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Ten Greatest Poets

The 10 Greatest Poets Project: The Postmortem

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As surprised I was by the overwhelming response to my call for lists of the 10 greatest poets, I was even more taken by the lack of . . . furor . . . over [my final list!](#) Even [The New York Times](#) seemed at peace with my rankings.

That's great, I suppose, but I expected a little more pushback about Neruda in the top spot. And I certainly was prepared for an onslaught of negative email accusing me of dissing Keats and Milton.

But, not one word about either.

So far, the names (or absence thereof) drawing the most ire have been T. S. Eliot and Rainier Maria Rilke (the latter I myself lamented excluding). But, most of the Facebook posts and emails have suggested something I never expected to see in an online forum like this: relative *contentment*.

I did receive some good questions about my final rankings. Since one of my scholarly areas is American Indian studies, there were a couple of queries about where Native writers might appear on the list. That's an excellent question, and it is connected to another question: why no living poets?

I decided not to put any living poets on the list for two reasons. One, their reputations and contributions are still actively in process of making themselves. It seems too premature to include someone on such a list who is still writing. Also, I know and am friends with many very good poets. So, I thought it best to make my list comprised solely of poets who cannot Facebook me. Though, if I get friended by a cranky Wordsworth or a giddy Rumi, I'll let you know.

The most talented, most prolific, and most influential American Indian poets, are, thankfully, still writing great stuff. It will be exciting to see how the work of writers like Sherman Alexie, Joy Harjo, Simon Ortiz, Linda Hogan and others becomes part of the tapestry of American literary culture.

One of the things the project made me think about is the notion of literary greatness—what makes the canon, what makes immortality, what makes a poet teachable. In fact, my department chair has proposed I teach a class on this project in the fall, which I may do. Students like questioning the canon as much as they like studying it.

Reading your letters and lists also made me think about poetry in relation to other literary forms, like fiction and nonfiction, as well as the other arts like painting (10 greatest painters?), and of course, music. Though poetry is shorter and *older*, many readers don't think it has the currency or immediacy of fiction or nonfiction. While it's true that lyric poetry tends to be less narrative than novels, it does share a great deal with nonfiction, most notably in the desire of the writer to make the personal public and to do so in an artful way.

And, as modes of communication get shorter and shorter, poetry's compression, its ability to say a lot in a little, may evolve into the medium of choice. A fantastic new online literary zine called [Bat Terrier](#), won't publish anything longer than 99 words. "Brevity," editor Joe Ahearn asserts, "is a form of compassion."

Poetry too is about compassion, as is the discourse about it. I thank you for your participation in this project, and I'll keep you up to speed on further developments. To read all of the posts related to the project and some of the other stories about it go [here](#). A short, explanation-free version of the list is below:

10. Rumi
9. William Butler Yeats
8. Li Po
7. Emily Dickinson
6. John Donne
5. Wallace Stevens
4. Walt Whitman
3. Dante Alighieri

2. William Shakespeare

1. Pablo Neruda



THE 10 GREATEST POETS: MY LIST

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Who would have thought so many people would have so many strong opinions about poetic greatness? The hundreds of passionate, articulate, persuasive responses proves that Americans think and care deeply about poetry. A shockingly low number of responses (perhaps three) tried to make the claim that poetry is dead. However, according to you, the reports of poetry's demise are greatly exaggerated.

Compiling my own list was an exercise in gleeful frustration. It was so much fun to see all of these names on one piece of paper and to relive the pleasure of reading their poems. Like so many of you, I hated that only ten could make my list. I almost caved and went to 15.

I rather informally carried three interrelated criteria in my head as I built the list—how thoroughly a poet's work has permeated our culture and become part of its fabric, the degree to which a poet has influenced other poets, fiction writers, artists, screenwriters, and critics, and the ability of a poet to *make*: to craft out of the chaos of emotion and language, something artful.

Sadly, I don't think my list is particularly controversial or revelatory, except perhaps my number one pick. Every name on my list was mentioned several times by readers. Saddest of course, are the names I had to leave off. Authors of some of my favorite poems did not make the cut.

But now, on to those who did:

10. **Rumi.** I have to confess that I didn't really know what to do with Rumi. He is still, I believe, the [best selling poet](#) in the United States, and [according to the BBC](#) (are they really experts on American poetry?), Rumi is "the most popular poet in America." I foreground the U.S. only because it means both cultural capital and book sales. As popular as he is in the West, his capital in the Arab world is even greater.

It is impossible to overestimate his impact. Embraced by scholars, poets, mystics, philosophers, new agers, and priests, Rumi's thoughtful poetics weds religion, science, and love. As my friend [Jonathan Curiel suggests](#), in a post 9/11 world, Rumi has become even more significant.

I can't read Persian, so I have to rely on various translations, the most famous of which is by Coleman Barks. But across the dozens of Rumi translations, his ability to compress remains singularly impressive.

One of my favorite Rumi poems stands as an example:

When I am with you, we stay up all night,
When you're not here, I can't get to sleep.
Praise God for these two insomnias!
And the difference between them

Something about his elegant simplicity speaks across centuries, religions, genders, and continents. He is everywhere.

9. **William Butler Yeats.** On your lists, Yeats and Wallace Stevens were the most frequent 20th century names, with T. S. Eliot a close third. If you have in your head lines or passages from a 20th century poet, it is likely from Yeats or Robert Frost. Yeats' poems like "Easter 1916," "No Second Troy," "The Lake Isle of Innisfree," "Leda and the Swan," "Sailing to Byzantium," "Among School Children" and especially "The Second Coming," will always be taught and always be relevant.

