The Potential of Poetry

Acknowledgments

**Grateful acknowledgment to the editors and publishers of the publications in which these essays originally appeared.**

The Potential Of Poetry

*Presa*, Number 11/12, Rockford, MI, 2010

Remember, It’s A Movement

*Small Press Review*, July/August, Paradise, CA, 2008

Accessibility And Quality In Poetry

*Presa*, Number 2, Rockford, MI, 2006

Explication of ‘Life’

*Magazine Six*, Cycle Press, Key West, FL, 2006

The Poet Laureate - A Small Press Perspective

*Home Planet News*, High Falls, NY, 2007

Nostalgic Notes From A Golden Age

*Grand Valley* *Review*, Allendale, MI, 2011

Toward A New Eclecticism

*Presa*, Number 7, Rockford, MI, 2008

**Special thanks to Kirby Congdon, Len Fulton,**

**Chris Haven, Richard Kostelanetz,**

**Ronnie M. Lane, Donald Lev and Roseanne Ritzema.**

INTRODUCTION

This book presents Eric Greinke’s poetic philosophy and his belief that the reader’s thoughts and perceptions should be challenged and expanded through the creative energy of poetry. The seven essays contained in this book strive to expand our understanding of the potential of poetry as an art form and in its impact upon human development. Eric suggests that human evolution can be stimulated through the encouragement of divergent thinking and exposure to a diversity of images and ideas. These essays create a needed stimulus for dialogue within the literary community regarding the universal value of poetry.

I had known Eric Greinke as a talented social worker for several years before I was introduced to his lengthy literary legacy. I was unaware that he had been active in the small press for decades as a poet, editor, reviewer, essayist, novelist and publisher. My introduction to his literary side was through a series of love poems he wrote for me. Now, after decades of reading his work and listening to him talk about poetry, I am still amazed how he stretches our imaginations with his poetry and his ideas about it. The following philosophical essays push the artistic parameters of poetics. The ideas in them are invaluable.

Eric firmly believes in the potential of poetry to expand the consciousness of mankind. Poetry synthesizes language and ideas to stimulate this expansion. *The Potential Of Poetry* encourages the reader to understand that numerous styles of poetic expression contribute to greater possibilities for human growth. Poetry is a key to our awareness.

*Remember, It’s A Movement* reminds us that there is a social value to poetry. It is a shared human experience. There is a difference in the *distribution* of small press poetry (supportive commonality) and the *profit* motive of the commercial presses (capitalism). Poetry should be reflective of our positive human traits, not our negative ones.

In *Accessibility And Quality In Poetry*, Eric identifies the essence of a poem and its relationship to the reader. This essay provides essential clues to his definition of poetry and makes it particularly difficult to separate the essayist from the poet. Most of his poems are encapsulated within these concepts. *“I want to read and write poems that work like keys* *that unlock endless mirrored hallways of association similar to dreaming while awake.”*

Irony lies just below the surface in the *Explication Of ‘Life.’* A five word poem can provoke a multitude of meanings and considerations. Isn’t poetry supposed to do this? Evoke new levels of perception? Yet, the simple mechanics - structure, word selection, punctuation - belie the complexity of the concept. Eric succinctly illustrates the idea of a poem and the necessity of the reader to poetry in this relatively brief but powerful statement.

Poetry as an artistic expression of human awareness is a gift which should be shared. *The Poet Laureate - A Small Press Perspective* shows how capitalism and classism limit society’s exposure to vital contemporary poetry. The vast majority of Americans are cut off from a significant part of current poetry because they lack awareness of its existence. As a small press veteran, Eric doubts this degree of discrimination will change. It reflects the greater social statement of our culture.

We are presented with a slice of historical perspective in *Nostalgic Notes From A Golden Age.* We learn more detail of Eric’s numerous small press activitieswithin the context of the national poetry scene of the 1970s. We experience the excitement and comradery of that era from the perspective of one who was there. This essay beautifully describes the supportive nature of the independent poet and their interchange of stimulating ideas.

Ideally, poetry should pro-actively move the Art forward. Whatever form a poem may take, its goal is to connect with an audience*.* *Toward A New Eclecticism* espouses the values of tolerance*,* diversity and universality. Ever the social advocate, Eric urges us to be divergent in our thinking and receptive to new ideas. We should focus on the positive aspects of poetry and how it unites us in our shared human experience.

Artistic expression is a wonderful gift and responsibility. Stimulating new thoughts and ideas in a reader contributes to a greater tolerance and understanding of humanity. By challenging our ego boundaries, we are able to grow as people. These essays are guidelines to the appreciation of poetry.

The existential ideas in these essays have been developed over a lifetime of experience, education and intuition. I believe Eric Greinke personifies the potential of poetry. He gives us hope that poetry can not only express the essence of our humanity but increase it. His expansive poetry guides us into the universal subconscious and unlocks the doors to our creative potential. As he says, *“*The goal of poetry is, after all*, enlightenment.*”

Roseanne Ritzema

Contents

*The Potential Of Poetry*

*Remember, It’s A Movement*

*Accessibility And Quality In Poetry*

*Explication Of ‘Life’*

*The Poet Laureate - A Small Press Perspective*

*Nostalgic Notes From A Golden Age*

*Toward A New Eclecticism*

Notes

1. *The Potential Of Poetry* attempts to provide some specific compositional methods and concepts that break the mold of poetic convention and thus expand it, and our consciousness, simultaneously. While some of the methods are based in my own practice, others are drawn from the work of contemporary experimentalists.

2.  *Remember, It’s A Movement* is a short piece written as a Guest Editorial for the *Small Press Review*. As such, it’s a position piece that encourages small press publishers toward solidarity.

