

John W. Barr
PRESIDENT



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Building a Home for Poetry

A Progress Report from the Poetry Foundation

Ruth Lilly's recent, remarkable gift to poetry continues to stand like a mountain on a plain. There has been nothing like it in the history of the art, and may never be again. How to put this money to work thoughtfully and effectively, for the benefit of poetry, has been the daily concern of the Poetry Foundation, the Chicago-based publisher of *Poetry* magazine. For the many who continue to follow the story, this letter offers an annual summary of our progress.

A PLAN FOR MEETING POETRY'S NEEDS

One year ago our Foundation embarked on a plan to use Ruth Lilly's gift to pursue a more vigorous presence for poetry in our culture. (The September 2004 letter setting forth the plan, and the rationale upon which it rests, can be found on our website, poetryfoundation.org.) Our premise was that poetry's overarching issue, the one that accounts for many of the other concerns in poetry today, is the lack of a general, interested audience. Poetry's striking absence from the public dialogues of our time, from public education, from bookstores, and from mainstream media—newspapers, magazines, radio, and television—is evidence of a people in whose mind poetry is absent and unmissed.

Our plan therefore seeks to help develop a national audience for poetry through a half dozen projects and programs. The first-ever survey designed to find out where poetry sits in our culture was launched last year through the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago. Assisting us in this study were poets, teachers, librarians, and other members of the poetry and poetry-publishing communities (including The Academy of American Poets, Poets House, American Library Association, and Graywolf Press). By year-end the results will be published and made available free of charge to all. The Foundation will use the findings of this survey as a reality check on its own strategy. By updating this survey in future years, the Foundation will be able to gauge the impact of its programs, and provide valuable information to other organizations committed to poetry.

Poetry magazine, now in its ninety-third year of continuous publication, is hardly a new initiative, but it has been reborn under editor Christian Wiman and his staff. Redesigned in April with a new type style and full-color cover art, the magazine has become a "must read" with its lively offerings of new poetry and edgy criticism. In the two years since Christian and his team took over, circulation for *Poetry* has doubled to twenty-one thousand.

The Foundation is in the latter stages of constructing a major new website for poetry readers, both the serious and occasional. Really a family of related websites, the first of which was launched by *Poetry* magazine last April (see poetrymagazine.org), the site will be fully loaded by year-end. We hope that it will join other excellent poetry websites in significantly expanding the universe of readers who go to the Internet as one source for their poetry.

Getting more poetry into the classroom is another important way to build a national audience for poetry. Initial results from the NORC survey confirm that a lifelong interest in poetry often starts with an encounter in the family or in the classroom. Mindful that the mortality rate is high for poetry programs in public education, we believe that we have found a winner in the National Recitation Contest. Brought to us a year ago by Dana Gioia, Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, the idea for the recitation program is to develop a nationwide competition for the performance of great poems. Think of a spelling bee, then think of a poetry bee, and you will have it. Last spring five thousand enthusiastic high school students tried out the program in Chicago and Washington, DC public schools. Next year the Poetry Foundation and the NEA will expand the recitation program to the national pilot level. Schools in the fifty state capitals will participate; state champions will advance to the finals in Washington, DC.

The Foundation has addressed another of poetry's needs—its conspicuous absence from mainstream media—with two new programs. In collaboration with the Library of Congress, the Foundation is supporting American Life in Poetry, an initiative by US Poet Laureate Ted Kooser, to place a weekly column on poetry in the mid-sized and rural newspapers of the country. Offered from a dedicated website created by the Foundation (americanlifeinpoetry.org), Ted's column in its first months, with its readable mix of poem and commentary, has reached an estimated audience of 3.85 million. Separately, the Foundation has established working relationships with the editors of an array of general interest magazines which do not currently offer poetry to their readers. The Foundation identifies and secures the permissions for poems that might especially appeal to a given magazine's readership, and the editors of that magazine then decide how best to use the poems. The aim of these programs is to get good poetry in front of millions of readers, and to provoke some portion of those readers into wanting more poetry in their lives.

Implicit in all of the Foundation's programs is a commitment to discover and celebrate only the best poetry. That is the legacy of *Poetry* magazine, which has published, often for the first time, nearly every significant American poet of the past century. In that same spirit of discovery and celebration, the Foundation has expanded its program of awards and recognitions. Last year the Foundation created two new literary awards.

- › The Neglected Masters Award (\$50,000 and publication by the Library of America) went to Samuel Menashe in 2004.
- › The Mark Twain Poetry Award for humor in American verse (\$25,000) was given to Billy Collins in 2004.

This year the Foundation will inaugurate two additional prizes.

- The Emily Dickinson First Book Award (\$10,000 and publication) will be presented to a poet over the age of fifty who has not previously published a book of poems. (In the submission period just concluded, more than 1,100 manuscripts have been received.)
- The Randall Jarrell Award in Criticism (\$10,000) will be awarded for literary criticism intended for the general reader.

Of course, the Foundation will continue the Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize (\$100,000), now in its twentieth year (C.K. Williams is the 2005 winner), and the Ruth Lilly Poetry Fellowships. Taken together these constitute the Pegasus Awards, which are often given for the under-recognized and overlooked in poetry. Some of these will be awarded every year, and some from time to time.

BUILDING A NATIONAL HOME FOR POETRY

By the end of this year all of the initiatives in our strategic plan will be up and running. And our strategic plan continues to evolve. The need to find or build a permanent home for the Foundation has been a subject of study by our Board since last fall. Although not yet completed, this work contemplates an opportunity to create a national home for poetry. Such a home would contain the offices of *Poetry* magazine and the other projects and programs of the Poetry Foundation. It would also contain our library, now in storage, a scholarly treasure of thirty thousand volumes of poetry and criticism dating back through much of the twentieth century. And most exciting, this home would provide physical accommodations for something new in poetry: a think tank where fresh ideas about the art form are invited and supported. Like an Aspen Institute devoted to verse, the Foundation hopes to host passionate and practical thinkers from around the world, who will come together to debate, write, and publish on issues in contemporary poetry.

The combined effects of these initiatives—the magazine, the website, the institute, and our other programs—are intended to raise poetry to a more visible and influential position in American culture. Our hope is that, over time, they will alter the perception that poetry is a marginal art—because that art will have become directly relevant to the American public.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John Saw". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long vertical line extending downwards from the end of the name.