Lines such as "O body swayed to music, O brightening glance, /

How can we know the dancer from the dance?" ("Among School Children) or "I must lie down where all the ladders start, /

In the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart." ("The Circus Animals' Desertion") have set up shop in our consciousness. We know his lines without knowing we know his lines.

And then there is "The Second Coming," maybe the most famous poem in English from the 20th century. Who has not read and not puzzled over this opening?

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,

The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Back in 1996, [National Public Radio did a funny story](#) about a strange trend in American politics—quoting Yeats. Both conservatives and progressives like to claim Yeats' ideas. Indeed, his ability to appeal to such a wide demographic over 70 years after his death is pretty amazing.

Sure, he was sort of an odd dude. His invented symbolic system, his notion of the universe as gyres, his Jung-like ideas of the *spiritus mundi*, his adherence to automatic writing, would make him, by today's standards a little new-agey. But, he became the voice of Ireland. His best poetry was an articulation of the heroic character of his country.

8. **Li Po/Li Bai/Li Bo.** Pick your transliteration, it's the same guy. The most talented of the great trinity of Tang poets, including Wang Wei and Tu Fu, Li Po's influence is incalculable.

Overt references to Li Po appear in Ezra Pound, James Wright, and Charles Wright, and even Gustav Mahler composed a piece about him.

Though he did many things well, he remains *the* great poet of drunkenness. He could poem-drink Bukowski under the table. No contest. Of the roughly 1,000 poems attributed to him, about 998 involve wine. The other two are about how sad he is without wine. That's an exaggeration, but I'm not exaggerating when I say that the range of his poetry is unmatched: friendship, nature, death, trees, water, poetry, wine, walking, the passage of time, romantic love, and the human emotion evoked by all of these. He was also not afraid to write about war and to make his otherwise serene poetic spaces political ones.

Few poets have had the ability to write simply about complexity. Li Po was one of those. He lived a poet's life, and he believed in the poetic project as a way to make sense of one's relation to the world, as in this passage:

Chuang Tzu in dream became a butterfly,
And the butterfly became Chuang Tzu at waking.
Which was the real—the butterfly or the man ?
Who can tell the end of the endless changes of things?

Even in Yeats, one hears the echo of Li Po.

7. **Emily Dickinson.** I have taught Emily Dickinson for well over a decade now, and she is the one poet who, when I return to her, makes me feel like I'm starting all over. No major poet is more dense, more compressed, more elliptical, more elusive.

Dickinson was so far ahead of her time, it seems like we are only now learning how to read her. The great poet Paul Celan has described a poem as a message in a bottle—the poet flings it out into the world never knowing where it will wash ashore. Dickinson's bottle floated around a long time, but I think she knew, one day, her readership would grow into itself: "This is my letter to the world, / That never wrote to me—."

While she may not have had much impact during her lifetime, Dickinson has, since the 1930s, inspired legions of American writers and thinkers. She is now *the* major American female poet, and to me, the best craftsperson in English of the 19th century—regardless of gender or nationality. When taken as a whole, her body of work stands as one of the best explorations of the philosophy of being.

With over 1,800 poems, we still have not yet fully been able to comprehend the force of her poems, but like Yeats, a large handful of them will endure: "[I heard a Fly buzz when I died](#)," "[Because I could not stop for Death](#)," "[The Soul selects her own Society](#)," "[I felt a funeral, in my Brain](#)," and "[My life had stood—a loaded gun](#)." The latter is an allegory on poetry, parenthood, sexuality, the afterlife, and female possibility all at the same time.

The first line of the final stanza of "After great pain, a formal feeling comes," remains one of my all-time favorite poetic moments: "This is the Hour of lead—."

There is no official hour of lead, but we all know what she means. No adjectives. No verbal pyrotechnics. Just syntax simplified. We feel the weight.

6. **John Donne.**

Batter my heart, three person'd God; for, you
As yet but knocke, breathe, shine, and seeke to mend;
That I may rise, and stand, o'erthrow mee, and bend
Your force, to breake, blowe, burn and make me new.

These opening four lines from "[Holy Sonnet 14](#)" still give me shivers. That combination of alliteration, assonance, heavy symbolism, and poetic conceit makes this one of the great sonnets. Donne was himself one of the great practitioners of the sonnet, right up there with Shakespeare and Petrarch. In fact, it seems that the sonnet's form with its problem/resolution structure, its voltas, its spatial limitations, and its possibilities for inventive rhyme, play to his strengths.

No poet's language is richer, except maybe Gerard Manley Hopkins, and no poet in English combined conceit, dislocation, and paradox better. Donne also enjoys some of the best first lines of any writer. He refuses to ease the reader into his lyrics, rather with his crazy unrelenting syntax, he beats us along into his words and his worlds.

One thing I love about Donne's poetic project is its ambition. He aimed high: god, the trinity, orgasm, salvation. He could be both raunchy and religious in the same line, the same phrase. Poetry is a discourse rooted in connotation over denotation, and Donne is among the most connotative. He can make meaning on many levels.

Donne is also one of the great love poets. No poet is better at demonstrating the relationship between the corporeal and the eternal, the erotic and the divine. "The Flea" manages to conflate being bitten by a flea, having sex, experiencing orgasm, and becoming one with God, and "Elegy XIX: To His Mistress Going to Bed," compares exploring his lover's body with exploring America. Take that Neruda!

