Songs of Ourselves

Review by Troy Jollimore

Americans' Favorite Poems:
The Favorite Poem Project Anthology
Edited by Robert Pinsky and Maggie Dietz
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Is poetry thriving, or dying? No one seems able to agree on this; indeed, when it comes to poetry, it seems that no one can agree on anything. The optimist cites sales figures, slam attendances, and writing workshop enrollments, all of which are, apparently, up. The pessimist, on the other hand, merely sniffs at the mention of slam poetry and wonders how good those sales figures would be if we decided not to count copies of Jewel's *A Night Without Armor*. How are we to decide who is right?

"The people who live in a Golden Age," wrote Randall Jarrell, "usually go around complaining how yellow everything looks." And so we must ask—is it possible that the optimist is right, that we have indeed been living in a Golden Age of poetry? And if so—how could we have missed it? Where were we, exactly, when this was going on?

Recently I was at lunch with a colleague—a fellow professor of philosophy—and when it came out that I regularly read poetry, a puzzled look came over his face and he said, "You know, reading poetry has never even occurred to me as something I might do." In a Golden Age this professor would be an anomaly; in ours he is the norm. Few academics regard reading poetry as something they might do; even fewer—almost none—see it as something they *must* do. Even those who care about being well read are likely to exclude poetry from their list of essential works. Nobody thinks anymore that verse may be the best, most accurate vehicle for the expression of a sophisticated or profound thought. As for those who write poetry—and they are more common than those who read it—many of these writers choose poetry because they think it's easier than prose. And in fact, the kind of poetry they have in mind probably *is* easier than prose.

(But what of the sales figures? —The sales figures, even if they really have improved, are still not good. Poetry—putting aside celebrity pretenders like Jewel, and tabloid successes like Ted Hughes' *Birthday Letters*—doesn't sell in bulk, or anything approaching bulk. But what of the workshops, the poetry slams? —Sniff.)

But am I not being unfair? After all, I have in my hands, at this very moment, a volume entitled *Americans' Favorite Poems*: a representative sampling, edited by Maggie Dietz and Poet Laureate Robert Pinsky, of works selected for inclusion in Pinsky's ambitious Favorite Poem Project. Indeed, the book seems intended to exist as a rebuke to the worries of the pessimist. Americans *do* have favorite poems, it says. Americans *do* care about poetry. Not poets, not book reviewers, but real, ordinary Americans—commodity traders, truck drivers, zookeepers, students, children, retired persons—who read, are inspired by, and take comfort from works of Shakespeare and Hopkins, Wallace Stevens and Hart Crane, Francisco de Quevedo and Sylvia Plath. Comforting, no?

Well, yes. And yet, the pessimist refuses to be so easily mollified: he still feels alone in his love for poetry. When a new book is released by James McMichael, say, or Ciaran Carson, his local bookstore doesn't carry it; he has to ask them to special order it—and the clerk, of course, hasn't heard of it—and it isn't in the warehouse, so it will be two to three weeks, not two to three days. And when he finally receives it and reads it and wants to talk about it—who can he talk with? There are, apparently, thousands of people in this country who know and care about poetry—but how do you meet them?

Of course, numbers aren't really the point: people don't take up poetry in order to be part of a mass movement. Knowing that a few thousand poetry-lovers are out there ought to be enough; *Americans' Favorite Poems* ought to be a comfort, after all. Really, isn't it nice to know that Randall Jarrell himself had two poems chosen for inclusion? (I'd have been happier if one of them had been "The Mockingbird," rather than the good but over-anthologized "Next Day," but you take what you can get.) And isn't it nice to know that people still read and enjoy John Donne's "The Flea"? (It's "the best argument for sex I've ever heard," writes the 17-year-old who chose it.) And, even as we mutter and gripe about our left-out favorites (where, for instance, is Berryman, that most American of poets?)—even as we grumble and complain, still, isn't it nice to have this group of strangers urging us to read Wislawa Szymborska, Edwin Arlington Robinson, Frank O'Hara? Isn't it nice for once to be urged to read poetry, rather than to be the one doing the urging?

