

## BETWEEN INNOVATION AND REVELATION: A CONVERSATION WITH DENNIS BARONE\*

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In 1994 Dennis Barone and Peter Ganick co-edited an anthology of American innovative poetry, *The Art of Practice: Forty-Five Contemporary Poets*, which was commented for the cover of this book by Ron Silliman in these terms, “It should be writ large for all to see: we in North America are living in a poetic renaissance unparalleled in our history. The riches of this book make the case.” Most of the gathered poets for this anthology were in their forties or thirties and the editors’ determination for labouring long and fruitfully gave readers the poetry of many unknown authors. Two composite elements in *The Art of Practice* counterbalance the intentions of other anthologies, 1) the notion of poetry as an art of practice, and 2) poetry understood as an adventure in language. The final result is a book for reflection that engineers a sophisticated audience. Dennis Barone has adorned his poetry career with a variety of books like *God’s Whisper* (Spuyten Duyvil, 2005), *The Walls of Circumstance* (Avec, 2004), *The Masque Resumed* (Standing Stones, 1993), *Waves of Ice, Waves of Rumor* (Zasterle, 1993) *Coda* (Spectacular Diseases, 1991), *Separate Objects* (Left Hand, 1998), or *Forms/Froms* (Potes & Poets, 1988). He has also extended his literary career to fiction, receiving the America Award for most outstanding work of fiction by a living American author for his collection of prose pieces, *Echoes* (Potes & Poets, 1997).



*Richard Deming:* In the introduction to *The Art of Practice*, which you edited with Peter Ganick, you describe the literary work as “a way of research for what will come next.” This echoes, and I’m not sure if this is conscious or not, Emerson’s claim in his essay “The Poet” that “Art is the path of the creator to his work.” I’m wondering if you would say more about your thinking on this because it might be taken as a claim for reading literary texts as procedural, yet that isn’t how I would characterize your work, generally speaking. Additionally, there’s an interesting tension to your use of “research,” which implies a belatedness, since research means going back over texts and archives, and yet you suggest this belatedness is the means of *discovering* rather than the more expected “uncovering” or “recovering” research usually implies. Do you mean this as revelation (for the reader and the writer) or as innovation, in terms of form and genre?

*Dennis Barone:* Although the initial idea for the anthology came from Peter, I wrote most of the introduction. I’m taking responsibility here for that sentence you quote partly because I don’t know if it was right of me to attach it to all the contributors in the anthology. I guess this is one of the dangers of an introduction. I think it has been and is still true for me. And I do believe it is true for contributors in the anthology, too. I just don’t like dictating rules for the group precisely *because* I do see the work as discovery. Growing up in northern New Jersey, I became interested in William Carlos Williams. As I read more of his work during college years, what attracted me was his urge to try to do something new with each new work. I did become aware of Stevens’s comment on Williams regarding “the sterility of constant new beginnings,” but recall that in “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” the poet lists as one of his three principles: “It must change.” There is a sense, too, of the centrality of the art in one’s life (if one chooses this path) and therefore the Emerson quotation makes complete sense to me. How could it be otherwise?

I wouldn’t, however, make the same distinction between research and procedure that you do. Research is procedural and both research and procedure can lead—probably always do—to surprise. One enters into research with some sort of plan but the uncertainty of the task is always there and hence so too is discovery. Discovery is uncertainty’s outcome. Composition as procedural, too, tends ever toward the unexpected. One can’t be sure until completion and then that sureness is little better than an opinion. For example, my working procedure for “Biography,” the longest piece in *Echoes*, was to write as soon as I got up in the morning until I filled a page in a composition notebook, with the page size determining the unit of composition. Additional rules were to accentuate the negative and to write in the second person: “you.” I thought of so many poems in the *American Poetry Review* where some “you” does this and some “you” does that and I thought I would just push that as far as I could. As in other works that begin with such rules in rewriting, in revising I alter the

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general frame a little bit and particular lines, sentences, and words a lot. Some pages that I wrote at the end I moved to the front. Some pages I cut entirely and some I edited and then combined with others. On one or two occasions I added in an “I” and I ended it with two paragraphs that develop the same sub-narrative rather than continue with the abrupt juxtaposition that runs throughout the rest of the work.

*RD:* In your introduction to *Beyond the Red Notebook*, you cite Auster’s essay on Celan, where he writes: “The poem then is not a transcription of an already known world, but a process of discovery, and the act of writing for Celan is one that demands personal risks. Celan did not write solely in order to express himself, but to orient himself within his own life...” Because this is a way of thinking about writing that seems akin to what you say in *The Art of Practice*, I’m wondering if it might be how you characterize your own stance about writing and risk.

