

NOTES FOR BROADSHEET POETS

In his new collection (which he is sure, now, will be his last), *Injury Time* (Picador, 2017) – reviewed in this issue of *Agenda* by W S Milne) – Clive James appends a ‘Letter to a Young Poet’. Most of us are familiar with Rilke’s famous ‘Letter to a Young Poet’, excerpts from which appeared in the Reconsideration of Rilke issue of *Agenda* (Vol. 42 Nos3-4), and this Letter by Clive James, though different from Rilke’s epistle, is as worth storing as the former.

Here I will, for the most part, take out the main points James makes, but you must remember he is so entertaining, so full of verve, and tongue-in-cheek in this ‘Letter’ that it is well worth reading the whole of the original text.

In his usual witty, amusing, articulate style, Clive James gives many sane punch-lines for the aspiring poet. He starts challengingly: ‘First of all, give up if you can. Nobody who isn’t neurotically driven should be in the game, because the chances of failure are too high, and the disappointments are too cruel’. He goes on to call ‘stacking shelves’ in a supermarket ‘more useful to society than the average poem’ and ‘superior as a work of art’!

He warns the budding poet – who will only persevere if ‘committed to a burning Miltonic compulsion’ by destiny – not to be too sensitive about reactions to his/her poetry, not to care about praise, and to be hardened to ‘indifference’ and ‘blame’. Important, also, not to be in a rush to publish but to wait until you are sure that the work is ‘really finished’ and you can even ‘wonder how you did it’.

He also suggests keeping a notebook (‘an ordinary quarto exercise book will do fine’) and transferring the best bits to a ‘work book’, then ultimately to the computer. I would imagine most of you will use your mobile phones or iPads for even the earlier exercises and prompts. Nothing should go into the work book, he advises, ‘except poems asking to be finished’, and then you have to practise technique or form and find an appropriate shape and sound for them.

Inspiration is important, even if a poem takes decades in the making for ‘Eventually the poem will tell you it is done by asking no more’ when ‘the whole thing sings’ – or it ‘will tell you it was misconceived by just lying there, saying nothing. Abandon it then’.

He suggests having a ‘brilliant, sensitive, and critically scrupulous friend’ to read your work on the condition ‘only if his objections are those that you would have made yourself, given time’. The caveat is: ‘if he objects to your basic individual tone, shoot him’!

He talks about the advantages and disadvantages of critics. Even hostile

critics, who might have ‘tin ears’ with their ‘brain-dead scorn’, he says, are on your side ‘if they quote you’. Critics who praise you are particularly dangerous, he states, and not worth depending upon as they might well change their minds the next time.

Listen to this:

If you start thinking about your reputation, or even about your career as a poet, you are in the wrong frame of mind. What matters most is the poem, not the poet.

Regarding role models if you think you need one, it is vital, he urges, only to copy the ‘sense of order’ they bring to their phrases, not how they lived their often disorderly, dodgy lives, for ‘the idea that only an intense life can produce intense poetry is a very bad one’.

He speaks of editors, too: ‘the very best are usually poets themselves, so they have felt all this on the skin’; he adds, that even if an editor doesn’t take to the poems you send in, always try again, as another poem may be accepted another time.

The editor, he says, ‘is more concerned with printing something attractive to read than with helping to decide starting positions in the world-historical struggle towards immorality’!

Personally I would like to add here, that I, for one, am interested in printing something vital and musical, not simply something ‘attractive’ to read.

He does offer some reassurance: ‘If even a few people remember a line or two in a poem you wrote, you’re not just getting there, you’re there. That’s it: and all the greater glory is mere vanity’, for ‘nothing matters except your new poem’ and ‘your status as a poet is a side issue’.

He ends the letter as he began implying that if it turns out that you weren’t, after all, born to be a poet, what you will be left with is your sense of dedication which you can put into doing something else – ‘just as long as you get enough spare time to go on reading poetry, the second best thing to writing it, as I’m sure you would agree’.

A particularly memorable line from the poem ‘Too Many Poets’ in his new collection, *Injury Time*, is worth heeding and maybe should be inscribed at the top of every workbook:

True poets should walk singing as they weep.

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