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College Poetry

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Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"I second the emotion: each of us has at least a little bit of poetry penned up inside him, and to spew it forth now and again does the world absolutely no harm. The worst that can be said of one's effort is that yet another bad poem has been added to the burden of bad poetry already in existence."

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You moved closer to me in the bed and whispered that your feet were cold. My hands were warm—So I held you And warmed your private kingdom.

I watched you that night sleeping, smiling, dreaming Of someone dancing across your mind But I knew somehow it wasn’t me.

Maybe I should have left then, or told you That Love is much more than warming cold feet. You were too young to realize it though And at least you smiled while you slept.

J. Stotz Jr.

It may be affirmed with great truth, that there is hardly any human creature past childhood, but at one time or other has had some Poetical Evacuation, and, no question, was much the better for it in his health.

Alexander Pope
Peri Bathous

I second the emotion: each of us has at least a little bit of poetry penned up inside him, and to spew it forth now and again does the world absolutely no harm. The worst that can be said of one’s effort is that yet another bad poem has been added to the burden of bad poetry already in existence.

I’m probably the last person in the world to be writing a paper on poetry, being possessed more of risibility than of sensibility. I pay court to the sublime, and have very little traffic with the beautiful. And though I might not know a good poem when I see it, I can usually smell a bad one from a distance of three stadia. Not unlike a cancer, a bad poem should be labeled quickly so that it can be done to death before its creator has a chance to fall in love with it, I know, because I’ve doted on many a soggy bit of verse of my very own. And speaking of lousy verse, I hope sincerely that someone with sense gets to the moon first, before some crazy romantic arrives and begins composing sonnets on how beautiful everything looks in the earthlight.

College poets—hmm. Even weeds grow according to the soil supplied. The better the soil, the better the weed; the worse the soil, the worse the weed. If your soil is growing thistle, exclusively, look to it. In other words, even a poet should have talent, and that talent should be assessed realistically: all the wishful thinking in the world will add not a single cubit to one’s store of talent. In the talent department—I’m—decidedly—a featherweight—long ago I assured myself that I would never expire from either a surfeit or dearth of that commodity. If anything kills me, it’ll be my big mouth.

There is a harmless type of insanity with which most college poets are afflicted: hearing bells when none are ringing. That is, the majority have little or not talent, but their savage little egos drive them to the production of ever more drivel. Again, no harm comes from their doing so, and as Pope says in his homely, albeit unpoetic metaphor, they will be the better for the purge. The other type of insanity is suffered mostly by us critics: we fail to hear the bells when an entire carillon is at work directly overhead. That is, we do not recognize a good poet when he is right in our midst. I have yet to find a good college poet, but even by the law of probability there must be a few in existence.

I daresay, however, the critics are not altogether remiss, jaundiced and myopic. There are many ways in which college poets sin against their talent. In their enthusiasm (which is not to be sneered at, by any means)
college poets stampede madly into the garden of verse and paw frantically at the ground, broadcasting their seed in all directions, and simultaneously proclaiming a bountiful harvest. What they usually produce is a great deal of noise: the wind begets the whirlwind. Perhaps what they should have been doing is gently turning over the soil and patiently planting seeds of recognizable lineage in honest rows, watering and manuring the whole with just-right measures of talent and inspiration. After a certain amount of sensible weeding and cultivation, the crop could not fail to appear and to produce some sturdy growth. Even the weeds in such a garden might turn out to be charming wildflowers.

What I am trying to say is that college poets, almost to a man, insist on by-passing their apprenticeship, and the good earth balks at this creative poltroonery. The poets want their soil to produce exotic fruits, and try to force the fruitage, whereas poetry wants to be seduced by shy advances and light, familiar caresses: no woman wants to be pawed by a barbarian. The poets want the earth to speak in pure tones of fescue, bents, and Kentucky bluegrass before she can even talk a relaxed slang of crabgrass, thistle and dandelion. The earth was meadow before it was lawn, and the best meadow is a compromise between weeds and grasses. It seems to me that a compromise is the most even a good college poet can reasonably expect.

Our college poets would be better off if they followed Shakespeare’s example: little Latin, and less Greek. People are still reading Shakespeare—some even willingly. Shakespeare produced a pretty fair crop of poetry without going near a college. Our college poets use altogether too much ‘Latin’ and ‘Greek’—their effusions are altogether too obscure. No one can understand their poems, and few care to try; and I don’t blame those who refuse to try. Most of the poems are state secrets written in code: unearthing the secret is not worth the effort of decoding; how much beauty can be seen when the eyes are filled with sweat?

