

The Peril of Writing Poems

by Rod Jellema

Donald Hall, many years ago, wrote a memorable book of essays in which he argued that the serious work of writing poems extorts too great a price from the domestic life of the poet. The subjects of his study—Ezra Pound, Robert Frost, T. S. Eliot, and Dylan Thomas—certainly in various ways exemplified the danger. In order, we could cite schizophrenia, suicidal depression, loss of confidence, and alcoholism. Reminding us that Plato kicked poets out of the Republic as crazies, Hall reflected upon it: “to make poems is to violate Platonic standards of civilization,” and therefore

For some poets—possibly for all—life’s hell is a wound self-inflicted, as punishment for defying the Platonic censor’s prohibition of poetry.

The tendency is to quietly hustle poets out the back door. But they come into poetry through the front door. They find it fascinating and seductive. Poetry for them is a different way of knowing in which you can play out some lines to hunches; a way in which you can claim a truth that is not in the mind initially but evolves in the working-out. Like painters, poets are adventurers who get to know the exhilarating terror of the tentative. As Paul Klee said of paintings, the business of poems is not so much *form* as *formation*. Perhaps it is even *transformation*. To write poetry is to take chances with the use of odd tilts, congruent sounds, associations, the sparks that fly off words rubbed together—and yet to bask now and then in the respectability of all those high artsy discussions about expanding the boundaries of human consciousness. Poetry can be, says Howard Nemerov, “a means of seeing invisible things and saying unspeakable things about them.” There’s the magnet. It pulls in the kind of people who would love to develop such an art.

I don’t think we would profit much from the indelicacy of a survey of all our poets, fixing their percentages for mental breakdowns, addiction, failed marriages and suicides as compared to car dealers or stockbrokers. There are enviable exceptions, but we know it as a fact: many poets do mess up their lives, often for nothing.

Most explanations are psychological or sociological. I do not have the expertise with which I can either change or expand those scientific observations. I only want to put them aside for the moment to pick up on Donald Hall’s suggestion, left undeveloped in *Remembering Poets*, that the poet’s work imperils the ordinary day-to-day living by getting her or him into “pre-verbal, irrational thinking” and the darkness of the unconscious. This puts us on a very different path. There is a good deal of risk and jeopardy for the whole person in all the chance-taking the mind does as the poet makes a poem. In the service of expanding consciousness, the creative imagination drives itself farther down into the dark layers of mythic consciousness and dream. In tandem with contemporary physics, contemporary art is fascinated with, for example, our

experience of chaos. The dizzying shifts in perspective are characteristically present in the artwork and poetry from 1914 on. Whether it's the call of outer space or what Carl Jung called racial memory, it's what the students soon began calling "far out."

The problem begins when the imagination must come back from those cold, mad frontiers with some way to look at shoes or a frying pan, a war, one's childhood, or the reality of a death. And some of these things will have to be seen in *two* ways, both actually and creatively. The balances are not easy.

This partial life-in-darkness—the landscape in which we dream, remember, imagine—is a long way from the burned toast at the breakfast table, which is apparently where domestic lives are made or broken. The length of that distance is the point. It gets difficult to move back and forth without losing the way. How does the same person trust the reality of the changing drafts of *Hugh Selwyn Mauberly* (Pound) or *Deaths and Entrances* (Thomas) and the reality of the electric bills? The public demand that the poets "just talk sense" builds pressure. Working alone at a desk can breed isolation, loneliness, feelings of failure and rejection, and finally guilt.

I'm veering close to the psychoanalytic. I really want to suggest that the jeopardy may be a simpler matter of two realities. That "other world" that the arts inhabit gives our actual world its needed riches and visions. It talks the way we humans aspire to talk. The danger to the mind is for artists and poets to claim a permanent residence there, or to linger too long, or to forget that other reality called home.

It would help if biographers and literary critics could be dissuaded from servicing that dismal classroom exercise of turning poems into prose re-statements, re-saying them in weaker words. That precisely is the activity that increases the distance from here to poetry, shoving poets farther off into their isolated hell, unwilling as they are to be rescued from the world's unnecessary misunderstanding.