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An Interview With Poet John Barr

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Six months ago, John Barr was named president of the Poetry Foundation. While many poets had never heard of the former Wall Street investment banker (although he is the author of six books of poetry and served on the board of directors of Yaddo as well as that of the Poetry Society of America) many are now acutely aware of the leader of the organization that received a pledge of \$100 million over the next thirty years from pharmaceutical heiress Ruth Lilly.

In response to the unprecedented financial gift, Barr and his colleagues at the Poetry Foundation are currently developing strategies for structuring the organization and creating programs that will meet the needs of the poetry community. Although the organization has not yet implemented any new initiatives since Lilly's donation was announced in 2002, Barr is already clear about one crucial point: The Poetry Foundation will not be a grant-giving organization. Instead, he hopes to create joint ventures with other organizations; build new in-house programs, such as prizes and awards available to poets; develop electronic media projects; and, perhaps most important, support the 92-year-old *Poetry* magazine.

Poets & Writers Magazine asked Barr for his views on the state of contemporary poetry and how poets can reach a broader readership. The answer, it turns out, is not all about the money.

John Barr: It doesn't feel like we're in a golden age of poetry right now. Poetry is surviving partly through the dedication of readers who have found it and go to it for the right reasons [and] partly because it's managed to find ways to exist in the academic world and in the arts funding world. Think about where you read poetry now. The *New Yorker* has a sort of time-honored feature. A respected place for poetry, but it's a couple of poems, right?

P&W: When you think of how many cartoons are in an issue compared to how many poems...

JB: That's exactly right. Poetry is respected but people aren't going to cross the street for it. If it's put in front of them they'll probably pay it some attention. People in the business like to talk about teachers being afraid of poetry, about poetry inherently being more challenging, and about the society being more visual—all things that make it harder to break down those unconscious levels of resistance to poetry. And I'm not sure it's ever been any different. I don't think those are today's issues myself. To me poetry is written out of the extremes of a person's life—the extreme moments, high or low. And it's what people go to—the readers—in the extremes of their lives. I think poetry's golden age will come when it is in front of a general audience, when people know to go to it when they need it. I'm not sure they go to it when they need it right now.

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P&W: But is that because it's not in front of them?

JB: I think poets have to do some of the fixing. I don't think we should be in the business of unqualified admiration—that "anything written is great, let's get it out there." The reason I love for poets to succeed through the sales of their books—two examples would be Mary Oliver and Billy Collins—is because it's the complete test: They're writing it; there is an audience out there who is going to buy it because they've learned to value it.

The commercial test I talk about is not so much that poetry doesn't deserve not-for-profit funding, but it makes the artist reach out to the natural listeners who are out there waiting for him. I've sometimes been disagreed with about this. To some people that sounds like compromising what a poet wants to say. I don't agree with that. Let me give you a quick example: If I were explaining how a car works to one of my children when they were five years old it would be a different conversation than when they were teenagers.

"Dad the car won't start."

"Well check the battery."

I'm not compromising what I'm saying, I'm just talking to an audience that is shaping what I'm saying as I speak. I think it's a healthy thing for poets to have a real audience of readers as opposed to just each other at workshop.

P&W: But does that mean that the general audience for poetry is like five year olds?

JB: I'm not characterizing them as five year olds. I don't mean poetry should be dumbed down.

P&W: That's what I'm getting at. Certainly the poetry you're bringing up—Billy Collins and Mary Oliver—I think people would say it's accessible.

JB: Yes they would.

P&W: They would characterize it that way. But is that what you're getting at: The commercial test of a poet is accessibility?

JB: I think what I'm getting at is that not every poet has to write for every reader. So some poets, their work is just naturally more dense, and it's going to take more time to penetrate than others. And there's not a quality differential there—that's why the whole dumbing down spectrum is not a good place to be. I think Mary Oliver writes some of the best poetry now being written, but it's also accessible.

Take Frost, if you want to stay with the safely dead, he was taken for a greeting card poet for portions of his career and then people decided there was a lot of depth to it, and darkness to it, which is always good for a reputation. So he got a serious reading from then on. But always accessible in the first reading.

P&W: But what about something like—to take a break from poetry for a second—Picasso. When John Q. Public or just anyone first comes to a Picasso painting, it's not automatically going to grab him. Doesn't it also require some effort...

JB: Well, I think "The Wasteland" might be a good example. Your point is that certain kinds of art are trying to change the way we see and hear: "We engineer perception." I think the Language poets today are doing that and I respect it. I would distinguish between two roles for poetry. There is a long tradition of poetry of the rational or the didactic.

If you take a poem by Seamus Heaney, you can parse it. Or Galway Kinnell. You can say, "Here's the argument of the poem; here's what it's about." You can't do that with Wallace Stevens. You can't do it with the Language poets. You can't do it with the surrealist poets. They're both doing important, legitimate art, but they're using art in quite different ways. I think of that first category as helping us to live our lives better. If there was a time of sorrow for me, and I was drawn to a poem, I would go to one in the first category probably. I think the second category, whether it's Picasso or the Language poets or the surrealists are in effect using poetry as a form of epistemology. So the Language poets particularly, they are exploring the question: "What do we know and how can we know it?" That's not what I'd go curl up with near a warm fire and read. But that doesn't mean it's not important. "The Wasteland" is a good question. When I first encountered it in college as a freshman so many years ago, I didn't get it at all. Now I can read it, I can follow it. Was Eliot ahead of his time? Did he drag the reading of poetry behind him? Did the modernists move us into a new place? Probably. So maybe from that point of view art should not be without effort. It's a little bit the job of the recipient as well as the generator to do that.

P&W: Exactly.

JB: Fair point. Fair point. And poetry's got plenty of challenge in it—that's why we don't get it read more easily and broadly. But I don't want to diminish the other kind either, which I think of as helping us to live our lives.

P&W: I'm sure you're not saying that in order to get poetry to the public, we need to write a certain way or change the way we write. I think the average reader could benefit from reading poems from both categories, so I think the real challenge is how do you broaden the audience for poetry without dumbing it down or without making it rigidly accessible poetry.

JB: I hope that part of the process of bringing poetry before its broadest public or a broader public in the country is a message that's partly received by the writers as well as by the readers. Poetry needs to be about communication, not just self-expression. And you don't know who's never read a poem before—includes a desire to be understood, not just to express yourself.

I think a poet always implies his audience and that audience implied should not be a poet, it should be somebody else, whoever it is. I think there is more conscious work that can be done by writers generally to reflect, embody, and digest a bigger body of experience and work that through into their own work. My example is Ernest Hemingway. In 1933 he took his first safari ... he shot lions and went home and wrote about it: *The Snows of Kilimanjaro*, "The Short, Happy Life of Francis Macomber," *True at First Light*, an unfinished novel. I don't know of a lot of poets who do that.

Somehow, I think unconsciously, poets have inherited the attitude that they are going to wait for the muse to come to them, that they're going to wait for the lightning to strike, that they are in effect passive witnesses of what is around them. This shows up in academia where you get poems about writing poems. There is great poetry written in the academy, but we might get a broader experience in poetry if people did things other than teach and write. I think it's sort of a romantic stereotype that poets wait to be struck by the muse, and I'd love to see a more activist, reach-out approach. The relationship between how we live and what we write seems to me underappreciated among a lot of poets writing today.

I think if poetry doesn't aerate itself in a more effective, broader way, occasionally it becomes self-referential—not my term, but a good term to describe poetry that gets a bit of a hothouse feel to it.

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