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Poets Talking Shop

THE POET'S WORK: 29 *Masters of 20th Century Poetry on the Origins and Practices of Their Art*, ed. Reginald Gibbons. Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1979. Pp. 305. \$12.50, hb.; \$6.95, pb.

One of the most interesting essays that Reginald Gibbons has included in *The Poet's Work* is by the Australian poet A. D. Hope. It is entitled "The Three Faces of Love," and it puts forward the proposition that rather than two ways of life as St. Thomas Aquinas contended, the active and the contemplative, there are in fact three, for the creative way is distinct in its nature, aims and needs from the two others. What Hope is ultimately concerned with is the best kind of education for poets, and he concludes that what "most people need to cope with their world is perhaps the training of positive capability. Because the end is known, the means can be adapted to it." But, as he remarks, "the end of the creative life is something not predictable," and therefore the kind of education which the artist needs is one that, apart from teaching necessary technical skills, will foster what Keats called "negative capability," the capability—as Keats put it in his famous definition—"of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." As Hope remarks, what distinguishes the creative life from the other modes of existence is that "what is truly creative must create itself."

This, of course, is the kind of education about which—by its very nature—one cannot write in specific terms, since its basic notion is openness to the unanticipated. But it is significant, in view of the context of *The Poet's Work* in which it appears, that Hope begins his essay with the reflection that, while other arts can be taught to the degree that they embrace physical skills which are transmissible and in which faults can be easily detected and corrected, with poetry it is different, since, as Hope says, "a poet composing a poem is doing it . . . in a private world that nobody else can share until he has done it and translated it into words. Writing from the beginning is a solitary process; the material shaped by the mind is the material of the mental life itself." And later, to sharpen the distinction, he adds: "One might say that in painting, skill releases the imagination; in writing, a released imagination leads to discovery of the skill."

I have quoted Hope's essay at length, since I feel that in their various ways almost all the contributors to *The Poet's Work* would accept his attitude, and that this fact reveals a curious and interesting division between the intention and the contents of the book. It is

described in the subtitle as "29 Masters of 20th Century Poetry on the Origins and Practice of their Art," and at the end of the introduction the editor expresses a pious pedagogic hope that "these pieces will . . . feed the appetites of young poets and creative-writing students for thought about the craft they are learning."

But if the sub-title and the introduction indeed express Mr. Gibbons' intent, then there can be little doubt that between them the poets he includes have quietly sabotaged it. For in fact there is very little in the book about the "Origins" of poetry, since none of the contributions touches in any serious way on literary history, and there is hardly any more on the "Practice," if by that term one means a discussion of how to use words on the same practical level as the discussions of how to use clay which even serious ceramic artists like Bernard Leach can undertake with dignity and usefulness. Indeed, as I read through the book, I was confirmed in my long-held belief that poetry is a mystery, not quite in the old mediaeval sense of being a craft shared by those who have gone through the proper training, but rather in the sense of a community of those the muse has called and chosen. It has never seemed to me accidental that the name of Orpheus, the mythical founder of our art, should also be associated with one of the great mystery cults of antiquity.

Such a view has always led me to refuse invitations to "teach" what the cant calls "creative writing" (as if *any* real writing were uncreative!), since I believe only those who are predisposed will become poets, and perhaps inevitably. As Wallace Stevens says in another essay ("The Irrational Element in Poetry") reproduced in *The Poet's Work*, "A poet writes poetry because he is a poet; and he is not a poet because he is a poet but because of his personal sensibility." What poets need when they have discovered their predisposition is not any kind of instruction that can be delivered in the academy, which is traditionally associated with Plato's condemnation of poets; it is communion with other poets, through reading, through hearing, through face-to-face contact in a personal and not a pedagogic way. Again and again the poets in this volume who do talk of how they became poets stress this coming to themselves through an intensely personal process of inquiry and experimentation. "I tried my callow hand at almost every poetical form," says Dylan Thomas. "How could I learn the tricks of a trade unless I tried to do them myself?" And Seamus Heaney tells how by imitating others in the actual practice of verse-writing the poet makes the crucial discovery of a voice. "Finding a voice means that you can get your own feeling into your own words and that your words have the feel of you about them."

But it is significant that, though Thomas—for example—remarks

"I am a painstaking, conscientious, involved, and devious craftsman in words," and confounds those who have portrayed him as an apostle of Dionysiac unreason by stressing the indispensability of the intellectual process in poetic composition, there are very few examples here of a poet telling how he writes a poem. Randall Jarrell does, but the poem he describes, "The Woman at the Washington Zoo," is not one of his best. And there are no examples of those speculations, which poets quite often pursue privately, on the nature and the psychology of the creative process. Perhaps this is because, though they sometimes talk about the question, poets rarely write about it. They tend to be superstitious about such matters, as befits those touched by the muse.

Indeed, I found a vast amount that interested me in *The Poet's Work*, but it seemed to me that this was because I was a poet, and here were poets talking about their own minds in a way their peers would understand, and discussing—as Louise Bogan does in "The Pleasures of Formal Poetry" and Denise Levertov in "Some Notes on Organic Form"—the kind of problems that face practicing poets when—as Thomas puts it—they set out "to make comprehensible and articulate what might emerge from subconscious sources." Poets in the various Continental European traditions I found much more oblique in their statements than those writing in English, and perhaps more concerned with the poet's vatic and symbolic roles. No English or American poet makes highfalutin claims like Mandelstam's "Poetry is the plow that turns up time so that the deep layers of time, the black soil, appear on top"; and the fanciful claims that the Romantics did once make are punctured by aphorisms like Auden's "'The unacknowledged legislators of the world' describes the secret police, not the poets." Moreover, Continental poets—at least in this collection—do not get involved in the theoretical discussions about poetic form that interest the English-speakers, and it is significant—after Thomas' surprising (to those who did not know him) support for intellectuality—to find Lorca, in a eulogy of the dark power of inspiration he calls *duende*, declaring that "intellect is oftentimes the foe of poetry because it imitates too much."

I don't think anyone who goes to a "creative-writing" school merely with the ambition of becoming a poet will get much more than confusion out of this volume. Those who are poets will—in the spirit of comparing notes—find what their fellow poets say usually interesting, often annoying, and sometimes inspired by unusual perception. Those who have learnt to love poetry in the process of shedding poetic ambitions—perhaps a majority of poetry readers—will be impressed and perhaps a little illuminated by so many poets guardedly talking shop.

GEORGE WOODCOCK