5. **Wallace Stevens.** I was surprised how many people included Stevens on their list. I think he's the great poet of the 20th century, but I feared few share my high opinion of the Hartford lawyer. Many critics find him cold, aloof, and abstract, but they misread him. Stevens is the modern era's chief poet of desire—desire named, desire lost, and desire regained.

One reason Stevens is great is because he is the master of extremes. He can be wildly experimental, intimidatingly intellectual, heartbreakingly lyrical, and surprisingly comical. He has written more great poems than any other modern American poet, but unlike Yeats, Stevens' best poems vary in tone, style, theme, and scope. It seems impossible that the same poet wrote "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," "Sunday Morning," "The Emperor of Ice Cream," and "The Snow Man"—and even more unlikely that all appeared in the same book, the now legendary *Harmonium* (1923).

Torn between writing an intellectually rigorous, aesthetically ambitious poetry and a poetry that could reach and move a wide audience, Stevens embraced overtly political poems, love poems, persona poems, poems about art and music, and most frequently, poems about the dual pulls of reality and imagination. He wrote movingly about the Spanish Civil War and World War II ("The Men That Are Falling" & "The Examination of the Hero In a Time of War"), the quiet intimacies of love ("Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour") and the relationship between poetry and the world ("The Planet on the Table"). His final collection, *The Rock*, which was published posthumously, shows depth, maturity, introspection, and a desire for connection.

He also has perhaps the best poem about finding beauty among the flotsam and jetsam of contemporary society, "The Man on The Dump." I'd take it over "The Waste Land" any day:

The dump is full
Of images. Days pass like papers from a press.
The bouquets come here in the papers. So the sun,
And so the moon, both come, and the janitor's poems
Of every day, the wrapper on the can of pears,
The cat in the paper-bag, the corset, the box
From Esthonia: the tiger chest, for tea.
The freshness of night has been fresh a long time.

Days pass like papers from a press. That's strong work.

The freshness of Stevens' poems will themselves be fresh a long, long time.

4. **Walt Whitman.** I know, I know, both Whitman and Dickinson . . . soooooo America-centric. But, what can I do? Whitman changed poetry in English. He fused the expansive, encompassing narrativity of the epic with the subjective, internal, introspective impulse of the lyric. The we meets the I, the community marries the individual, the body loves the soul. Ralph Waldo Emerson saw in Whitman's raw, exploratory lines the poetic correlative of an inchoate America.

Song of Myself, Whitman's great lyric-epic, is the most American American poem. It's self-obsessed, rambly, gargantuan, contradictory, and radical. It thumbs its nose at tradition. It revels in its own self-revelation. It is what America hoped it would become and may yet one day be.

In a country founded on a sort of Us vs. Them mentality, Whitman brought a refreshing union of opposites. He was about reconciliation, consummation, connection:

The pleasures of heaven are with me, and the pains of hell are with me;
The first I graft and increase upon myself—the latter I translate into a new tongue.
I am the poet of the woman the same as the man;
And I say it is as great to be a woman as to be a man;

Me likey.

Ironically he is also a fantastic war poet, just as he is a great poet of equality, a great poet of homoerotic love, a great nature poet, and a great elegist. No American elegy is more emotionally or poetically wrought than "*When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd*"—Whitman's homage to President Lincoln, and to me, it rivals Milton's "Lycidas." How amazing that one person can be a country's great poet of mourning and its great poet of celebration.

Whitman's ability to speak eloquently and forcefully on so many levels has earned him countless followers—Allen Ginsberg, Federico Garcia Lorca, Vicente Huidobro, C. K. Williams, and of course, Pablo Neruda. His poetry will endure in part because formally and thematically it represents freedom. He accomplishes in poetry what people around the world want to do in any restrictive situation—seek liberation.

3. **Dante Alighieri.** Aside from my top slot, I predict this pick will elicit the most controversy. Dante did not appear on as many lists as I would have predicted, and

indeed, he seems to be taught and talked about less and less. Perhaps this is because he's only well known for one poem (*The Divine Comedy*). Or maybe it's because this poem is overly Catholic. Or, it's possible people are turned off by the intense allegorical nature of the poem. Or, it could even be because the poem is just weird.

Think about it. Dante makes himself the protagonist in his own epic poem. He descends through Hell with Virgil, participates in every sin along the way, crawls across the frozen belly of the Devil, zips through space to Purgatory where he meets characters from the Bible, then sort of flies through the cosmos before chilling with God and getting reunited with his one true love, Beatrice. It's a hard poem to paraphrase and even harder to make feel . . .current. But, it's a phenomenal poem.

It's phenomenal in part because of its ambition. It takes on the great questions of life—death, loss, love, revenge, punishment, eternity, justice, and salvation. It's also one of the most technically complex poems ever written. Structurally, the whole book centers on the number three, which symbolizes the holy trinity (Father, Son, Holy Spirit). The *Comedy* is divided into three books (*Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, *Paradiso*). Each book is comprised of 33 cantos, but the poem begins with a one-canto introduction, making an even 100 cantos. But, that symmetry gets even more detailed in the verses themselves. The poem takes the form of what Dante called “terza rima,” which is essentially interconnected rhyming tercets. So, terza rima is a series of three-line stanzas in which a chain-like rhyming pattern of aba bcb cdc ded and so on. So, that tripling effect, that trinitarian power gets encoded and re-encoded throughout. For Dante, it was a way to infuse his poem with God's order, God's symmetry.