3. *Accessibility And Quality In Poetry* is a response to the ‘poetically correct’ emphasis on accessibility that often results in generic, narrative, run-on poems of approximately 28 lines that all sound and look like they were written by the same person. My suggestion that a poem’s autonomous values be considered is in the service of encouraging editors to accept poems that attempt deeper artistic levels.

4. *Explication of ‘Life’* was written at the request of Kirby Congdon, who planned his *Magazine Six* around poets explicating their own poems. I thought to have fun by overdoing a piece of many words on a poem of only five words. While the tongue is clearly visible in the cheek, it’s also a sincere explication of my little poem. I purposely chose a small poem that was all abstract statement, with no images.

5. *The Poet Laureate - A Small Press Perspective* was written when I learned that my old friend Donald Hall had been made Poet Laureate of the United States. Small press editors and publishers wondered if he’d do anything for the independent presses. Knowing him, I guessed that he would not. It turned out that I was right, but Hall had a valid point when he complained at an AWP meeting about the prevalence of the ‘McPoem.’

6. *Nostalgic Notes From A Golden Age* was written at the request of Chris Haven, the editor of the *Grand Valley Review*, to commemorate my founding of the magazine on the occasion of Grand Valley State University’s 50th anniversary. As such, the piece relies on names a great deal more than I’m usually comfortable with, but I felt that the assignment required that I give credit. The larger scheme is to show how a literary scene expands from the microcosm of the individual poet to a school, a local scene, a bigger statewide scene and finally to the nation and the world.

7.  *Toward A New Eclecticism* makes a case for greater open-mindedness among poets in their reading as well as in their writing. I reveal my own biases in an attempt to overcome them in recognition of a higher value.

I apologize for the redundancy of the ideas in these essays. Each of them was written to stand alone, though it takes all of them to assert the statement that I wish to make. –EG

The Potential of Poetry

The potential of poetry goes beyond the mere literary. Poetry can be a vehicle of human potential. Poetry has the special power to expand consciousness beyond the prosaic and the merely literal. Words are symbols for concepts. By combining words in poetic sequences, we are actually discovering new ideas. Sequenced normally as prose, the meanings of the combined words are commonly perceived. Poetry deviates from normal usage in order to reveal fresh verbal (conceptual) relationships and meanings.

Poetry is unique among the arts, first in antiquity. In pre-literate cultures around the world, the poet was acknowledged for having the power of giving form to shared histories, heroic values and feelings. After the battle, the poet would celebrate the notable heroic acts, list the slain on both sides, memorialize in inspired words the shared feeling of triumph or disaster. Or, the poet repeated a favorite saga as entertainment on a cold winter night. Shared values were confirmed and new perceptions, and new mysteries, revealed as well. Poetry was the glue that bound a culture together.

Poetry had an essential function to our group consciousness prior to the invention of the printing press. It existed for millenniums before prose, which came as a product of printing. Ancient handwritten religious texts were memorized in verse. The earliest histories were also composed in verse, a legacy of oral tradition.

Language is more precise in poetry than in prose, more crucial. Meanings are compressed and multi-layered in poetry, which gives it an appeal that goes beyond the surface and concrete. The essential difference between poetry and prose is the area with the greatest potential for mental expansion. This difference is not superficial, but quite fundamental in nature. Formal or stylistic considerations such as sound patterns, rhythms, etc. all fall in the superficial differences category. Whether it is in formal verse or in free verse, poetry is defined by its fundamental difference from prose, and that difference is in its deeper and more complex levels of meaning. Human evolutionary growth is revealed in more than physical adaptations such as our average height. Our mental evolution is a subtle accumulation of our universal experience and the consciousness that accompanies it. By conceptualizing the language and imagery of poetry in divergent ways, poets and readers expand their mental flexibility and move beyond old levels of awareness. Growth and adaptation require mental and emotional flexibility and range.

New ways of using words lead to new ways of thinking. If history has taught us anything, it’s that we need to be more thoughtful. We need new ideas and ways of looking at reality to survive and progress. If we do and think what we always have, we’ll get what we’ve always gotten: war, scarcity of resources and inhumanity toward each other, other species and the blue environment on which we all depend.

Creative thinking is divergent rather than convergent. Ambiguity is fundamental to poetry, just as literal meaning is to prose. Divergent thinking flexes our mental apparatus and knocks us out of complacency and away from responding to things in hackneyed, routine ways.

A poem cannot be defined by either form or content. Poetic material takes several different forms as it leaks from the subconscious to the conscious, riding on imagery, music or even thought. A poem is not defined by a standard of content. Anything may be the content of a poem. No subject (or lack of obvious subject) disqualifies a piece of writing as a poem, because content in poetry is not what defines it as poetry. Rather, it is the experience of poetry that matters. Although it seems to be ‘nonsense,’ Lewis Carroll’s *Jabberwocky* is still a poem, and a superior one at that.

Tone poems, poems in sign language, found poems and visual/concrete poems all function to imply deeper meaning, to give a reader something to think about, or to evoke a new feeling.

Poetic inspiration is distinctly intuitive at its point of origin, but like a musical note, it decays at different rates depending on the state of mind of the poet. If a rational mode of thought dominates the poet’s mind, then the decay from original poetic impulse to rational thought is so fast that the poet is lucky to retain very much of it. Even a completely irrational poet cannot avoid meaning, because his very material is words, and words have meanings. There are only levels of difficulty. Neither can either type of poet *avoid* evoking emotion of some kind in a reader, as we all have intellectual and emotional associations to words, images and patterns of sound. Quality is another issue. Quality is subjective. It is fundamentally dishonest to claim a superior standard where art is concerned. Taste is personal, and a combination of internal and external values. Poems are like snowflakes, since no two are alike. Two people hear a song. One loves it and the other hates it. Is it the person or the song?