Yes, really, it is nice. And yet...when you read the comments of the real, ordinary Americans who chose these poems, you get the feeling that a great many of these people have somehow missed the point: when they try to explain why they chose the particular poems they did, why they mean so much to them, you find that they're not talking about the poems at all; they're talking about themselves. "My interpretation of this poem written by Langston Hughes may not be the same as his," one writer comments. "But a poem is what I choose to make of it and this one is a description of me." This theme—*this is a description of me*—occurs again and again. A note introducing "Sailing to Byzantium" explains, "I find Yeats's stanzas to be a dynamic metaphor for the rebirth I have experienced since returning to school. The poem admirably sums up my transformation from self-centered substance-abusing egomaniac to exceptional student." One might wonder whether someone who insists on seeing Yeats's magnificent work as nothing more than a description of his own recent life has really completed the transformation away from self-centeredness. But these comments are spoken without a hint of worry or shame, driven by the unspoken assumption that a poem can only matter to me if it is in some way about me. Rather than letting poems draw us out of ourselves, making us larger and broader, we are encouraged to make the poems smaller so that we can take them inside us and, in a literal sense, comprehend them.

One searches in vain through *Americans' Favorite Poems* for the person who would write, *I love this poem because it describes a reality I knew nothing of.* Those who come closest to saying this are generally young. An 18-year-old student writes of James Wright's "A Blessing" that "The poem leaps at you, and something moves inside you—metamorphosis." And a 12-year-old boy, writing of Wilfred Owen's "Dulce et Decorum Est", gives us the wonderful if baffling claim that "This poem connected to me by means of life itself." But for every one of these people you have six or eight who seem interested only in poems that confirm what they already knew or believed. "The last three lines of this poem [Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken"] illustrate my life as a mother and a teacher." "This poem [Robert Hass's "Meditation at Lagunitas"] speaks not only in my voice, but speaks of me through the eyes of my ex-fiancé, thinking the thoughts I constantly told him he was having." Even the salesman who chooses John Ashbery's "The Improvement" claims that the poem contains "my life recreated" and rhetorically asks the poet, "How did you write it without ever having met me?" (This of a poem that ends, "Then the larkspur/ would don its own disproportionate weight,/and trees return to the starting gate/See, our lips bend.")

"Nothing conceivable is so petty, so insipid, so crowded with paltry interests—in one word, so anti-poetic—as the life of a man in the United States." So wrote Alexis de Tocqueville in a Chapter of *Democracy in America* entitled "On Some Sources of Poetry Among Democratic Nations." But the people quoted in *Americans' Favorite Poems* would, it seems, disagree: the lives of Americans, their own lives, seem to them precisely the right subject matter for poetry. Would de Tocqueville be surprised? Unlikely: a few pages later in his book we come across the following observation: "In democratic communities, each citizen is habitually engaged in the contemplation of a very puny object: namely, himself."

Still, as irritated with Americans as one may become while browsing *Americans' Favorite Poems*, we should keep in mind that what is operating here may be not so much a general social trend as an editorial strategy. Pinsky and Dietz may simply have assumed that the only way to sell poetry to Americans is to appeal to their inherent narcissism. This viewpoint is reflected in Pinsky's introduction, where he writes that the Favorite Poem Project "will present something like a snapshot of the United States at the turn of the millennium year, through the lens of poetry." In order for the poems to be snapshots of their readers, they must *resemble* their readers: that's just what a snapshot is. And, we should add, just what a poem isn't.

Not only does this editorial strategy condescend to American readers of poetry, it also works against Pinsky's stated aim of constructing "an anthology of literary interest." Each individual poem may be of literary interest, but the book as a whole seems soft and shapeless, a literary grab bag. An assortment of the same or similar poets illuminated by thematic commonalities might have been quite interesting; but the book as it is, guided only by the purpose of displaying ordinary American individuals in the act of reading poems and discovering—surprise!—themselves, is somewhat less than the sum of its parts; it has all the coherence and interest of a collection of unsolicited testimonials for detergents or sleep aids. ("I thought I'd *never* get over my divorce. Then a friend said, 'Have you ever read Louise Glück?'") Indeed the most depressing aspect of books like *Americans' Favorite Poems* may be the way they reduce poems to products and poets, critics, and readers of poetry into merchants and hucksters.

I'm being unfair, I know. The pessimist has gotten his claws into me; his sniff is contagious. Although it is not a good book, *Americans' Favorite Poems* may still do some good. Its plan seems to be to domesticate poetry, to convince people that they can let poems into their homes the way they let cats and dogs into their homes, and need not worry about getting bit. If, in the process, the poems really do lose their teeth, the book will have done us a great disservice. But surely there is a chance that the opposite will happen: that the poems will manage to retain that wildness with which they were first conceived, and may even infect some of their masters with it. It's a shame to see good poems trapped in a characterless, homogenized, market-oriented format. But a format, no matter how artificial, cannot keep a poem from being a poem. Though it is marketed as a friendly puppy, the book may in fact be a Trojan horse. Let's hope the warriors are inside, huddled in the darkness as we speak, sharpening their blades.

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