But, Dante could also get nasty. For example, he put his enemies in Hell, he sent some competing poets to Hell, and he banished corrupt priests to Hell. Also, as he descends further down into the pit of the *Inferno*, his language becomes more guttural, more vulgar. He rips and tears at the Italian the way the demons shred the souls of those condemned. It's glorious.

Anyone who has written an epic since Dante has had to grapple with his legacy. Similarly, no one owns a poetic form the way he owns the tercet. He made the three-line stanza his. It is his brand.

2. **William Shakespeare.** According to my shockingly un-scientific measurements, Shakespeare's name appeared most frequently on your lists. In fact, for many of you he occupied the top spot and a few threatened me if I didn't rank him among my greats. I'm okay with this. I'm not sure if a poet in English has had more of an effect on language, culture, and poetic form than the Bard. He reinvented the sonnet in English, out Petrarched Petrarch, and introduced into our culture some of the most-quoted lines:

* Shall I compare thee to a summer's day? (Sonnet 18)

* So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,

So long lives this, and this gives life to thee (18)

* Not marble, nor the gilded monuments

Of princes, shall outlive this powerful rhyme (55)

* Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore,

So do our minutes hasten to their end. (60)

* That time of year thou may'st in me behold,

When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang

Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,-

Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang (73)

Not only did Shakespeare rework the sonnet, making it more facile for English, he also wrote excellent verse in other forms, like his narrative poems “Venus and Adonis” (funny) “The Rape of Lucrece” (earnest), and the strange “A Lover's Complaint” that, like “The Rape of Lucrece,” is written in rhyme royal, an inordinately difficult poetic form.

What many of these poems share is a departure from what we might call the poetics of praise. So much of Western lyric poetry before Shakespeare was fairly predictably laudatory—a woman, God, nature. But, Shakespeare plays with that convention throughout, bringing a much-needed sense of humor and even an edge to lyric poetry. It is impossible to think of poetry in English without him.

Before I reveal my top pick, I should mention other poets who really should be on this list. It was not hard for me to narrow down to 14 or 15, but getting from 15 to 10 was excruciating. I am particularly sad to leave off Rainer Maria Rilke (who I adore), Gerard Manley Hopkins (who I also adore and who the president of my university had hoped would make the list. Sorry President Privett! At least we'll always have “The Windhover”), and John Keats (who everyone adores). I also wish I could have included John Milton, Anna Akhmatova, Langston Hughes, and Yehuda Amichai. On another day, they would have nudged out Rumi or Yeats or Li Po.

And so, the top pick goes too . . .

PABLO NERUDA. Why Neruda? Well, he has done everything poetically. He's written an epic (*Canto General*), he's authored the most popular love poems of the Americas (*Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair*), he wrote some of the most imaginative and influential surrealist poetry (*Residencia en la Tierra*), he's published some of the best odes in poetic history (*Elemental Odes*), he's penned love sonnets that rival Shakespeare (*100 Love Sonnets*), he's composed some of the most biting and most effective political poetry, and he wrote an achingly beautiful book of poems comprised entirely of questions. In Latin America, Neruda was and is poetry.

The Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes tells a story about visiting a seaport in Chile. One night, as the fishermen were reeling in their nets, he heard them singing, as a song, verses from Neruda's poem *Canto General*. He was amazed. So, he walked up to the fishermen and told them how pleased the poet would be to know they were singing his poem. Their reply: “What poet?” Neruda's poem had so thoroughly saturated Chilean culture that it had taken on the weight and significance of myth, folklore.

No poet has more passionately and thoroughly spoken for his people than Neruda. *Canto General*, for example, is a 15-part book, comprised of over 200 poems and 15,000 lines. It tries to map the entire history of Latin America. It is an insanely ambitious project that seemed to unify a country. His poems articulated hopes, dreams, desires, histories, protest, sexuality, beauty, and national pride like no one before or since. Because of his poetry he became an ambassador, a statesman, and even his party's candidate for president of Chile.

Think about this: a poet so popular, so beloved: a poet with so much cultural cache that he could be a viable candidate for president. And in 1970 no less. His funeral was a national day of mourning, so significant it's described in Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits*. He's even had a movie made about him, *The Postman*. In Chile his houses are national museums, and his legacy is deific.

From a poetic perspective he is just as important. He influenced poets around the world. American poets like W. S. Merwin, Mark Strand, and James Wright read him in Spanish, and it changed their own poetry, becoming more associative, more surreal, which in turn altered British and American verse. One might also argue that Neruda helped democratize poetry by making the "poetic" less exclusive.

Neruda believed poetry could change the world, and he knew that well-crafted, passionate poetry could, under the right circumstances, create aesthetic, political, and cultural revolutions. Neruda's work is as close as we have in poetry to something like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in fiction. It altered a political and cultural landscape.

We see this throughout his work but perhaps best articulated in the final lines of his famous poem "The Heights of Macchu Picchu," where the poet, history, and the reader become one:

I come to speak for your dead mouths.

Throughout the earth

let dead lips congregate,

out of the depths spin this long night to me

as if I rode at anchor here with you.

And tell me everything, tell chain by chain,

and link by link, and step by step;

sharpen the knives you kept hidden away,

thrust them into my breast, into my hands,

like a torrent of sunbursts,

an Amazon of buried jaguars,

and leave me cry: hours, days and years,

blind ages, stellar centuries.

And give me silence, give me water, hope.

Give me struggle, iron, volcanoes.

Let bodies cling to me like magnets.

Come quick to my veins and to my mouth.