Would we even want a world where everyone responded the same way, understood or experienced a work of art in the same, standard way? Obviously not, if we care about the survival and expansion of the human spirit. One size does not fit all, nor should it. Viva la difference! Relevancy in art changes with the times, in response to emergent feelings, cultural values and breaking information. Because poetry is, ultimately, about our reality. This may include inner reality a.k.a. surreality. At any rate, it’s all human reality, a subjective state limited by human sensual perception. While a larger reality contains human reality, humans may only perceive that portion of it which is accessible through human perception. We participate in the dimension of sight, but we cannot see past our own eyes. Is our inner perception more limited than our hearing, eyesight and senses of taste touch and smell?

If a poet’s own personal vision extends to the universal on some level, his poems will have readers who derive value from them. Some poems speak to and for large audiences, while others are like Zydeco music, appealing mainly to a narrower niche that nonetheless values it quite highly, and understands its aesthetics, and is transported by it.

It’s the transportation effect that matters. A poem should somehow enrich, inform or move one from a previously convergent feeling or thought. If it only reinforces or confirms what was already known or felt, it can still produce that aesthetic moment of recognition, the ‘Aha’ of revelation or confirmation.

The ancient Greeks placed poetry at the top of all the arts. If they were right, then it’s particularly ironic that other, presumably lower arts are allowed greater variation and experimentation. Painters, for example, are well within the acceptable range if they produce abstract work, but it’s still the rare literary magazine that encourages abstract expressionism in poetry. This is even more ironic when it’s recognized that abstract expressionism tries to explore that very intuitive territory where poems have their origins. Whenever one considers the poetic impulse, the inextricably connected issue of the role of intuition in the poetic process rises automatically and inevitably.

Intuition is divergent thinking that pushes up from the subconscious, and even from the deeper, universal unconscious. The aesthetic experience for the poet comes primarily from the birth of the poem. For the reader, it comes as the poem is born again in sudden recognition.

Poets should be keen perceivers, seeing and imagining new thoughts and perceptions as advance guards for the rest of humanity. This has been their historical role. Only in recent decades has this been questioned. The entertainment value of poetry is secondary to its primary purpose: exposing the unknown, forming alternate ways of perceiving our reality, and advancing human awareness.

A rejection of difficulty in poetry is actually a veiled fascistic attempt to make everyone dance to the same simple tune. Accessibility often takes the form of anti-intellectualism, wanting everything to be simple, shallow and in low expectation of reader intelligence or sensitivity lying beyond the prosaic. Slogans are not poetic. Keeping everything on the surface ensures that nothing new will be evoked. A resistance to difficulty is also reactionary.

Totalitarian political regimes have historically suppressed freedom of expression in the literary arts, because it is recognized that anything that stimulates free thought is antithetical to social conformity and total control of the individual. Poetry is subversive to rigid, stagnant ways of being.

One of the major characteristics of superior intelligence is adaptability. Adaptability requires flexibility. A tired metaphor is one that has been overused and rendered thereby into prose. A cliche is a classic that has been too successful. The classics of the future will use different methods and forms than those of the past. The standards for Art must never be fixed in position, or Art will cease to expand and progress.

During my early twenties I had the wild good fortune to study with two of the most inspiring and forward-looking poets of my parents’ generation. In the same amazing week I had daily workshops, separately, with both Robert Bly and Ted Berrigan. Although they were very different from each other, these two important poets each taught me important principles of poetry.

Robert Bly reinforced something that I had intuited already, that imagery is encoded into our collective unconscious and it therefore has deep symbolic power. Robert’s own poetry wasn’t always successful in tapping into this great shared treasure-house of archetypal imagery, but his batting average was pretty high and at least his failures were of the magnificent sort. Bly’s influence has been enormous on my generation of poets, especially those of us in the upper Midwest who feel no need to leave home.

Bly also talked about the value of non-linear association, which he called “leaping.” Images in poems don’t need to have a clear rational relationship in order to have an associative value. The primary organizing principle is inside the poem itself. The surrealists taught us that juxtapositioning of images ties them together as the rational mind of the reader reconciles them emotionally.

Ted Berrigan’s influence went in the other direction, but it was just as profound. He encouraged us to plunge right into editing magazines and books (a thing I was already doing, but again, he reinforced it) and experimenting with cutting and pasting ‘samples’ from all of literature, to “make it your own.” Ted had a charismatic social approach to the literary scene. He was a great synthesizer of influences, and he felt that anything and everything could be a subject for poetry or could be included, collage-style, and integrated into other texts and processes. His book *The Sonnets* was the supreme example of this approach at the time. He also introduced me to the idea of transmutable forms, an approach that I’ve developed ever since. Again, this concept fell under the compositional principle of integrating received material to “make it your own.”

One value of the collage/adaptation approach is that it may jog loose poetic material that is more original to the self of the poet who practices it. This would be similar to the way a musician practices scales. Later, interesting new arpeggios come back out of the creative unconscious where the scales have been integrated and then reborn or reformulated. Berrigan was not just a collagist. He also wrote more persona-based poems that perfectly reflected his charisma and joie de vivre. He loved language and saw poetry as unlimited in its potential.

My two mentors left me with the belief that poetic processes could originate from deep inside *or* from the way-far-away *outside*. What matters is what’s on the page or in the ear, and how the receiver relates to it. I began to think that the reader is always the real poet. The writer functions as a conduit to a shared universal unconscious.

I couldn’t have chosen two better poets of the preceding generation who would have combined to stimulate me so much. Bly and Berrigan were ideal teachers whose influence came at a seminal moment in my own development as a poet and also in my understanding of the potential of the art. When their theories disagreed, I had no problem synthesizing the seemingly disparate parts into a whole on a higher level of abstraction. I made it my own.

In recent correspondence, Bly has written of the value and importance of mystery in poetry, again reinforcing my pre-existing proclivities and impulses. Another great influence in this regard has been the literature and paintings of the surrealists, whose juxtapositioning of disparate images led to deeper associations. For painters, Magritte, Dali, Bosch, DeChirico and the others represented visually that dream imagery is natural to artistic expression.