*DB:* Just this morning while reading a contemporary book of poetry I put it down for a moment and in reaction took up a pen, grabbed my notebook, and wrote: “What are the terms of its challenge, its risk?” In addition to an art of practice, of continuation and commitment, I also have been concerned with writing that takes on large terms—or tries to. I am reminded of the oft-cited Creeley quotation about writing from deep necessity. Now, one can’t take risks and go off in another direction at every moment. Perhaps the whirling dervish can, but I think I am trying for communication of some sort, too. So every couple of works maybe are different.

When I write, I think that I think first off of a central problem. Here is research of a sort again. So art is a problem solving activity. In considering the problem to be solved, any possible reader is not in my thoughts. Later on, though, I do think of readers; try to orient myself to a possible listener and think of what he or she might hear—and the emphasis is very much on ear, on sound. My writing, in its centrality to my life, does orient me to this life, but so does my reading. I think someone who reads something of mine may have its words become as a directional signal, but I am not in charge of the direction or the volume.

*Manuel Brito:* It is well known that in the last three decades of the 20th century poetry and poetics anthologies emerged with unusual vitality onto American literary scene. Ron Silliman points out on the cover of your *The Art of Practice* that this period can be considered a poetic renaissance unparalleled in American literary history. Should we congratulate ourselves on these anthologies’ satisfactory results, seen from the perspective of these early years of the 21st century?

*DB:* Well, I don’t know if we should congratulate ourselves because to congratulate ourselves would be a hindrance to other efforts at this moment and future ones, too. In college I titled my senior project “A Renaissance of Words: American Literary Magazines, 1946-1964.” And then, also, there was a great burst of literary publishing in the early part of the last century. As William Carlos Williams wrote in his *Autobiography*, “The little magazine is something I have always fostered; for without it, I myself would have been early silenced.” But he didn’t stop with *Others*



or *Contact* or the Objectivist Press. He pressed on and so even very late in his life he was not only a contributor, he was also an aid and inspiration for Gilbert Sorrentino's magazine *Neon*. So, I would say the last century had three moments of renaissance. Perhaps, such global matters as war and depression while not deadly to expression are deterrents to the dissemination of that expression. America had stability and affluence that made much of the eighties and nineties publishing possible. I would say the results of *The Art of Practice* are far more than "satisfactory," but I don't want to place it in a field of competition with Don Allen's *The New American Poetry* or Ron Silliman's *In the American Tree*. However, I'm very happy to place it *in a tradition*, a tradition of innovation that must continue—and does.

*MB:* Dennis, would you talk on how was the collaboration between Peter Ganick and yourself in the final assembling of an anthology like *The Art of Practice*? I mean how each of you assumed responsibility in the organization of this poetry anthology. Did both of you lay ground work for new ideological and aesthetic objectives, or just attracting attention to those new poets not yet published in Ron Silliman's *In the American Tree* and Douglas Messerli's "*Language*" *Poetries*?

*DB:* Peter and I have been friends for twenty years. We've helped one another out over the years in countless ways. I used to help him with Potes & Poets Press—questions about the merits of a project, for example—and he would point me to important things to read and challenge me with new ever-evolving notions of poetic form. Also, we used to meet every Friday morning for breakfast, but over the past five years every few weeks for afternoon coffee instead.

Lots of the procedure for the anthology is now hard to recall. It's been eleven years since it came out and, of course, it was an idea and an idea in the process of becoming an anthology probably two or three years before that. I think we made some initial decisions. We would include writers not included in Silliman's or Messerli's anthology. We would ask for a longer selection of work than anthologies usually include. We would not have contributor biographies, but rather a sort of contributors' bibliography; hence, pointing to the work and not adding to an ego circumscribed individualism. I would write the introduction and Ron, the afterword. Peter and I made a list of possible contributors. We both wrote solicitation letters. We both made the decisions about what to include from the work sent us. Our final order we left in a sense to chance, but with some intentionality as well. It is hard to remember precisely. (I wished we had taken the time to proofread it all one more time.) Yet, just because we first of all decided on authors not in two former anthologies that does not mean we weren't interested in—as you say—"new ideological and aesthetic objectives." Indeed, that concern shaped and perhaps superseded the simpler manner of avoiding a sort of editorial repetition.

*MB:* In your task as editor were you being conscious of the implications of your strategy in the orientation of an innovative poetry anthology as instrument of legitimation? And what values can clarify this new poetic adequacy, which can be considered under Pierre Bourdieu's political view as a "subversive misappropriation"...



DB: I think Alan Golding's *From Outlaw to Classic: Canons in American Poetry* provides a very useful exploration of the poetry anthology in the legitimation of literary canons. But still —I'd say, it is poetry. And while poetry may be central in my life, in yours, in Richard's, it is not so in America in general. Perhaps, this status as less than marginal —this is an old modernist notion, I suppose, but for the postmodernist it'd be nothing to worry about or to elevate— makes it possible to be ever in a state of innovation and never in a concretized legitimacy. I wrote an essay on The Dalkey Archive Press (*Critique* 37.3 (1996): 222-239) in which I argue that despite many critical works to the contrary a classically defined literary avant-garde can still exist and it can exist inside an institutional structure such as an American university.

