

THE POET AND POETRY—A SYMPOSIUM

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The opinions of several poets as to the most interesting problems in writing poetry. Included in this symposium are: Robert Duncan, William Everson, Rosalie Moore, Jack Spicer, Leonard Wolf.

Jack Spicer:

Here we are, holding a ghostly symposium—five poets holding forth on their peculiar problems. One will say magic; one will say God; one will say form. When my turn comes I can only ask an embarrassing question—“Why is nobody here? Who is listening to us?”

Most of us are rather good poets. If we were actors or singers or cartoonists of the same relative talent, a sizable percentage of the students of this University would recognize our names and be familiar with our work. As it now stands, I doubt if there is a reader of this magazine (including the editorial staff and the poets themselves) who is familiar with the work of all five poets. Yet, I repeat, there is not one of us that has not been recognized as a good poet by critics, magazines, or publishers.

The usual answer to this complaint, given, to use a home-grown example, in the letter column of the *Daily Californian* every time a new issue of *Occident* comes out, is so much hog-wash: “Modern poetry does not make sense,” the letter-writer will passionately exclaim, “Nobody reads it because nobody understands it.”

That is just not true. If a lack of intelligibility makes a work unpopular with the public, why is it that there is always at least one song with nonsense lyrics near the top of the Hit Parade? “Chickery Chick” was far less capable of prose analysis than *Finnegans Wake* and no one can claim that its bare, monotonous tune was responsible for its popular favor.

As a matter of fact recently some of the same people that condemn modern poetry as unintelligible express (weirdly enough) admiration for Edith Sitwell and Gertrude Stein. The phonograph records of “Façade” and “Four Saints In Three Acts” have made two writers (who are hardly paragons of intelligibility) perfectly acceptable to a large audience. What

this audience has found is not the intelligibility that it had modestly asked for, but that greater boon that it did not dare to ask—entertainment.

The truth is that pure poetry bores everybody. It is even a bore to the poet. The only real contribution of the New Critics is that they have demonstrated this so well. They have taken poetry (already removed from its main source of interest—the human voice) and have completed the job of denuding it of any remaining connection with person, place and time. What is left is proudly exhibited in their essays—the dull horror of naked, pure poetry.

Live poetry is a kind of singing. It differs from prose, as song does, in its complexity of stress and intonation. Poetry demands a human voice to sing it and demands an audience to hear it. Without these it is naked, pure, and incomplete—a bore.

If plays were only printed and never acted, who would read them? If songs were only printed on song sheets, who would read them? It would be like playing a football game on paper. Do you wonder where the audience is?

It affects the nature of the poetry too. There was a time in the middle ages when music was mainly written and not sung. It was a time when crab canons were composed, complicated puzzles made of notes that no ear would think of hearing. Poetry, when it is removed from a living audience, loses its living form, becomes puzzling. It becomes blind like the salamanders that live in dark caves. It atrophies.

Orpheus was a singer. The proudest boast made about Orpheus was not that his poems were beautiful in and of themselves. There were no New Critics then. The proudest boast was that he, the singer with the songs, moved impossible audiences—trees, wild animals, the king of hell himself.

Today we are not singers. We would rather publish poetry in a little magazine than read it in a large hall. If we do read in a hall, we do not take the most elementary steps to make our poetry vivid and entertaining. We are not singers. We do not use our bodies. We *recite* from a printed page.

Thirty years ago Vachel Lindsay saw that poetry must connect itself to vaudeville if it was to regain its voice. (Shakespeare, Webster, and Marlowe had discovered this three centuries before him.) Our problem today is to make this connection, to regain our voices.

We must become singers, become entertainers. We must stop sitting on the pot of culture. There is more of Orpheus in Sophie Tucker than in R. P. Blackmur; we have more to learn from George M. Cohan than from John Crowe Ransom.

Jack Spicer