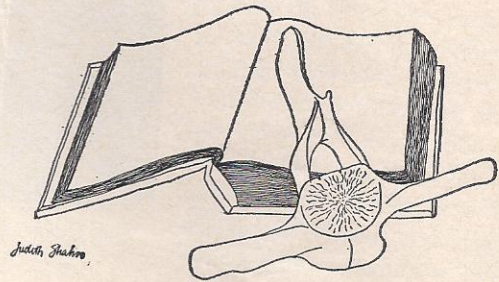


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HOW POETS MAKE A LIVING, IF ANY

Some of them actually do.
But—with three or four exceptions
—they don't pay the grocery bill
with money from verse.



About a year and a half ago I did a piece for *Harper's* on American poets under thirty-five, and I planned to do a companion piece on the economics of the writing and publishing of poetry. Here at last it is. This time also, I sent out questionnaires. Some of my questions to book publishers may seem a bit ingenuous—or disingenuous—but they are designed to reveal certain recalcitrant problems that beset poetry publishing.

Fifty per cent of the publishers say they publish one or two titles a year. Twenty-five per cent said none. Interestingly, the largest commercial publishers and the small avant-garde specialists (10 per cent of those queried) average the same number yearly—five. In addition, there are a few small publishing houses which publish only poetry. Of these the highest number of titles was eleven. Some publishers admitted to a policy of no poetry.

A few years ago there were several regular poetry series. None of these have survived except with the university presses and the avant-garde specialists. Only these houses and two others have regular poetry editors. In three firms which do not publish poetry at all, fairly well-known minor poets of the 'thirties are now senior editors and answered the questionnaire with sad irony. Most publishers who publish poetry use well-known poets and critics as readers. Like the late Alan Swallow, James Laughlin of *New Directions* picks his own poets and seldom relies on outside advice. The same is true of Lawrence Ferlinghetti's *Pocket Poets*. *Corinth's Totem* list is edited by LeRoi

Jones. The *Yale Series of Younger Poets* is always edited by a poet. Denise Levertov was until recently editor of a similar list.

First orders for an average book of verse range from 250 to 5,000. Maximum reprint orders are probably 25,000 for Ferlinghetti's *Coney Island of the Mind* with *New Directions*, and the same amount for Ginsberg's *Howl* with the *Pocket Poets*. The great majority of publishers print 2,000 and then simply do not reprint unless the book is a fantastic success. Given the conditions of trade-publishing overhead, this is not a break-even point, at any possible retail price. However, this is misleading. If the general overhead is thought of as carrying the poetry, on which usually little or nothing except the printer's bill is spent specifically, the book does not lose money if it sells out. Alan Swallow, one of the most dedicated of all poetry publishers, answered this question with great intelligence:

Break-even point is an invention of commercial publishers, who assign to each book certain costs—usually those of production, a share of editorial costs, and a percentage of return for overhead of selling, et cetera. As a general rule, one cannot make such assignments and sell enough poetry to break even, book after book. A few will; most will not. And pay royalties, too, of course.

Since it is true that one cannot pay commercial prices for production (let alone assign these other costs) and pay royalties—and sell enough to bring back all out-of-pocket expense, for say