In literature, many of the names of the most important and influential forefathers are French: Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Appolinaire, Reverdy, Breton, Artaud - the list is long. The French language lends itself well to artistic expression. It is highly nuanced. It is a language which, in itself, encourages widely divergent thinking processes.

Even in English literature, the line of mystical, visionary poets is substantial: Coleridge, Blake, Shelly, Wordsworth. Among the modernists, Yeats was very much a poet of archetypal images and myths and ancient folk stories. Ezra Pound expanded the collage/adaptation approach, as well as providing the foundation for the projective and objectivist poets that followed.

Some come from the inside, some from the outside. All achieve poetry. Deaf poets sign their poems. Are they not poets? On whose authority does poetry depend? Poetry is naturally occurring, a part of reality. It doesn’t take its standards from its practitioners. Rather, it is we who need to discover what its real natural function is and what its natural processes are. It is not an invention of man, but a discovery. It is not so much a particularly defined product as a *process* of inspiration and revelation.

The revelational function of poetry is at the center of man’s mental and spiritual evolutionary progress. Prose tells us what we can know through rhetoric and the common usage of language. It’s intellectually based, and consequently it limits its revelations primarily to conceptualizations. But the poetry that furthers our human progress reveals more mystery than it solves. The ability to leap mentally increase inner richness.

Why should poetry tell us what we already know? Prose already does that. Significantly, poetry came first, which means that we need language more to tell us what we don’t already know than to confirm or refine what we already know.

The mother and father of American poetry exemplified our two main poetic impulses. Dickinson created a vast personal universe, writing her poems in a personalized language of inner origins. Whitman was the great poet of democracy and social values. Where Dickinson explored her own inner emotional world, sending messages in bottles to “an admiring bog,” Whitman espoused humanitarian values and reached out to everyman, expanding the personae and presumed audience of poetry simultaneously.

Yet, even given these strong predominant qualities, each of these truly great poets also reflected a recognition of the other, opposite origin of poetry. Dickinson didn’t throw her poems away. She wrote them down, even sent them to a few people. And Whitman also came from the inside, social as he was. His was the expansive ego of the mystic, not unlike Blake or Rimbaud. Allen Ginsberg is a postmodern case in point. While Ginsberg was primarily a poet of social protest, he also sincerely felt his causes. They were a deep part of him. He was *also* coming from the inside. He *connected*.

Perhaps the only real difference is the degree to which a poet desires to communicate with readers. But I doubt it. I think it has more to do with what Aldous Huxley called “the doors of perception.”

Once one has unlocked the main door to the unconscious, one can enter the big vault where all the smaller doors are. The key to each door is a poem. Some are portals to ecstasy, while others are ruled by Pandora. Some doors contain ladies, others orange tigers burning bright.

There are several areas of poetry where I, as a practitioner, see great potential. Here is a limited sampling:

1. The Serio-Comic

The highest level of aesthetic experience is the serio-comic. When a work of art dredges emotions out of you that you didn’t know you had, it’s high Art. It makes you laugh. It makes you cry. Ultimately, it takes you somewhere you can reach by only one road. It’s both landing and launch pad. Call it sweet and sour, or call it yin-yang. The full ‘aha’ experience is like a net that pulls a variety of creatures up from the depths. When you don’t know whether to laugh or to cry, you’ve encountered the mystery of the poetic realm, where the potential for significant growth is great.

2. Multiple Personae

Although many readers seem to feel that a poet is only sincere when he composes from a single, autobiographically honest persona, there is really no justification, logically, for their attitude. One cannot escape being oneself any more than words can be separated from their prosaic meanings or from their associative value. I always think it’s funny when a person looks at an old photo and declares that ‘it doesn’t look like you.’ It *has* to. It’s a photograph. Of course they usually mean that it doesn’t look the way I look now, but so what?

Multiple personae are actually representative of the many modes and roles we inhabit in a day or in our lives. We like to identify prose according to its degree of realism as fiction or non-fiction. Within each category there are numerous sub-categories. No one objects. Indeed, objection would be silly. Why is poetry, supposedly the highest Art, more restrictive than prose? Poetry is imaginatively based writing that reveals hidden aspects of reality. Non-fiction sports writers do not dogmatically claim that political, entertainment or academic writers are not writing non-fiction, after all.

The diversity of poetic approaches, methods and styles does not diminish the Art. Rather, poetry as an Art is enriched and sustained by diversity. Why then, shouldn’t an individual poet explore his or her many personae that interface of poetry and drama?

3. Non-linear sequencing has been used already in a number of ways, but still has enormous potential. Deconstruction and reconstruction both result in meaningful but irrational meanings. Shorter pieces may be combined to form still larger structures. A sequence of haiku may be related primarily by tone rather than by subject, and also bear a unifying, but abstractly related title. A sequence of pure images has a cumulative effect as the ego of the reader either accepts them as poems or as one poem. A sequence may slow the reader down to consider each part more attentively, or present different aspects and levels of an extended symbol or metaphor.

4. Transmutated Forms

Some traditional forms from world literature, such as the Japanese haiku and tanka, the sonnet in all its subforms, or the Persian ghazal forms are themselves archetypal. Syllabic and other ‘rules’ can provide stimulating parameters that may actively help the poetic process. They have endured for a fundamental reason, and they may evolve carrying some of their historically traditional values while jettisoning some others, poet’s choice. An external framework can be especially valuable when it is married to irrational, intuitively based content.

