

# THE STRUGGLING POET

Michael Milburn

*One has made oneself a master of an art. One may forget that it is in making oneself a master of something that mastery consists.*— Robert Fitzgerald

*It is my rather subversive opinion that a writer's feelings of anonymity-obscurity are the second most valuable property on loan to him during his working years.*— J.D. Salinger

Twenty-five years ago, my college friends and I used to sit around discussing our favorite writers' *Paris Review* interviews and fantasizing about our own future encounters with the journal's editors. Today, I still find myself imagining trenchant responses to questions about where and how I write, my process of revision, and attitude toward fame. Unfortunately, my comments on the latter topic remain speculative, for I have yet to produce any poems that merit interrogation by the *Paris Review*. I do, however, possess two and a half decades of experience as a struggling poet—that is, one who cannot count on his work being published. As such, I belong to a species never heard from in interviews, though surely more poets strive for recognition than publish to even modest acclaim.

Despite our numbers, all accounts of literary neglect that I have read end with the writer being discovered and offering a tidy moral such as “persistence pays,” or “believe in yourself.” Yet the perspective of a chronically struggling writer can be just as instructive as that of a Nobel laureate. Obscurity might even be the optimum condition for American poets, affording them a degree of motivation and independence that diminishes when they acquire an audience. In my view, at least some of the mediocre verse produced by established poets—that is, those whose work receives prompt and prominent exposure—can be blamed upon their success.

Adversity can serve as a spur. Every rejection that I receive makes me work harder to write a poem so good that both I and my appraising editors will recognize its quality. This isn't necessarily a realistic goal (after twenty-five years of writing and submitting, I doubt that recognition will come suddenly), but it contains just enough possibility to keep me working. After years of railing against the abysmal taste of editors who reject my po-

**Coowescoowee 2007**

ems, and melodramatically threatening to give up poetry, I have learned that the best cure for my discouragement with writing is to sit down and write. If I were to receive a phone call today conferring publication, money, or fame, I wonder what would get me back to my desk tomorrow. Since these rewards would disorient me as much as they fulfilled me, I'd have to find a new source of motivation to replace the old indignant striving. Like an Olympian in training, the struggling poet may never be so fit and focused, or so anonymous, as in the days leading up to victory.

What happens after victory? Relieved of the initial craving for affirmation, where do poets find their incentive? Of course, many will say that they have always written to please themselves, or to satisfy an intangible urge, or to honor poets that they love. But the fact is that after poets receive a certain degree of recognition, their new books will be more likely, if not certain, to see print. This change in status can't help but affect the way that these poets write and think about their writing. A few may manage to tune out the factors that accompany success, but for others the attention can be ruinous.

To test this view, I selected from my bookshelves five of my favorite poetry books from the past four decades. All were published in the early or middle years of the poet's career, all gained their authors wider recognition (three won Pulitzer Prizes), and all but one were followed by books that disappointed me. In the latter cases, not only did the quality of the poems deteriorate after the poet's success, but the subsequent books appeared with increasing frequency, at an average rate of one every two and a half years. The only poet in the group who managed to sustain the quality of his work was the one who published at a rate (a book every seven years) and in a quantity (four books in all) that strikes me as appropriate to the demands of the genre.

When asked about the writing process in forums such as the *Paris Review* interviews, established poets tend to focus on creative strategy. Secure in the knowledge that their work will proceed efficiently from their typewriter to an editor's desk and then to readers' hands, they worry about little other than whether to employ three- or four-line stanzas, or if a particular word should be kept in or taken out. One would think that such circumstances would help writers, allowing them the freedom to concentrate on composition. But if this is the case, then why do so many abundantly published poets who produced exciting verse in their youth now write as if they are going through the motions, bereft of inspiration?

Maybe loss of inspiration is the problem; many poets produce their best work before their forties, with fertile older masters such as Yeats being an exception. Or maybe the anonymous poet's preoccupation with extra-

neous matters such as getting published and finding a job is a good thing. Struggling poets continually question their behavior, viewing each completed poem, if not each writing session, as a victory over discouragement. They wonder why they persevere, contemplate other uses of their time that would yield more financial and psychological rewards, and fantasize about conditions that the established poet takes for granted. These uncertainties can provide the strugglers with extraordinary independence. Far from being reassured by the existence of an audience, they are driven by their longing for one. This prods them to write as ambitiously as they can while allowing them to remain the sole judges of their achievement. For all of the strain that it places on self-confidence, then, obscurity may provide poets with an indispensable opportunity, freeing them to experiment in an anonymous laboratory with no expectations drawing them toward or away from certain styles and subjects.

