

A FIFTH ANNIVERSARY, JANUARY 2010

Dear Friends of Poetry,

Five years is not long in the history of an ancient art, but it's long enough in the history of a new organization to pause for a look back and a look ahead. In the summer of 2004, the trustees of the Poetry Foundation approved a plan for putting Ruth Lilly's momentous gift to work for the benefit of poetry. Their desire was to challenge the perception that poetry is a marginal art by making it directly relevant to the American experience. Helping poetry to regain a central presence in our culture and helping poets to gain recognition for their work from a wide readership were among the specific aims of the plan. Five years into this unique experiment, it's fair to ask: Has the Poetry Foundation, through its programs, given to poetry anything that it would not otherwise have?

The first of these aims, a more visible and influential presence for poetry in our culture, lends itself to measurement. In 2009, the programs of the Foundation brought poems to nineteen million Americans who would not otherwise have read or heard them. That compares to a number of less than ten thousand five years ago, when the Foundation had no programs other than *Poetry* and its subscribers. Since then, the readership of the magazine has tripled under the editorship of Christian Wiman and his colleagues. Beyond its reach, what is singular about the magazine is the passionate engagement with poetry that it calls forth. That starts with the poets themselves, who have submitted almost half a million poems over the past five years. The difficult task of the editors has been to publish only about fifteen hundred of these in the space available. Beyond the work of the editors, a cadre of reviewers applies independent judgment to the annual tide of newly published books of poetry. To all this, *Poetry*'s readers add their own voices by letter, e-mail, and blog. The effect of the whole is a various, vibrant colloquy that arrives in the mail like a monthly jolt of aesthetic energy. The magazine's single-minded concern for what is excellent in poetry is now more than ever important—in an art where supply so far exceeds demand—to those who love poetry but don't read it professionally. Speaking of anniversaries, this monthly magazine that has never missed an issue will celebrate its centenary in 2012.

Another program notable for promoting a deep engagement with the art is Poetry Out Loud. This national recitation contest, founded by the Poetry Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts, has an impact on high school students that will stay with them—like the poems they memorize and perform—for the rest of their lives. Stephen Young, who manages the program for the Foundation, quotes one student: "I entered because I am a competitive speaker. Next year I will enter because I love poetry." Teachers also love the program, which is entirely voluntary. Says one: "Poetry Out Loud is the best thing I do as a teacher." Last year, Poetry Out Loud put three hundred thousand students on stage to compete for \$100,000 in prizes. Now operating in every state and territory of the Us, the program has, in the past five years, included over three-quarters of a million high school students as participants, in thousands of classrooms across the country.

Poetry for the very young is a special case. A landmark study conducted for the Poetry Foundation by the National Opinion Research Center in 2006 found that readers who experience poetry at an early age are the most likely to read it for life. We also found that the audience for children's poetry, unlike the readership for adult poetry, is robust and a bright spot for the book publishing industry. The Foundation's response to these facts was to name a Children's Poet Laureate as a way to honor the field of children's poetry and to raise awareness of its importance in the greater poetry community. The inaugural laureate, Jack Prelutsky, and now his successor, Mary Ann Hoberman, found their horizons opened by the distinction. Another project for the very young was the Foundation's collaboration with HBO on a poetry television show in their *Classical Baby* series. First aired in 2008, the co-production received the Emmy Award for Outstanding Children's Program.

Yet another part of this nationwide audience is the several hundred thousand Web visitors who regularly go to *poetryfoundation.org* for their poetry needs. In its first year the site received a Webby Award, and it has continued to enrich its offerings with poetry journalism, poetry news of the day, poetry walking tours of Chicago and Washington DC, and a learning center for teachers, students, and autodidacts who want to deepen their poetry-reading skills. At the heart of the site is the archive; with over eighty-five hundred poems by poets from Geoffrey Chaucer to Jorie Graham, the collection is the largest of its kind to be published on the Web with all necessary permissions from poets and their publishers. We think of it as a multi-volume Oxford anthology, free for the downloading. With its breadth and its depth in the history of poetry, the archive complements the magazine, whose mission has always been to discover the breaking news in poetry. Catherine Halley and her team have also been busy projecting the content of the Foundation's programs onto new technology platforms as they appear, among them Facebook, iTunes, and podcasts. Their goal is to take poetry to readers wherever they go.