5. Sensuously Restricted poems may be in sign language, visual or concrete representations of single words or unrelated word clusters, or anything else that utilizes the language in a novel, non-prosaic, metaphorical way. Richard Kostelanetz is one such experimental poet who is well known for this type of work. I’ve collaborated with him several times. Jackson MacLow used parallel texts, films and tapes to create fluid poetic experience. I was fortunate to participate in one such happening with MacLow back in the golden early seventies. There were four film projectors projecting streams of words on the four walls of the room while MacLow recited some chance phrases from the *I Ching* through a microphone while four cameras filmed the whole thing from shifting points of view. This is the ‘derangement of the senses’ referred to by Rimbaud. The participants became the poets, transported by the power of the words as they combined in each participant/poets consciousness. Chance operations clear the mental palette, allowing one a fresh perspective.

6. Breaking assumptive rules, such as the ‘rule’ against use of public symbols, the ‘rule’ against sentimentality, the old taboo against cliches or other politically correct poetic assumptions can yield new insights. A cliche was first a classic, before it became overused. But, it’s very overuse indicates a powerful connection that may be revitalized or expressed in a fresh manner. Breaking the rules knocks both poets and readers out of their complacency. Poetry should not be too predictable. Perhaps this is why the public today is largely complacent toward poetry. It seems predictable to them before they even read it.

The key with this kind of work is to truly make it your own. If you own it, it may transcend cliche and regain its classic status.

7. Implied Meaning

Deep personal revelation doesn’t have to come from the poet in order for the reader to have it. If a poem means one thing to a poet and another to a reader, is its intrinsic value somehow diminished, or is it really multiplied? Even more importantly, the degree of ambiguity in a poem leaves it more accessible to a variety of responses and interpretations. Do we want poetry to be *more* or less meaningful?

Ambiguity also puts the emphasis right on the emotional or evocative level, and allows the reader to relax normal rationality and expectations, to better experience the poem before rushing to premature ‘understanding.’

Mystery in a poem keeps the poem alive for both the reader and the poet. It serves as a magnetic spectrum. Prosaic thought is broken into primary colors like light passing through a verbal prism.

8. Collaborations between two or more poets or between poets and artists in other mediums have enormous potential, especially in the light of new technology. Multi-media productions reveal more than the sum of their artistic parts. Again, the participant is shaken from a fixed position and from expectations, opened up to perceive something new.

Collaborations between poets can take several forms. I have done several of the every-other-line type, as well as more parallel processes that hooked together following extensive independent work by the poets.

One of the best advantages of collaboration is the suspension, to varying degrees, of individual themes and egos. If one has been too self-centered, this is highly beneficial. It’s good exercise to break out of one’s own comfort zone. It expands personal boundaries, as poetry is meant to do.

9. Real time reportage that documents the ongoing perception of the poet can include snips of dialogue, electronic secondary material that is gleaned from television, internet or radio, in collage style, external observations along with passing thoughts and inner dialogue or visual images. All have the potential to break free from the programmatic and celebrate the linguistic texture of the environment. Objectivistic or personalistic modes are equally valid entry points. It is the construction of poetry from real time that is the most significant characteristic of this paradigm. This approach could range from the simple ‘I do this. I do that.’ of Frank O’Hara to a more complex collage that captures time or attempts to replicate consciousness itself, analogous to photography, cinema verite or to real time podcasts. Cyberspace is uniquely well suited to such an approach. One could even say that this work is already well underway and should simply be *redefined* as another form of poetry. Spontaneous writing has more potential than has thus far been realized, even though it’s not a new idea. Many areas of untapped potential are not new, such as the use of shifting syntax, fragmentation, spacially open pages, dialogue and quotation.

10. Projective techniques are based on the same principle as the Rorschach test. A simple form of projection is to make up pictures from clouds, like a child on his back on a hillside. Another is to ‘find’ lines of prose from prosaic sources like newspapers or textbooks, and put them together with lines found from novels, cut-up method. One can stop there, or go on to rewrite the grafted-together piece to impose a personal style. The act of selection has projective value. It’s a photograph. It *has* to look like you.

These are just a few of the areas of potential I can think of offhand. I’m sure Richard Kostelanetz or John Keene could come up with considerably more, but these examples will suffice for this essay. The important thing is to recognize the legitimacy of these experimental approaches and to appreciate their absolute value in advancing not only the art of poetry, but man’s evolutionary consciousness too.

But Art will not be denied, nor should it. Art goes beyond the personal into the social realm, to bridge the many inner and interpersonal gaps.

What real difference does it make what the intention or interpretation of the artist is in the value of a work of art? Isn’t value determined more by the response it gets than any intention the *messenger* might have? Shouldn’t any value in an artwork come from the actual artwork itself? I’m not referring to only historical values here, but rather to a reader’s aesthetic experience. It’s the viewer or reader who completes the loop. Otherwise, a poem in a drawer is like a tree falling in a forest with no one to hear or see it, no green crash.

Remember, It’s A Movement

I was thinking about a phrase, ‘small press movement,’ that I began using in the early seventies and still use even to this day. I wonder if, in the four intervening decades, it is common to think of the small press as a movement anymore. Instead, it does seem evident that a majority of the current presses perceive themselves more as businesses than as a movement.

Businesses compete, whereas members of a movement compliment and support one another. I believe that this is an important distinction for small publishers to consider.

My personal experience, as both an editor of a litmag and as a publisher of books, is that magazines are more connected with each other than small book publishers are. This is evident in the fact that we exchange our magazine *Presa* with eighty plus other magazines, some independent and some university affiliated, but exchange books regularly with only a half dozen or so small book publishers.

Why this discrepancy, and what can we do about it?

Magazines share writers, which gives them a common ground. Presses probably tend to compete for writers in addition to the more obvious scarce book store shelf space, the small audience of literary readers, etc. Some of this can be good, as it keeps everyone on their toes, but the social effect is that we are more divided, therefore more easily conquered. Ronnie M. Lane, the poet/publisher of Free Books, Inc., had a solution. First, he went non-profit. But he didn’t stop there. He then proposed that non-profit small presses *give their books away for free*. This may seem to be a radical solution to many, but it does illustrate one way to deal with the problem. Ronnie still uses the phrase ‘small press movement.’

