

# The business of poetry

By Elizabeth Lund

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When John Barr, president of the Poetry Foundation, enters a room, the image that comes to mind is "live wire." Make that "power line," since Barr, formerly an investment banker known for structuring complex utility deals, seems to have great energy beneath a cool exterior. His quick smile and striking white hair add to the impression that he doesn't just occupy a room, he commands it.

But once the interview begins, that image is replaced by another: Barr walking a tightrope, with thousands of spectators below. After all, the poetry world has been watching Barr since he was named president of the two-year-old foundation in February 2004. He is expected to be fiscally conservative with the roughly \$100 million gift from heiress Ruth Lilly, which made Poetry magazine and the Poetry Foundation the wealthiest literary organization in the nation. He is also expected to implement bold new programs that will move poetry from the shadows to a prominent place in American culture.

That's quite a challenge, given that poets and businesspeople view risk-taking in vastly different ways.

"The artist really has to seek it out. No risk, no reward," says Barr, who has published six books of poems and founded three companies. "In business, you look for an asymmetrical relationship, a set of actions for the least amount of risk."

Maintaining that "asymmetrical relationship" helped Barr rise to the top on Wall Street. He was a managing director at Morgan Stanley and later was chairman of SG Barr Devlin, which serves the electric and gas industries. The Wall Street Journal has described him as "a seasoned financial expert."

To succeed in his new venture, though, Barr must merge his analytical and artistic sides and successfully pitch poetry to a seemingly indifferent public.

## The wire is high and thin

At the heart of Barr's challenge is the foundation's strategic plan, announced in early September. He leans forward a bit in his chair as he explains his objectives: "We want to be uncommonly good at discovering the best poetry. We don't want to celebrate the status quo," he declares. At the same time, "we want to get work out there in front of people, placing it before the largest audience possible."

This two-pronged approach shaped the plan:

- Fund a national study of people's attitudes toward poetry and where and how they encounter it.
- Hire a media manager to persuade newspapers, magazines, and TV and radio stations to run poetry and criticism of poetry.
- Create the "biggest and baddest" poetry website in the United States, featuring the largest anthology available.
- Start a poetry recitation program with competitions at the local, state, and national level, similar to the national spelling bee.
- Establish several new prizes, including a \$25,000 Mark Twain Poetry Award for humorous work and a \$50,000 Neglected Masters Award. The first recipients were Billy Collins and Samuel Menashe, respectively. Menashe's selected poems will be published by the Library of America.

Barr hopes these and future initiatives will broaden the audience for poetry so much that print runs for poetry books will one day be 50,000 copies rather than 1,500 copies, which is currently the norm. Ambitious is an understatement, especially since many in the poetry world aren't yet persuaded by Barr's balancing act.

An article in The Straits Times (Singapore) led with the headline: "Literary Awards Can Only Do So Much." And Perihelion, an online magazine, questioned Barr about whether he needs to find more creative ways to interest people in poetry, perhaps with a poetic version of "The Apprentice" TV show. It also asked why he has no plans to help individual poets.

But Barr is not easily dissuaded. Or ruffled.

"We've gotten a lot of letters back from people, and they've been very positive and enthusiastic [about the plan]," he says in a calm, even voice. He also explains that he believes increasing the market for poetry is the best way to help individual writers.

## In the spotlight

The foundation will hold the Chicago finals of its poetry recitation contest April 11. The competition is expected to go national in 2006.

Another key program is also being implemented: provide a free, weekly column by Ted Kooser, poet laureate of the United States, to newspapers nationwide. The project, called American Life in Poetry, was announced in November, and has already generated interest from two dozen papers, as well as professors and teachers who want to use it in their classrooms.

Despite these developments, some observers still wonder how successful Barr can be. **After all, executives who** shift from the business world to the nonprofit realm often have a difficult time, as an article in the August issue of Chief Executive magazine explained. The two spheres operate in vastly different ways, and "learning a whole new set of rules is not as easy as it looks," the article said.

In Barr's case, however, he's not just learning new rules, he's also inventing them, since no other US literary organization has tried to make the worlds of business and poetry intersect.