Speak through my speech and through my blood.

Posted By: [Dean Rader \(Email \)](#) | Mar 03 at 9:48 am

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The 10 Greatest Poets: Your Lists

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The most frequent question people have been asking me about the lists readers are sending in is not really about the list at all.

Everyone wants to know what poet, what *one* name, appears most frequently. Is it Whitman? Shakespeare? Rumi? Rilke? Li Po? Milton? Jewel? As controversial as this list project has become (see, for example, [this piece about it in The New Yorker](#)), it appears folks are only partially interested in slots 2-9. You guys want to know number 1!

Maybe next year.</P

For now, we'll stick to the waffly, fear-of-commitment, pluralistic, wishy-washy list in which at least nine other poets get ribbons. And so, with that in mind, a relatively random sampling:

* The very first full list I received was from Chris Haven, a creative writing professor at Grand Valley State University in Michigan. Writers have never been known to be strong at math, but we'll let Professor Haven slide on account of potential confusion over foreign language poets and sheer enthusiasm. His list also contained one of the first real surprises for me—Thomas Hardy:

John Donne,

Gerard Manley Hopkins,

Thomas Hardy,

Pablo Neruda (does he count?),

Szyborska (does she?),

Langston Hughes,

Yehuda Amichai (?),

Anna Akhmatova (?),

W.S. Merwin,

Walt Whitman,

Theodore Roethke,

James Wright,

Samuel T. Coleridge.

* Greek Goddess's list is pretty typical: mostly *really* dead white guys, a few slightly less dead ones, at least one female (usually also dead), and at least one "ethnic" writer. What makes her list unique is three contemporary writers, one of whom (W. S. Merwin) is still alive: **William Blake**,

Gwendolyn Brooks,

Emily Dickinson,

T.S. Eliot,

Allen Ginsberg,

John Keats,

W.S. Merwin,

John Milton,

William Shakespeare,

William Wordsworth.

* Posted on [The New York Times article](#) about this project—at exactly the same time—were two opposite lists. The first from Toronto in, ironically, Toronto is fabulously eastern, old, and male: **Wang Wei, Li Po, Tu Fu, Tao Ch'ien, Kabir, Hafiz, Yunus Emre, Rumi, Mirabai, Po-Chui**

However, just after Toronto, Spicy Reads of Allegan, MI offered a list that is heavily contemporary and female: **Emily Dickinson, Audre Lorde, HD, Sylvia Plath, Gwendolyn Brooks, Marianne Moore, Phillis Wheatley, Edna St Vincent Millay, Emily Bronte, Denise Levertov**

* It's not been uncommon for someone to nominate him or herself. In this case, the late poet Wallace Stevens threw his own hat in the ring. Seriously. The email return name is "Wallace Stevens," and the email node begins "casualflocks@—a reference to the final stanza of Stevens' gorgeous poem, "Sunday Morning." I'm so looking forward to seeing Alexander Pope's hotmail address. No surprise, Stevens put himself first: **Wallace Stevens**,

Shakespeare,

Emily Dickinson,

Arthur Rimbaud,

Du Fu,

Frank O'Hara,

Li Young Lee,

Rainer Maria Rilke,

Aleksander Blok/Marina Tsvetayeva,

Pablo Neruda.

* John Edward Martin, a professor of English at Louisiana Tech, not only sent in a list, he augmented his rankings with pithy, incantatory justifications:

1. John Donne—for sheer technical mastery, human emotion, and beauty;

2. Walt Whitman—for his moral courage, audacity, and integrity;
3. John Milton—for his profundity, power, and complex understanding of our relationship to the divine;
4. William Shakespeare—for his emotional range, his psychological depth, and entertainment value; all the elements of a great bard;
5. T. S. Eliot—for his learning, the timelessness of his language, and contributions to poetics as a discipline;
6. John Keats—for creating some of the most beautiful poems in the English language;
7. Wallace Stevens—for combining aesthetics, philosophy, and poetic expression better than any modern poet;
8. William Blake—for inspiring so many of “the devil’s party” to challenge their most deeply-held assumptions;
9. Emily Dickinson—for revealing the power of the solitary mind to generate poetry from within itself that still speaks to everyone;
10. Rainer Maria Rilke—for combining human and divine longings so perfectly.

* Some may laugh at the final name on LPG’s list, but if you take my claim seriously about poets who do cultural work, then the good doctor can absolutely make a claim for himself on the same dance card as Bill S:

Shakespeare,

Emily Dickinson,

Goethe,

Robert Frost,

Rumi,

Ruckert,

Verlaine,

Dr. Seuss. Who cares if the list only has eight names. Seuss wasn’t really a numbers guy anyway. By the way, Dr. Seuss has garnered at least three votes so far, which dusts Shel Silverstein’s solo vote and Lewis Carroll’s single advocate.

* So far, the biggest surprise has been the similarity of lists. I expected a more diverse range of writers, but the same 20-30 poets kept asserting their immortality. I also expected more obscure lists. The winner in this regard might go to rhill41 of Huntington, WV:

Gregory Fraser, Chad Davidson, James Dickey, Mary Oliver, Betty Adcock, Kathryn Stripling Byer, David Bottoms, Kathryn Kirkpatrick, Laurence Lieberman, and Eric Smith.