Maybe a more realistic solution for the small publishers who want to develop greater solidarity would be to exchange books with other publishers more frequently. Back in the seventies, John Martin of Black Sparrow was my model for this. I sent him every Pilot Press book and he sent me all the Black Sparrows. John was never stingy with free copies of his new books, even though they were expensively produced letterpress books, often in limited editions. For many years he spent his profits from the popular Bukowski books sending out free copies of his other books to other literary publishers. John used the phrase ‘small press movement.’ His ultimate success has yet to be matched. Need I say more?

Accessibility And Quality In Poetry

Quality in poetry is perceived as accessibility. Accessibility, however, is dependent on a reader’s personal receptivity to the degree of ambiguity in a given poem.

Quality in poetry comes from that element which differentiates poetry from prose. This must be so, because without the poetic element, there would be no separate category of poetry. If poetry is defined as any compressed writing arranged in lines instead of paragraphs, then there would be no real, specific intrinsic difference between nonfiction and poetry, advertising slogans and graffiti.

Quality in poetry stems from the degree of poetic consciousness that the piece evokes. It can be mainly emotional, but it doesn’t have to be. It can be based intellectually, although that is more difficult, largely because the drive energy of an intellectual poem comes from quite a different place than the emotionally charged poem. Humor comes from an intellectual source, but it evokes an emotional response. A poem evokes many different responses that involve the reader in poetic consciousness at different levels.

Poetry can help us transcend normal states of mind and *spirit*, to enter the level of consciousness of collective soul, archetypes, symbols, and dreams.

A symbol doesn’t have to be intentional on the part of the artist. A work of art should be evaluated and experienced *for* *itself*. Any poem, because it is made up of words, must be a symbol, simply because all words are symbols. I think poems symbolize complex, ineffable feelings and deep ideas that defy normal prosaic symbolism. Poems say things that cannot be said in any other way. The poetic element that differentiates all forms of poetry from prose exists in varying degrees in different poems. We distinguish prose poems from flash fiction, vignettes, and short short stories because they contain this poetic element. At this point in literary history, we have to admit, by consensus, that anything goes. The real issue is *how well* a thing goes. Anything goes, but not everything goes well*.* The difference rests on that quality of poetry that differentiates it from prose. Without that quality, it would be only prose cut up in lines. We wouldn't need to differentiate between prose poems, vignettes, narrative poems, or lyric poems. They'd all be prose.

Surprise is an integral aspect of the difference between poetry and prose. I also think of poetry as mystery. Something needs to remain unresolved and mysterious. It draws the reader back to the poem repeatedly. At the same time, as a whole, there must be unity. How well a poem hangs together, its unity, is a major quality factor. A poem should behave according to its own special physical laws. A poem’s structural integrity depends on how balanced it is. The ideal structure should support the emotional/ evocative level of the poem. A degree of arbitrary unity is automatic, because the basic elements exist together, as a whole. To get to a metaphoric level, surprise/mystery leads us into non-linear reality - poetic truth that transcends prosaic thought and is direct experience of spirit.

What is the magic poetic element? In a letter, dated 9/22/05, Robert Bly wrote: “I’m willing to say anything in the poem, that “the cottonwood leaves are resigned,” or that the tractor tires “love” the back land. I don’t know about the subconscious or the unconscious or the difference between them. I’m looking for surprise! Writing a prose poem is like going through some underground tunnel with a flashlight on your head. Only the flashlight types will really enjoy it.”

My daughter’s inept creative writing teacher emphatically informed her class that there was no such category as the prose poem. As a lifetime honorary member of the Flat Earth Society, I was appalled that a true believer could be so narrow-minded. Upon further inquiry, I learned that she also denied the Holocaust and the Theory of Evolution. Whoops. There I go again. Nevermind all that. The Poetry Nazis are everywhere. They make me nervous.

The “issue” of the prose poem is central to our consideration of the organic relationship between accessibility and quality. The prose-poem takes prose just over the borderline, into poetry. The elements of compression and ambiguity, achieved by deliberate violation of the rules of rhetoric, give a prose poem greater depth of meaning than any old piece of prose that does not imply other levels of meaning.

If any old prose isn’t prose poetry, then what distinguishes poetry from, say, memoir? Many seem to feel that memoir and poetry are the same thing, so long as you arrange the memories and observations into lines. But if you put them into paragraphs, they cannot be distinguished from prose. Maybe if they’re really short, we can call them prose poems! This is fallacious reasoning, because if length was the poetic element, then short poems would be *more poetic* - of higher quality - than long ones. So much for *Song Of Myself* and *The Wasteland*. We’re eliminating whole categories here! Yee haw! The Poetry Nazis don’t feel comfortable in grey areas. (Or in grey matter, for that matter.)

The characteristic that differentiates poetry from prose is its compressed multi-levels of meaning, and the freedom a poet assumes to utilize language in any way that serves the essential impulse that the poem symbolizes. Mere compression of language *by* *itself* does not differentiate poetry from prose. It just makes it better prose. Compression does contribute to a poem’s unity and integrity, however. Ambiguity is the essential ingredient of poetry. The implication in a piece of writing that there is something deeper beneath the surface, some mystery to be discovered, makes a piece of writing poetic.

Although a polemic social protest poem may be prosaic, it may transport a reader to a higher level of social consciousness. A personal poem may raise consciousness emotionally or psychologically. But in both cases, poetry seeks higher meaning.