MB: In your introduction there's an emphasis on poetry as an experience, poetry that remains infinite. Indeed, there's a need to document the gradual shift from specific bio experience to language experience. Stressing such a revolutionary innovation, do you think that avant-garde poetry anthologies have secured some efficacy in consumers of poetry, in institutions of culture in recent years?

DB: I think one way you can see this is that former "auto/bio" poets have become more oriented to language itself. For example, Carolyn Forché followed two books of very personal poetry, a poetry that sought to recall a prior experience with a long-poem, *The Angel of History*, that seeks to be an experience in and of itself. She does much in this latter work to reject the personal, to consider language as material object, to engage a theoretical sophistication, and to make the work more reader-centered by a refusal of the author to draw connections or conclusions. It is a poem of both more risk and ambition and challenge, too, than her earlier two books. There are many instances of this cross-fertilization in recent American poetry. Of course, the anthologies had a role. Let me add, all is not copacetic. There remains much animosity against innovative writers from all corners: the universities, mainstream publishers, and newspapers. This is very unfortunate and seems ridiculous to me, since the activity of poetry is undeniably a marginal one in US culture. So, yes some inroads have been made for and by innovative poetics, but some new obstructions, roadblocks have been put up.

MB: In my classes students understand this new American poetic production as a labyrinth of conceptual changes —deferred, multiplied— making them feel some nostalgia for an anchoring concreteness. How would an anthologist reply against the apparent nothingness of an impenetrable language in so many American poets today?

DB: I would be suspicious of any proposed anchoring concreteness for any time or place. Is it ever that simple? Isn't that what one finds in an encyclopedia? And isn't that precisely the sort of vague reference that can't be in the research paper (unless it is a paper on the history or the ideology of encyclopedias)? I'm not sure if American poetry today has the "nothingness of an impenetrable language." If that



is offered as an anchor, then that univocal claim for a multi-vocal art shows the danger of an anchor mid-sea or line. It brings to a close any further movement. Williams said there are “no confusions just difficulties,” but then again, I’d add, not always difficulties, either. Marjorie Perloff’s critical studies, for example, have shown how a poem by Charles Bernstein or Susan Howe can be explicated —if explication is what one wants. I’ve long been fond of a sentence from Montale: “There is a middle road between understanding nothing and understanding too much, a *juste milieu* which poets instinctively respect more than their critics.” Furthermore, Bernstein now has a course at Penn called, I think, “Poetry Performance.” *Performance*, you see, instead of (or as) interpretation: to go *along with* the poem’s language rather than to feel obligated to “penetrate” it. The PennSound audio website (<<http://www.writing.upenn.edu/pennsound>>), organized by Bernstein and Al Filreis, offers a new notion, an electronic notion of both publication and anthology —by way of sound, and as for sense? Well, whatever the reader or listener... I’m immediately finding myself thinking of Susan Howe’s *Pierce-Arrow*, too. Does one see and hear its presentation of words and visual images or “pierce” it?

*RD:* Over your career, editing has been a constant or at least recurring activity for you —from the journal *Tamarisk* to the collection of essays on Auster, two half-issues of *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* (one on Toby Olson and the other on Auster) and, of course, *The Art of Practice*. You have even edited William Smith’s 1760 lectures on rhetoric. How is editing a part of that “research for what will come next?” What is the motivation for you in these various editing projects and what discernable effects come from it? I’m wondering how editing has shaped or informed your understanding of possibilities available within or as the process of writing. Has it shaped a sense of community for you?

*DB:* One editing project in a sense led to another, although they tend to be very different. *Tamarisk* came about while I was studying American literary magazines for a project that became my senior project at Bard College. When I began that journal, I wanted to know what the possibilities for a magazine could be. What was the tradition and how might I fit into it? I did like the idea of magazine and press as adding to the formation of community. After Bard, when my wife and I lived in Philadelphia while attending graduate school at the University of Pennsylvania, I knew a literary community like I never have since. Gil Ott was, of course, instrumental in this, but there were so many others as well. Additionally, some of these others may not have been physically present in that geographical space but were located by way of our currents of interest. For instance, Gil and I both had lengthy correspondence with Cid Corman and John Taggart, although I’m sure the nature of our correspondence differed. We had community, but also space and encouragement to find whatever it was we were about to find. I think I like the William Dean Howells model of a writer: that a writer should contribute to the world of letters in many different ways. I do hope that this kind of work keeps words well in a time when some seem to want to lock words up or infest them with various ailments such as Patriot Acts.