* Far, far fewer readers than I expected complained about the fact that I made singer/songwriters check their poet hats at the door. I was prepared for an enormous backlash, but only two or three people mentioned it. Doug Willhide of Minneapolis was one of those:

I agree with posts arguing that song writers should definitely be included (Irving Berlin, Ira Gershwin, Cole Porter, Bob Dylan, Paul Simon, maybe Joni Mitchell). Also agree that the narrative poets be considered: Tennyson, Longfellow, Robert Service, Rudyard Kipling. My own list would be built around poets that just can’t be omitted:

Shakespeare,

Wordsworth,

Whitman,

Eliot,

Yeats,

Frost,

Stevens...and the rest from a list that just gets longer the more you think about it: Theodore Roethke, e.e. cummings, Robert Browning, Rita Dove, Emily Dickinson, Keats, John Donne, Ferlinghetti, Chaucer, Billy Collins...

* Another surprise was the relative dearth of Kahil Gibran and E. E. Cummings, two poets I think of as being wildly popular. Of course, Cummings made the list above,

and one person, dynadin, championed both: **ee cummings, Ezra Pound, E.A. Robinson, Langston Hughes, Carl Dennis, Kahil Gibran, W.D. Snodgrass, Yeats and Emily Dickinson.**

* The Poet Laureate of Marin County, California, CB Follet, sent in her list and ended it emphatically: **Yeats,**

Rumi,

Neruda,

Li Po,

Whitman,

Lucille Clifton,

Bishop,

Lorca,

Eliot,

Enheduanna (yes, Baby, the very first, and a nice big body of work, not like the Sapho scraps and MUCH earlier.

Thanks to the hundreds of people who have posted and/or proffered lists, both in earnest and in jest. Next week I'll write one other column about the project and then post my own rankings next Friday, March 4.

Posted By: [Dean Rader \(Email \)](#) | Feb 25 at 5:23 am

Listed Under: [Ten Greatest Poets](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments & Replies \(0\)](#) : [Post Comment](#)

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The Top 10 Poets: What You're Saying

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Without question, the best aspect of this project is reading the comments (and lists) from readers. Democracy and poetry like to flirt, but they don't always hook up; so hearing from dozens even hundreds of readers is exciting. A lot of people are reading a lot of poems. And they, I mean you, have a lot of opinions . . .

* I love how **Burt123** derides my project then jumps right in. He was not alone:

I think you'll agree that this exercise is pretty silly — an almost perfect example of what troubles our culture and makes fools of so many of us. Because though I feel that way about it, I still enjoy putting my list forward. As someone once said, writing is not a competitive sport. Yet we're a competitive nation, and in our competitiveness I'm afraid we destroy more people and distort (torture) more talent than we nurture.</p>

* **Jean** from New York agreed with half of what Burt123 said:

What a hopelessly stupid waste of time. Projects like this are a real sign of inferior brain power.

* **Firstcitybook** makes a lyrical plea for poets who won't leave her consciousness:

I often think of poets like John Donne, John Milton, William Wordsworth, John Keats, Robert Frost, and Elizabeth Bishop. Their work remains in my head, informs my life, and often crowds out other thoughts.

* In response to my question about greatness, **alanaronold** put all his chips on a poet's theme:

Greatness implies that there is a message, a genius, a way with words that is profound, endures the test of time, and touches the heart or mind in a way that resonates. One cannot forget a line, a message, or feel that an avenue of seeing has opened so that one sees, or shares an experience that we know is at the heart of all human experience.

* **Pensum** really gets to the crux of the decision-making process of compiling such a list. Sure, such lists are potentially ridiculous but yet, not. Who professors and critics identify as "great" is probably who our children and grandchildren will be reading:

So Dean, as demonstrated by your remarks in regard to Donald Trump, for you "greatness" is simply "the most important?" really? are you sure you want to stand by that? Hitler is no doubt one of the most important historical figures of the 20th century, yet I don't think you will find many outside of a few sick individuals who would consider him "great." Which, by the way, highlights a certain moral or idealistic aspect to the notion of greatness, beyond just influence. or perhaps it is merely a

question of individual aesthetic pleasure—one must “like” or “love” a poet’s oeuvre in order to consider them great. And yet I may not be much of a fan of The Beatles and not care to listen to their music but i still consider them on of the greatest pop bands. Which brings us to the question of whether greatness is to be awarded by the individual or the collective. T.S. Eliot considered Jules Laforgue great and yet i doubt you will Laforgue’s name pop up on too many others’ lists. Once again we are back to defining standards. Now as you have opened this up to the public it would seem in this case to be a collective issue, as even individual opinions are to be considered and subsumed into a “final” list. So does one merely put forth a personal subjective pantheon irrespective of positions within a larger cultural/historical milieu or does one attempt a certain objective viewpoint, however limited?

* **Darkbrownink’s** brief opening paragraph is a succinct reminder of our shared differences:

I loved the top 10 composers project and this is great too — because it reminds us of how non-monogamous we are when it comes to our relationships with art and artists.

* **Tim from Oakland** was skeptical of my connection between poetry and social engagement:

The larger point: I’m sure you’re right that there is a connection “between literature and revolution, poetry and civic engagement.” Yeats springs immediately to mind. But Yeats’s greatest poems are great because of their poetry, not because of the ideas they were designed to transmit or the events that incited their creation. My view of poetry is that it’s more intimate and personal than epic and revolutionary. Which actually suggests my nomination (and I’m sure you’ll get her name from dozens of people): Elizabeth Bishop.

* One of the most surprising nominations comes from American historian and boxing legend, **Dr. Jack Dempsey**:

I’d like to nominate America’s FIRST poet in English—namely, Thomas Morton of “Merrymount”—who settled in New England in the 1620s not far from the Pilgrims of Plimoth Plantation. His poetry represents a truly foundational moment in the conception of what America first was, might have been and might still become.