Those critics who insist that poetry be “more accessible” punish poets and poetry itself for the deterioration of vocabulary and for the functional illiteracy that scars the current period. I guess that many of the simplistics among us never experienced Rod McKuen, the poetic equivalent of bad Disco. His books were like Hallmark cards bound together. His poems resembled advertising copy. He was obvious and cliched, but he was *accessible*. On one extreme, Rod McKuen’s poetry barely *qualified* as poetry, because it was trite and sentimental. Poems that are obvious and lack secondary meaning are really prose, dressed up to look like poetry for the easily accessible reader. On the other hand, complex works, especially those that discard linear logic, that utilize clusters of imagery, defy immediate explication. But they may communicate on the original level of the pure poetic impulse itself. This is the highest use of language. Every word is a concept. New concepts grow from more fundamental concepts. Human progress depends on the discovery of new concepts, meanings, nuances, moods, recognitions and attitudes. Many of the answers are in us already, and can be *retrieved* *and discovered* through poetry. The Dadaists discovered, or rather revealed, that when any two words or images are juxtaposed, meaning is created or at least implied. The intention of the artist to create something meaningless, which was the Dadaist goal, was thwarted by the very nature of words themselves. One cannot kill an idea (concept = word) simply by putting it next to other seemingly disjunctive ideas.

Imagery gives substance to poems and helps the reader to get into an associative state of mind. The receptivity of the reader is at least as important as the intrinsic accessibility of a poem. Poems evoke subjective responses. The ability to relate to diverse types of poetry depends in large part on a reader’s ability to think abstractly and to tolerate or even enjoy ambiguity. *A poem doesn’t happen on a page. The reader is the poet. The original writer of the poem is actually a spiritual medium who provides an outline for a poem that happens in a reader’s mind.*

The ongoing futile debate over the issue of accessibility raises the question:  *where does street wisdom warp/degenerate into a mob mentality*? Contemporary poets are being coaxed and coerced into an anti-intellectualism that’s reminiscent of the Eisenhower 50's, when homogenization of poetry turned it into skim milk, and heroic poets like Ginsberg, Corso, Whalen, Ferlinghetti, O’Hara, DiPrima, Snyder, Lamantia, Bukowski, and Olson emerged in reaction, to stand against The Nothing. If it wasn’t for these holy rebels, American poetry would have regressed back to the imitation of British mannerism, back to a time before Whitman, Poe and Dickinson won the American Revolution. I can’t tell the New Formalists from the Old Nazis. They walk like ducks, or goose-step, and they’re also chicken. So much for poultry.  *I want to read and write poems that work like keys that unlock endless mirrored hallways of association that are similar to dreaming while awake.*  Poems that transport each of us to their own special space, into higher meaning. Quality seems objective to the Poetry Nazis. They have no sense of humor and they have short attention spans. They are Nazi low-brows and dangerously delusional, but nevermind them. They never go the full distance, because they are afraid of the ambiguous, deep water. They like to lurk around close to the shore, in the shallows. Besides, I have always believed that it is better to light one candle than to curse the darkness. The goal of poetry is, after all, *enlightenment.*

Explication of ‘Life’

My poem ‘Life’ is, on the most prosaic and immediate level, a commentary on the biggest subject reduced to an ironically and deceptively concrete statement of only five words, one comma and one period. As such, the reader perceives an irony in the very form of the poem, as well as in an apparently simplistic statement that sums up succinctly a subject that usually requires volumes that are ultimately inconclusive. That is the quick reading.

The poem may also be read extremely slowly, with greater concentration on each word and its meaning. Extremely concise poems, such as haiku, when read slowly, are objects of *contemplation.* This mode of “reading” is the deep layer of the ironically simple “little” poem. Before proceeding further, here is the poem:

LIFE

Life

is short,

but great.

Initially, the form evokes brevity, again due to the irony of the big subject, little poem contrast. However, the brevity is brief, because the statement is *intrinsically serious.* Life is short. We all know this, and it is a fact that usually leaves us feeling sad, angry or wistful. If the whole statement was that *life is short,* it would evoke these feelings. I might as well add the cliche “and then you die.” However, the last line, only two words, creates a tension: *but great.*

This elicits the question: is life, which we all *know* is short, also *great?* Is this poet an idiot? A Pollyanna? Seeing life through rose-colored glasses?

A very thoughtful reader can make this a profound poem. On the opposite end of the spectrum, a reader who is shallow, hyperactive, Type A, superficial, can perceive it as an oblique advertising slogan for the terminally optimistic - perhaps more appropriate for a bumper-sticker than a litmag. But the question is posed by this insidious little poem: is life great?

Presume that I, the poet, am telling the truth when I *propose and assert* that, although it is short, life is also *great.* I have provided evidence of the very premise of the poem with the tiny poem itself, as a *symbol of itself.* The poem is great, *if you* also believe that life is great (worth the trouble, with remarkable, amazing peaks and beauty) or even great as a great tragedy by Shakespeare or Dostoevsky is great - in contrast to comedy. This definition of "great" leads us back into the tension of the poem: life is short, but great, just *like this poem.* Just like life, the poem is great if you *make the best of it.*

Do I get to declare my little poem “great?” My answer is that I do if I also have the right to see life as great. That is, we all have not only the *right,* but the *duty,* to define our own experience, of life and of poetry. This is another statement made by the poem. Can it do all that, in five words? Of course it can - it's short, but great.

Finally, there is the *really slow,* linguistic meditative reading of the poem, each word to be meditated on in great detail, going as deep as possible: first, the word “life.” Think about *life.* Not just your life, but all of life. In the universe. In a single cell. At the atomic level. Also at the universal level. Life.

Now add “is.” Life *is.* Was it many years ago, as an adolescent that you looked up at the sky or into the eyes of another, and *marveled* at the very fact that *life is?* Are you constantly aware of the miracle of existence? That something is?

Next, add in “short,” with a comma. Life / is short,/. The reality of death enters. The opposite of life, that also gives life its meaning. The big yin- yang principle. The source *of all tragedy.*

Life / is short, / *but -* hope enters. There is more - it isn't *just* short. There's a “but.”