Worse still, college poets are lost in a wilderness of free verse, or what they hope will emerge as free verse. Free verse is tricky for the most accomplished of poets, who know all too well that one false step will destroy the entire effect of the poem. One solution would be for the college poet to pour everything he has into free verse initially, to avoid shackling his ideas and imagery. The, when he has said all he ought to say, he might convert the whole into a recognizable “conventional” form. In most cases a much better and more satisfying poem results. In any event, no one should attempt to palm off free verse before he has mastered the conventional forms, just as no painter should settle into abstractions before he can produce a decent landscape, still life or portrait. There is as much bad painting as there is bad poetry, and for the best of reasons—just as college basketball is ordinarily good basketball for the best of reasons. It must be obvious to a dunce why I’ve dragged this analogy in by the heels. College basketball players do not run aimlessly in all directions, making a great deal of noise, working up a lather to no good purpose. They’d be laughed and boo-ed off the court if they did. And the only reason college poets are not roundly hissed is that everyone knows they’re not really college poets—actually they’re kindergarten poets: they do not yet know how to give a polished performance; they’ll never give a decent performance until they’ve had plenty of practice. Well, hell, you have to start somewhere, and if people are going to continue putting off writing poetry until they get to college, then college will continue to be a poetic kindergarten.

College poets do all the wrong things, as beginners can only do. Worse yet, they’re too old to start from scratch and too egotistical to absorb criticism—having just attained mental puberty, they wring their hands, have tantrums, and all but burst into tears when told their verse is what it is: rotten. They think that every ten-line bit of doggerel that they composed in a three-minute frenzy should be praised extravagantly simply because they produced it—see what I mean about kindergarten? The kindest thing to do when a college poet hands you one of his masterpieces is to read it carefully several times and return it to him with a single comment: “Burn it!” Once, a guy brought his first poem to me and I gave him the usual instructions. Since he was a senior he thought it not too intolerable to berate me for a solid two hours before he went away (mad, of course.) He came back twice more because he found some damned fool who didn’t know a single-stringed harp is essential. And the materials the college poet works with should be suitable to his stage of accomplishment.

Those who write short poems are bad enough (I used to write short ones in college, and I have a good memory.) But those who write those long, intolerably dull and meaningless things are worse. After having cranked out one of these abortions they parade and posture and set themselves up as intellectual dictators for life—from then on, they know everything, and anyone who demurs is cubic and anti-intellectual. More claptrap is retailed by composers of long college poems than is worth the mention. Naturally, this is a generalization—there are some sensible “long” college poets, and they are beyond praise.

For a newcomer, the lyre is a tricky instrument—it should be admired from a respectable distance long before it is ever touched. Meanwhile, a lot of practice on the single-stringed harp is essential. And the materials the college poet works with should be suitable to his stage of accomplishment.
Causes, no matter how pressing or noble, are ordinarily poison to the poet who wants to advance beyond the folk-song stage. Sadly enough, we find little beauty in college poetry—all is weeping and gnashing of ill-fitting false teeth. College poets are too busy menacing paper tigers with magic wands operating on weak batteries (I say paper tigers because the poets haven’t met the real ones yet.) The ‘dedicated’ poet has no time for beauty, and consistently turns out ugly poetry. Ugly writing should probably be confined to prose. I’d give a lot to read a good, straightforward love lyric, written by a guy with stars in his eyes and some power in his pen.

Should college poets quit writing just because I think they produce rotten poetry? On the contrary—even I believe that rotten poetry is a necessary stage in the development of a competent poet. There’s only one way to get the garbage out of the system, and that’s to flush it out with ever more and better stuff. No one will become a decent poet if he sits around worrying about what I or anyone else will think of his poetry. If (God help us) free verse is here to stay, then we nasty critics will have to come to terms with it. So go ahead, you writers of ugly free verse—write it, polish it, burn it; and keep doing so until one day you find a gem on your hands. And there are more where that came from. But for heaven’s sake, write a comic one now and then—they world is not entirely populated by weeping philosophers.

In the great crises of poetry what matters is not to denounce bad poets, nor worse still to hang the, but to write beautiful verses, to reopen the sacred sources.

Georges Bernanos
"Brother Martin"

Harry A. DePuy

The Angle

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Blinking shades of blue, red, yellow, and white,
The stellar crowds rush through the blackness of night.

without direction
without applause
without affection
without a pause

The stars fly on tittering hymns of conceit to their own light.

Still, among the mass a single sun shines through.
Its quiet glow and constancy of hue

with coolest heat
with no pretention
with steady beat
with kind intention

Win it special place, and in verbose silence turn my thoughts to you.

Terry Ging