* **Laura Seide** passed on slots 2-10 altogether. For her, there is only one poet:

Who else could it be? John Milton is a master of the art of composition and description. He made up his own words that have become extremely pervasive in the English language (pandemonium for example). And, his insights into the human psyche are unparalleled; the fact that 400 years later, Satan’s argument to Eve can still sway the intellect of the modern reader is a testament to his genius. And, he wrote what is arguably the best poem and story ever to be written without ever putting pen to paper! Blind, all he could do is dictate to his daughters. Not to mention the fact that many of the themes he presented were extremely incendiary for his day. For his ingenuity, his insight, his command of the language, his masterful imagery, and his superb characters, it has to be Milton.

* I laughed the hardest at **bthogan’s** post, who, though writing from Philadelphia, asked us to look to England:

Let’s not neglect John Lillison, England’s greatest one-armed poet (and the first person ever to be hit by a car; he died). Whom among us can forget “Pointy Birds”?

Oh pointy birds

O pointy pointy

Anoint my head

Anointy-nointy

* What’s up with Philadelphians? **Peter** from the City of Brotherly Love seemed to be channeling the folks from [My Word:/](#)

This is really hard. Let’s see. In no particular order:

(1) Super Sticky Printed Notes 562-AN35, 3 in x 4 in

(2) Word Strips 562-WS-80 Super Sticky, 8.125 in x 2.75 in

(3) PC410B, 8 1/2 in x 11 in Sheets of Notes for Printers

(4) ED65V-10, 10 pound variety pack of notes for teachers

(5) Sketch and Stick Pad 562-KL 12 in x 9 in x .25 in Super Sticky

(6) –

Wait, what?

Oh, excuse me, I’m so terribly sorry. I thought you said top ten POST-its.

* **Tiako** was one of many readers to make a plea for Eastern and Middle Eastern writers:

It’s a bit rich to criticize the final list before it’s been written, but the simple truth is that in an objective analysis, nine of the top ten would be Chinese, Indian, or Persian.

In terms of the sheer breadth of their poetic history and the quality of the poetry, every single one of those literature leaves the entirety of Europe behind. Although I assume the poetic tradition the readers and author are most familiar with won't be confined to one spot (for good reason, mind you), I do urge you to at least set aside three spots for:

Rumi

Li Bai

Kalidasa

* One of the advantages classical music has over poetry is the absence of foreign language. I don't speak Czechoslovakian, but I can still "understand" Dvorak as well as Milan Kundera can. **lisztian** made a similar observation then went on to give two lists—an international list and one for poets who write in English:

The Classical Top Ten was absurd enough a project, even with the constraints Tommasini applied (nobody before Bach, nobody living, no genres outside western classical). In poetry, how does one begin to compare the merits of poets in different languages without being a native speaker in all of them? This applies especially to smaller languages.

* On the other hand, **trolanda** just wants the author of *Deliverance* to get a little love:

WHY ALL YOU LEFT COAST LIBERALS HATING ON JAMES DICKEY!???

* I found myself moved by **Nancy** from PA who writes:

What makes great poetry great is that it stays with you, transforms you, becomes the verbal soundtrack of your life. A great poem or even a phrase from a poem is something you can fall back on in times of intense emotion or distress, something that makes your heart swell up and beat faster. For those of us who appreciate poetry, there will always be a couple of special poets and special poems that we think should be on a top ten list. For me, one of those is Czeslaw Milosz. Shakespeare, sure – a given. Yeats, Rilke. But Milosz is my go-to guy. Even in translation, he's great.

* One of my favorite responses was from **Mark Lanning**. His full letter, much longer, walked me through his various picks, but I was struck both by his sympathy for my email inbox and by his optimism about poetry. It bordered on the inspirational:

You poor guy everyone will send you manuscript-length e-mails filled

with their psalms. Here are mine. . . .Poetry, as much as anything else, is helping me grow wiser instead of more cynical or morose. I can go far back in time and be touched by the words and insights of people I had earlier assumed to be irrelevant to me. On the contrary, there is no comparison between the teachers of now and an army of "courage teachers" going back centuries. Thanks for the opportunity to write this and I look to be inspired to find more great poets.

Great stuff.

Later this week I'll post some of the more interesting lists. There is a great deal of agreement and disagreement, but that's not surprising. What is surprising is that I'm starting to fear my own list might be affected by names I keep reading on yours.



THE TEN GREATEST POETS. WHAT IS GREATNESS ANYWAY:

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I've been impressed by the lists and comments readers have contributed—both on the site itself and in emails I've received. As I suspected, there is some general overlap on the lists and also a great deal of diversity, suggesting variance in how we might define "greatness."

Most of the writers on everyone's lists enjoy powerful reputations, which always makes me wonder if we associate "fame" with "greatness." Do we all really think Wordsworth is great, or, is all of the information out there proclaiming his greatness just noise in an already noisy world? And, even more interestingly, does knowing (and acknowledging) Wordsworth's greatness confirm our own intelligence—our own ability to see and determine greatness?

Is cultural literacy just one big cycle of self-congratulation?

A few years ago, I asked one of my classes to name the five most important living Americans. A couple of students offered up "Donald Trump." I was flummoxed. Big-haired, sure. Rich, okay. But great? Really? **Great?**

But, we often mistake "prominence" for "importance." We certainly do that with celebrities and sports figures—who is to say we don't also do that with poets?

