
In the twentieth century, American poetry underwent considerable transformations. Poetry—at least the kind that usually comes into the scope of literary history (written, highbrow)—became increasingly self-reflexive and self-referential, especially because new generations of poets often defined their style in opposition to older models that they cast as outdated or even pernicious. A literary history of twentieth-century American poetry thus stands to profit considerably from the sociological concepts introduced to Literary Studies in recent decades, especially from Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of the literary field as a consciously negotiated conglomerate of interrelated positions and position-takings. Lilian Chaitas’s *Being Different: Strategies of Distinction and Twentieth-Century Poetic Avant-Gardes* brings Bourdieu’s approach to bear on the struggles for legitimacy and distinction that transformed American poetry at three turning points in the twentieth century: the autonomization of the field in the early twentieth century, the “anthology wars” of the post-World War II period, and the debates around Language poetry in the 1970s and 1980s.

Chaitas’s analysis of the early twentieth century (which begins in chapter 4.3—more on that later) traces the emergence of a ‘subfield’ of poetry within the literary field. It shows how poets and poetry critics distinguished themselves from other genres and how their socio-aesthetic relations were shaped by struggles over the legitimacy of poetry. This provides a fresh perspective on the emergence of modernist poetry, especially because Chaitas challenges the autonomization narrative that a Bourdieusian perspective suggests. Drawing on contemporary essays on poetry in general and on free verse in particular, she argues that poetry was neither marginalized nor high-brow in the early twentieth century. This narrative was imposed retroactively, she shows, when modernists and New Critics began to rewrite literary history in their image.

The following chapter, on the post-war period, examines how the next generation of poets and critics broke up the late modernist orthodoxy by staging a clash between an “academic” and a “non- or even antiacademic camp” (204). Chaitas convincingly outlines the stakes and position-takings that motivated not only that particular conflict but the reconception of the field of poetry as a struggle between different schools, movements, and nomenclatures. This reconception “has never really disappeared” from American poetry, she points out, and what is more, it continues to inform our very perception of the field (205). Her source material in this part of the chapter is made up of a symposium on “The State of American Writing” in the *Partisan Review* and of essays (by Philip Rahv, Robert Lowell, Charles Olson, and others) that develop various terminological dichotomies to establish the conflictive structure of the field. Against this background, the chapter then launches into an (over-)extensive comparative analysis of the “anthology wars” around Donald Hall’s *The New Poets of England and America* and Donald Allen’s *The New American Poetry*. This analysis seems to have been the conceptual germ of the study. Not only is it unusually long but it corresponds most closely to the aims and scope of the book outlined in the introductory chapter.

The book achieves greater coherence in the last chapter, which builds on and complements the arguments of the previous chapter. Chaitas reads the debates around Language poetry as an extension of the dualistic conception of the field established in the post-war years. The three sections of the chapter examine
how Language poetry came to be regarded as a distinct school in the first place; how the reconfigurations in the field occasioned by its emergence led to clashes such as the Duncan / Watten debate of 1978; and how orthodox critics sought to contain the Language group by associating it with the extreme left of the political field. As throughout the historical chapters, Chaitas’s method is the close reading of a handful of selected critical writings that she positions as representative of the dynamics in the literary field.

This has been a somewhat partial summary of Chaitas’s study. Her historical analysis of the field of American poetry actually does not begin until almost halfway through the book (on page 150). It is this analysis that makes up the worthwhile portion of her book. To get there, the reader has several obstacles to overcome. One of these is a misleading introductory chapter, which insistently frames the book as a study of the functions of “such terms as ‘experimental,’ ‘new,’ or ‘open’” (1) in the field of twentieth-century American poetry, even though only one of the three case studies so much as addresses this issue (chapter five). A more substantial obstacle is the convoluted theoretical discussion that begins in the introduction and runs through the following chapters.

Chapter two argues for the value of Bourdieu’s field theory to the study of American poetry. This is an important argument to make, but one that needs far fewer words than Chaitas expends on it. Her chapter is a temporally displaced miniature version of the study announced in the introduction: a Bourdieusian analysis of the function of the terms experimental, open, and new as position-takings in the field of poetry. The case study in this chapter is not one of the three phases the book supposedly covers, but a rather obscure essay by the contemporary poet Ann Lauterbach. This essay falls outside the stated scope of the study in that it emerges from and discusses the field of American poetry in the early twenty-first century, almost forty years after the Language school. The chapter is something of a digression that itself digresses several times, to topics such as painting techniques and Chomskian linguistics, which may be relevant to contextualizing Lauterbach’s essay but take the reader a considerable distance from the main argument of the book.

This detour might not be a problem in itself were it not for the convoluted, long-winded style that pervades the theory chapters (and occasionally resurfaces later on, especially when the argument goes beyond the close reading of source texts). For one thing, a considerable portion of the theory chapters is given over to announcements of what has been argued already, will be argued at a later point, or will not be argued at all. Such announcements recur every few pages, often in identical or near-identical form. Most of chapter 2.4, for example, is a restatement of earlier self-reflections. Far too often, these passages serve to foreground the author over the subject matter, as when Chaitas “conceptualize[s]” ideas that have long become truisms (301) or “propose[s] to differentiate” between terms whose difference no one doubts (112).

This tendency toward gratuitous self-reference buries the argumentation under a thick layer of meta-commentary on the structure, terminology, and positionality of the author’s argumentation. A typical passage reads: “A note of caution is necessary here. These cautionary remarks pertain not only to the label ‘experimental’ but to all the different kinds of nomenclatures I will look into in the following chapters. My purpose at this point of the emergent discussion (and, as I have stated above, hereafter), is to retrace descriptive and evaluative ways of making nomenclatures mean” (65). Instead of simply stating its argument, which is limited to the last half-sentence (and has repeatedly been made by this point), the passage runs the reader through a maze of superfluous
analepses and catalepses. This sort of empty wordiness makes it unnecessarily difficult to follow the argument. Even more of it can be found in the extensive footnotes, many of which define terms already defined in or not relevant to the main argument (e.g., fn. 2, 3, 16, 49, and 54).

These problems persist in chapter three, a knowledgeable survey of key theorists of the avant-garde (Perelman, Poggioli, Bourdieu) and their relevance in analyzing the field of American poetry. They gradually recede toward the end of the chapter, when an insightful discussion of the relation between Bourdieu’s work and the genre of poetry adds considerable substance to the argument. Chapter four begins with another puzzling structural choice: a long detour to poetry criticism in Britain and New Zealand around the turn of the twentieth century whose relevance to the topic is nowhere explained. This chapter makes for more profitable reading, however, since most of the gratuitous self-references have been edited out. From this point onward, readers who have made their way through (or simply skipped) the preceding chapters will find a careful, nuanced, and convincing study of the sociological dynamics behind the evolution of American poetry in the twentieth century.

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