and quality selective print publishing conveys.

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