Tommasini was chided by some readers for the role “influence” played in his rubric of greatness. Influence is different than prominence, but they are linked. For him, the frequency (and degree) a composer like Bach affected other composers is telling. The problem with influence lies, again, in exposure. A relatively unknown writer is less likely to be influential when no one knows about her—think of Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Kate Chopin, or Emily Dickinson. So, while I’m wholly sympathetic to influence, I’m also a tad skeptical of it.

For others, greatness is less about the internal accomplishments of a piece of music or literature but its ability to alter the world. The literary critic Jane Tompkins has advocated for a new barometer of literary greatness—what she calls “cultural work.” Tompkins argues that even though most scholars and professors praise writers like Herman Melville and Nathaniel Hawthorne, they actually sold very few books during their lifetimes and made almost no impact on American society at large. Tompkins contrasts them with writers like Brockden Brown, Susan Warner, James Fenimore Cooper, and especially Harriet Beacher Stowe. All four of these authors were wildly popular, and there is evidence that their books had great influence on the day-to-day lives of Americans. In the case of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, it changed history. It was the first American novel to sell over a million copies, and it is probably the most important factor for galvanizing middle-class white Americans against slavery. And yet, as a work of art, it is considered “sentimental,” “clichéd,” “emotional,” “predictable,” and, well, just lame. Very few scholars or authors identify it a “great” novel, but it was, without a doubt, the most important American book of the 19th century.

Poems tend to incite revolutions less than other works (think of Thomas Paine’s great political pamphlet *Common Sense* or Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*), but poetry does have a great reputation for being the genre of literary resistance. I can tell you right now that for me, a poet’s ability to affect social movements, to alter political discourse, and to be a mouthpiece for the oppressed will, in some way, figure in to my own notion of greatness. For me, greatness is not just about scope or ambition but inclusion and transformation.

But, what about you? What are your criteria for greatness? What must a great poet possess beyond a turtleneck and a beret?

Posted By: [Dean Rader \(Email \)](#) | Feb 17 at 8:57 am

Listed Under: [Ten Greatest Poets](#), [core curriculum](#), [critical thinking](#), [cultural work](#), [general education curriculum](#), [great poetry](#), [poetry](#), [university classes](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments & Replies \(0\)](#) : [Post Comment](#)

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The Top 10 Poets: Who are the Greatest?

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Anthony Tommasini’s fascinating project to identify the ten greatest composers has generated a shocking amount of publicity and an impressive level of participation. In mid January, Tommasini, the affable classical music critic for *The New York Times*, [embarked on a two-week project](#) in hopes of galvanizing a list of the greatest composers of all time. He sent out queries, wrote about the project, and fielded over 1,500 responses from readers before ultimately [publishing his own list](#) (the top slot goes to Bach).

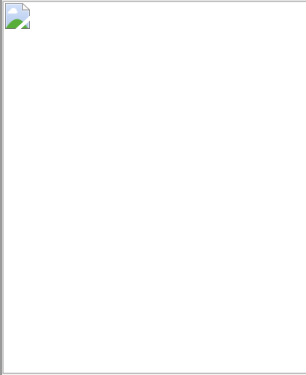
This morning, as I was watching coverage of the celebrations in the streets of Cairo, I began thinking about the connection between literature and revolution, poetry and civic engagement. At times of social crisis and political milestones, historians and commentators often turn to writers (especially poets) to help encapsulate the emotional tenor of the event. Great moments need great language.

In was Martin Heidegger who said "In the time of the world's night, the poet utters the holy." Indeed. But, who are those writers we tend to gravitate toward? Who embodies "greatness?"

This was what motivated Tommasini in regard to music, and it's what interests me in regard to poetry. As a teacher, a scholar, and a poet, I always ask myself what makes greatness, but even more often, I wonder what (and who) others think of as great.

Since there is no poetry critic at the *Times*, The Gray Lady is unlikely to take on this project. But I'm not.

Taking a cue from Tommasini, I'll spend the next two weeks taking suggestions, lists, nominations, and justifications for the ten greatest poets.



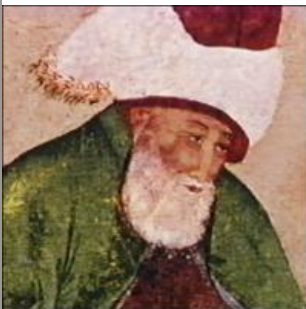
It's a ridiculous and futile project, but those are often the most fun. I fully expect to anger many and satisfy few (myself included).

Some parameters:

* Figures like Homer, the author of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, The Biblical Psalms, and other oral narratives are not eligible for this particular list. Questions of authorship are too complicated here. It's hard to know who wrote what or how many people were involved in the final composition. So, even though this may be the most controversial part of this whole project, we'll confine ourselves to those poets who wrote their own poems themselves.

* Poets who did or do not write in English are eligible. Though, again, issues of translation complicate things.

* Musicians have their own lists—dozens of them. So, for this project, no Bob Dylan, no Jim Morrison, no Springsteen, unless they have a separate life as a poet. Ryan Adams, for example, has published at least two books of poems. Jewel and Tupac (two sides of the same poetic coin?) have also written books of poetry. So, those works could count but their lyrics, not.





That's it!

Who do you love? Who do you consider great? What is greatness? Let me know. I'll publish some of the responses, and write about some of the questions generated by what I receive. And, in two weeks, I'll post my own list.

Release the hounds!



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