The Poetry Foundation does much of its work through programs that are managed in-house by its twenty employees. But it also collaborates widely on programs, in dozens of joint ventures and partnerships. Through our media director, Anne Halsey, the Foundation invests in poetry programming to reach the American public across the full media spectrum. Public radio listeners, more than nine million of them in 2009, heard poetry on Garrison Keillor's Writer's Almanac as well as on Marketplace and other programs on which the Foundation partnered with American Public Media. The three million nightly viewers of the NewsHour have, for the past four years, taken their poetry with their news, thanks to a series sponsored by the Foundation. In nearly fifty features, correspondent Jeffrey Brown has profiled poets and covered the poetry beat from the displacement of poets by Hurricane Katrina to poets in the Middle East. Poetry Everywhere, a series of short films featuring poets reading their own work, reaches another two million public television viewers. And more than three million readers see a weekly poetry column in sixty newspapers across the country, thanks to a program founded by then us Poet Laureate Ted Kooser and funded since inception by the Poetry Foundation.

A primary aim of these programs has been to help poetry regain a more visible and central presence in our culture. The beneficiaries include the millions who discover that reading poetry reveals the meaning and beauty in their own lives. They also include the poets themselves, who, we believe, will draw aesthetic energy from a growing readership that knows their work and wants to see more of it. As Whitman said, "To have great poets there must be great audiences too." Beyond a poetry-loving and book-buying audience, there are other ways that a poetry organization can support our poets. The Lilly Prize and the Ruth Lilly Fellowships recognize poets, respectively, at the peak and at the outset of their writing careers. The Pegasus Awards, a family of prizes for under-recognized poets and types of poetry, include the Neglected Masters Award, the Randall Jarrell Award in Criticism, and the Verse Drama Prize. And live poetry events—most but not all in Chicago—have ranged from Poetry Day, which for more than fifty years has brought great poets to the city, to the more intimate forums of the workshop and the classroom. The prizes and

reading fees and permissions paid over the past five years by the Foundation directly to poets and their publishers amount to more than \$3.2 million.

Two of the Foundation's more recent initiatives also seek "to give to poetry something that it would not otherwise have." The Harriet Monroe Poetry Institute, a think tank devoted to addressing issues of practical and intellectual importance to poetry, is completing its first year of operations. Inaugural director Katharine Coles, who is also the poet laureate of Utah, has chosen access as the theme for her two year tenure. For its first project, the Institute has convened a team of fifteen distinguished poets, publishers, and other thinkers to study the rapidly evolving subject of poetry on the Internet and related new media. Their study, to be published in early 2010, moves the dialogue toward a set of best practices for the fair use of poetry in all media. The Institute's second project will explore ways of bringing poetry into a variety of communities.

Early in 2010, the Foundation will break ground for the construction of a permanent home for poetry in Chicago. Four years in the planning, under the management of our CFO Caren Skoulas, the building will house Foundation and magazine offices, our twenty-five-thousand-volume poetry collection, and a performance venue acoustically designed for the human voice. Like the beautiful space just opened by Poets House in New York—itself a cause for special celebration—and like other dedicated poetry spaces around the country, our building will be a physical manifestation of the nationwide resurgence of poetry in American culture.

Poetry's great subject is permanence.

Whenas in silks my Julia goes, Then, then (methinks) how sweetly flows That liquefaction of her clothes.

Next, when I cast mine eyes, and see That brave vibration each way free, O how the glittering taketh me!

We still read these lines, 350 years after they were published, because Robert Herrick captured a moment, like a fly in amber, with the perfection of which art is capable. The work of poets, in creating something that is perfect within the four corners of the poem, is to make something that will last forever, in a world where nothing lasts forever. Ruth Lilly's historic gift, like Herrick's poem, was also made with perpetuity in mind. The Poetry Foundation, as one among the many who work in support of poetry, hopes that work will continue as long as poetry itself.

Sincerely,

John Barr

PS A few days after this letter went to press, poetry lost a friend and its greatest benefactor when Ruth Lilly passed away at age ninety-four. A poet herself, Ms. Lilly favored the art with many bequests over many years: the Ruth

Lilly Poetry Prize, the largest prize in poetry when it was established over twenty years ago; the Ruth Lilly Poetry Fellowships recognizing poets at the outset of their careers; the Ruth Lilly Professor of Poetry at Indiana University; and the major gift that made this report possible. Philanthropic bequests are often customized by the personal, sometimes idiosyncratic wishes of donors. The lifelong generosity of Ms. Lilly toward poetry, made in gifts without conditions or restrictions, or even an expression of wishes, stands out as philanthropy in its purest form.