Established poets don't necessarily bend their poems to others' tastes, but I don't envy them the burden of recognition. I imagine that the number of poems a poet discards before submitting them diminishes when he or she achieves success; efforts that once would have gone into a drawer or the trash, or yielded to better poems as a manuscript circulated, now make their way into envelopes simply because the poet knows they will be published and read. When an Academy of American Poets chancellor or Poet Laureate submits his or her new collection to Knopf or Norton, a few poems may be returned for fine-tuning, but I doubt that poets of this stature often receive their manuscripts back with the comment "It's not up to our (or your) standards." Yet isn't it conceivable that some of this work might be unworthy of publication? If editors accept these books based upon their authors' reputations rather than the quality of their poems, then who gives the celebrities honest appraisals of their work? One can see how quality might deteriorate as fame increases. Pop singers such as Mariah Carey who follow a hit debut with several flops might find themselves dropped by their profit-minded record label, but it would have taken more than a few weak books for Knopf to stop publishing James Merrill.

Many established poets also seem to interpret their success as an invitation to generate as many poems as possible. John Ashbery, one of our most celebrated poets, published eight books in the decade between 1992 and 2002. Brief periods of prolificness have suited the talents of some poets such as Emily Dickinson and Sylvia Plath, but Ashbery appears to have settled into making poems like a professional in any line of work, regarding productivity less as a matter of inspiration than of showing up and putting out. Increasing output in response to demand may work in the business world, but among artists it can result in a lowering of standards. As Mark

Coowescoowee 2007

Rudman observed about two other poets whose outputs exploded along with their reputations:

How does a reader deal with 120 pages of poetry written over a two-to-three year period? When I read Amy Clampitt or Derek Walcott in large doses, I hear Elias Canetti whispering "One should fear words more."

Surely Elizabeth Bishop, who published ten poems between 1965 and 1976, when she was at the height of her renown, possessed a healthier regard for the demands of her art.

Of course, not all established poets sacrifice quality for quantity, and I am sure that many want to keep improving their work. Still, they cannot claim solidarity with poets who have few or no published poems and have yet to fulfill even modest literary goals. An established poet who tries to approach every new poem with the mentality of a nobody is like a trapeze artist who pretends that the net has been removed. One can't fake obscurity. Unlike their struggling counterparts, established poets don't write in order to stave off despair or to maintain their identities as writers. If they give up writing for a day or a month or a year, they can still feed off past approval, and the sight of their books aligned on the shelf will confirm to them and to others that they are still poets. If strugglers stop working, they give up their sole tangible credential as writers—the fact that they write.

Whether they are aware of it or not, all poets face a quandary when they begin to write: the recognition that they aspire to and that drives them to do their best work also threatens to corrupt them if they attain it. They yearn to be successful, yet also want to maintain their standards and produce better and better poems. Barring a decision to relegate their work to a drawer, however, poets cannot ensure lifelong obscurity, nor should they want to—all writers need some acknowledgment, which sends them back to their desks with renewed optimism. Their best strategy is to hope that success does not come too early or abundantly, and to appreciate (or at least not resent) their obscurity. They should remember that these may be their most productive, if not their happiest, years as writers. The luckiest poets may be those recognized late in life, when they are too conditioned by the capriciousness of public favor to succumb to its allure.

I don't mean to condemn all successful poets to careers of self-delusion and mediocrity, though sometimes the current state of the art makes me fear such an outcome. One cure for complacency would be a return to a more rigorous criticism: when Randall Jarrell deplored the decline in W.H. Auden's poetry in the 1960's, everyone concerned with Auden's career,

**Rogers State University Journal of Arts & Letters**

including the poet himself, heard him. Although no publisher would have abandoned such a superstar, I like to think that Auden returned to his study with indignation and perhaps even renewed resolve after reading Jarrell. Nowadays, poetry primarily receives either descriptive reviews or scholarly exegeses where evaluation is secondary to interpretation. Opinionated critics tend to either rave or condemn, causing readers to dismiss them as biased.

In the absence of external checks, established poets must recover their own high standards. Seamus Heaney recalls reminding himself "You're mortal, you're mortal" as he grappled with the onslaught of fame. W.D. Snodgrass identifies the motive behind his poem "A Flat One":

In relation to a poem like this, I'm much more moved by a desire to compete...and to write a poem that's as good as so and so's....I'm sorry to sound so unconscientious, but I have a dirty suspicion that if Robert Lowell and Tony Hecht and John Berryman weren't around I might not have wanted to re-write that poem....

Perhaps William Butler Yeats remains the best example of a poet who never settled for mere recognition; lavished with fame during his life, he nevertheless kept pushing himself to improve, as evidenced by his worksheets for such late poems as "The Circus Animals' Desertion." Yeats continued to write from within the struggle which motivated him as a youth and which, after talent and experience, constitutes a poet's most precious gift.