But Barr has advantages that many CEOs do not. He served on the board of Yaddo (an artists' community) and Bennington College and was president of the Poetry Society of America. Most important, he's an accomplished poet in his own right.

That background, and his love of poetry, may be the real keys to success. When Barr talks about the art form, his passion and conviction are palpable. He looks almost boyish. And when he describes his own poetic journey, it's easy to see that he's been preparing for his current role for years.

## A long apprenticeship

The balancing act began when Barr was a teenager in Illinois and announced to his father, a hard-working railroad man, that he wanted to be a poet.

Go to college first, his father replied. That way people will think you're an eccentric, not just a beach bum.

Barr attended Harvard on a ROTC scholarship and studied English literature. There, he published a few poems in the campus journal and discovered such writers as William Butler Yeats. "He was the first poet I'd read who had something to say to us."

Upon graduation, Barr reported for duty as a junior naval officer. He served for five years on destroyers and made three cruises to Vietnam. Poetry provided catharsis and a sense of balance, among other things.

During that time he also married and began planning for the future. "I never really thought I would try to support myself through poetry," he says, explaining that the model of the "professional poet" who teaches at the college level had not yet been established.

Barr returned to Harvard, earned his MBA, and then waded into the corporate waters at Morgan Stanley, where his ability to balance his artistic and practical sides was further developed. He spent all day in contact with people, and enjoyed working in partnerships, he says, recalling 60-plus hour weeks.

"I thought of myself as a salesman," he continues. "The act of selling is the act of persuasion, and without it the world doesn't go around."

Poetry could also be described as an act of persuasion, but it doesn't always arrive at convenient times. During his long workdays, Barr jotted down lines on 3-by-5-inch notecards and then transferred them into journals. Eventually those ideas would end up in poems.

His writing time typically began at 3 a.m. "The wee hours are a wonderful time to write," he explains. "You have the quality of silence necessary. The sounds of the day before have fallen out."

The business world also seemed to fall away in those early hours, as he worked on poems about life, love, war, and the physical world. He hints at his balancing act in this poem from his book "The Hundred Fathom Curve":

### Driving in rain

*End of a weekend, going back,  
my two tracks sinuate as one.  
Skin of rain drawn tight by wind,  
the windshield wipers don't keep up.*

*Posed in this airspace, passing  
Purgatory Gulf Pop. 125,  
I wonder why observe the limits, why  
keep pulling it back,  
when, let go, it would go  
straight for a time,  
then wander  
off without assumptions,  
questioning first the need for road.*

In the late 1980s, his business and artistic interests began to merge. Barr was preparing to leave his job at Morgan Stanley, after 18 years, to start his own company. That's when he began to hear the voice of Ibn Opcit, a fictional Caribbean poet and gardener who became the central character in his book-length mock epic, "Grace." Opcit's jailhouse monologues about justice, death, and creation gave Barr "a way to say everything that mattered in life during my late 40s," he says. "It became my declaration of independence as a poet."

It also allowed him to express his feelings about the business world and government, while making "a case for all of us to be decent."

*America, an economy dat hum  
like a hamper of flies, where the top line and the bottom  
are in easy walking distance. Cause us to say,  
Here is a cornucopia feeding on itself...  
He tap his foot. He declare bankruptcy.  
He say "This too will pass from corporate memory.  
The thing about commerce is it doesn't care."*

All of Barr's experiences culminated in a teaching position at Sarah Lawrence College, the first part of his second career. There, his balancing act proved useful, because it allowed him to "shake up preconceptions about how to write differently." He could "share things [his students] hadn't heard before."

He hopes to do the same at the Poetry Foundation, where the stakes and the challenges are so much greater. The question is: Can he do it?

Past performance is no guarantee of future results - according to the financial adage - but it does indicate whether someone has the necessary qualities needed to succeed. By that measure, Barr's record is reason to be optimistic. But so much depends on that balancing act. Artistic and analytical. Creative and conservative. It's a fine line to walk indeed.

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