

The revolution in American poetry that began with Whitman and Poe in the nineteenth century and exploded in the first half of the twentieth is responsible for an attitude among contemporary poets in which to ask what constitutes a poem is considered a naïve question. There are no rules anymore yet that does not mean there is no technique. The war between Williams (at least in his mind) and the “academics”<sup>1</sup> represented in journals like *The Partisan* and *Sewanee Reviews*, complicated by Pound, Stevens, and Eliot<sup>2</sup>, who did not take “sides” as much as simply express the genius of their own personalities, laid the foundation for the atmosphere in which contemporary poets work.

The serious poet of today is limited only by his or her curiosity. Every tradition from every country from every era from Homer to the voices of their peers is there for the poet to investigate and use. We owe this cosmopolitan attitude more to Pound than Williams, yet the affection and tension between those two impassioned, gifted maniacs that lasted for over forty years created an artistic synergy still felt by poets and seen in their work today. However, it is also responsible for the vast amount of poetry currently written and “taught” in undergraduate and graduate workshops throughout the U.S. Over the past five decades the literary marketplace has been flooded with poems written in workshops that have—in less talented and individualistic sensibilities—the unintended but unfortunate consequence of producing writers with formulaic techniques and rigid notions of what poetry can be. Many fine poets have come out of the workshop system but its influence has created an atmosphere in which the likelihood has increased that good but out of vogue work will not get read by editors. Due to the volume of submissions to journals, magazines, and book publishers, editors no longer have time to read each poem or manuscript received by their publication. Instead, most journals and book publishers use “readers”<sup>3</sup> who volunteer to cull through the vast amount of submissions and present to editors only what they consider worthy of a closer look. Consequently, I do not go out of my way to read contemporary American poetry because much of my haphazard scanning of what is published in respected journals and magazines reveals too much writing that is clever, full of catchy images, inventive without any apparent purpose, and void of authentic emotion. Yet recently through a lucky chain of events I have begun to take a close look at the poetry of two important contemporary poets—Kate Knapp Johnson and Kevin Pilkington—and I am amazed and encouraged by the ingenious and authentic ways their work demonstrates how the entire range of technical elements used idiosyncratically and iconoclastically by Williams, Pound, Eliot, Stevens, Marianne Moore and Hilda Doolittle (“H.D.”)—line length, commonly spoken language, punctuation, syntax, conventional prosody, unconventional prosody, grammar, prose, diction, humor, irony, the texture, rhythm, and tone of emotion, treatment of ideas as things, lack of use of connectives, e.g. Williams’ use of the *dash* instead of *and* to fit images together in a way closer to how the mind works, (learned from Moore),<sup>4</sup> etc.—are employed.