Life / is short, / but *great.* The poet asserts positive meaning. But what's his proof, for making such a grandiose statement, and couching it in so simple a form? What's his *evidence,* that life is *great?* The answer is - this poem. I am taking a stand for positivity and good humor.

Unlike 99.9% of my poems, this poem uses words that are abstractions, and contains no imagery. It's a reduction and compaction of a philosophy, and its poetics come from that. A poem can lack imagery, as long as it is itself an image.

I also feel that there is a level of ironic humor in it. I’m trying to be obvious.

Technically, the poem uses single syllables to give the short lines taut, decisive stops needed to support the content. The final three words, plus the comma and the period, phonetically symbolizethe meaning of the poem, “short,/but great.”

Or not. It depends on the reader, as all poems ultimately do. As life depends upon the living, and quality of life depends on love.

The Poet Laureate - A Small Press Perspective

Donald Hall is the new Poet Laureate of the United States. Will Hall do anything for the small press?

I knew Donald Hall back in the Golden Age of the 1970's. He lived in Michigan, then, at Ann Arbor. He taught at the University of Michigan. I visited him on several occasions, and we also had a prolific correspondence. He once wrote me a 28 page letter about poetry.

We talked about poetry and poets during our visits, and we found a specific point upon which we completely disagreed. Much of our dialogue during those years consisted of a running argument over the place of spontaneity in poetry and the related issue of tradition.

Whenever we both attended a reading or a conferences, we always sat together and we hung out after hours too. On a couple of occasions we drove around Ann Arbor on errands, and didn’t talk poetry at all. I liked him and felt true affection for him, but we never agreed very much on poetry, the art we both love.

Twenty+ years my senior, Don was patient and always kind. He was already a well-known poet, easily the most famous in Michigan at that time. He’d gone to Harvard, edited anthologies and was one of the founders of *The Paris Review*, and later *The American Poetry Review.* (He had a big poster of the first *Paris Review* cover in his dining room.) I was a 22-year old upstart, a small press renegade and a bearded, long-haired type.

Don usually made us lunch. (He loves to cook and makes a great soup. Another one of his favorites was fried green tomato sandwiches.) His house was warm and woody, and filled with plants and books. He had cats. He had a demeanor that ranged from jolly to dead serious. He had a bear-like quality, from Teddy to grizzly. He had a thick, brown beard and a full head of hair that he often wore in a short curly Afro. He hung with the hip young literati on the Ann Arbor scene, but he didn’t share their values.

Hall is a traditionalist. He harkens back to the values of an earlier generation, and he does not think these values are narrow-minded. He spent his summers as a child with his grandparents at their small farm in New Hampshire. When the opportunity arose for Hall to inherit his grandfather’s farm, he jumped at it. He was extremely excited - it had been a lifelong dream since he was a teenager to live there and write. It was the scene of his happiest childhood memories. When he moved from Michigan in 1975, it was the beginning of the end of our relationship. We continued to correspond for a while, but then I went into the social work field and ceased all literary communications. (It was insensitive of me, because several of my literary friends/ correspondents were people I liked very much as persons more than as poets - but I was young and threw myself into the social work lifestyle without looking back.)

Hall is so old-fashioned that he doesn’t have a computer. He’d prefer to hibernate like a bear, but must leave his rural cave to support his new books periodically. His new duties as Poet Laureate will pull him out of there more often, but I don’t think he’ll like that aspect of it much. Without a computer, a large segment/development of the current literary scene is invisible to him. Knowing him, I’m sure he prefers print anyway. He loves old things and growls suspiciously at new trends and developments. As poetry has expanded into a performance art and large circulation e-zines have been established on the world-wide web, it has gone beyond his traditional literary world.

He told me a story of how, in the early 70's, he edited a National Book Award winning collection and discovered that William Stafford was a poor judge of his own work. The poems Stafford thought to be his best were sent first, and Don only used a few of them. Out of the “next-best” group, Don took the majority of the book. He took an equal number of poems from the “worst” group as he had from the “best” group. The book was a resounding critical success.

He used this and other stories to convince me that poets *in general* were poor judges of their own work. I didn’t buy it then, and still don’t, and neither would most of my small press colleagues. Hall has a basic values clash with the small press. He equates it to vanity publishing. Whitman, Thoreau and Twain, among many others, thought otherwise. There’s an element of vanity in *all* creative writing, in the very *act* of creative writing. A strong belief in the value of one’s own work is not inherently dishonest or self-indulgent. Surely all great artists believe(d) strongly in their work.

None of this bodes well for the small press. At the heart of the matter we are not more vain nor are we more self-indulgent than the privileged poets and writers of the upper class, but we do *appear* to be because we lack their vast material resources and connections. The Old Boy Network has a strangle-hold on the big commercial publishers and thus on the perception of the general public as to who are the best poets. Quality is relative and largely subjective. Ironically, upper crust poets seldom stand the test of time. The poets whose work has survived have generally been the innovators who stood outside the academy and expanded the boundaries of the Art, often in poverty.

No one loves poetry more than Donald Hall. The problem, if there is one, is that he has very firm, deep-seated beliefs about the poetic process and about tradition and continuity that are conservative and even reactionary, and I don’t think he can help it. His own process is a slow, painstaking one, with a great deal of revision, and he doesn’t *believe* that quality poetry can be produced any other way. An uneducated poet is a folk artist to him, not in ‘the top echelon.’

Is he Establishment? He is. While he is not a political conservative, he is a poetical conservative. Snobbism is relative too.

A famous story/rumor went around for years about a titanic clash between Allen Ginsberg and Donald Hall early in their careers. The story went that Donald had publicly criticized ‘the spontaneous bop prosody’ of the Beats and Ginsberg’s *Howl* in particular. Ginsberg’s public retort, ina widely read newspaper, was that “Donald Hall wouldn’t know a poem if it buggered him in public.”

By the time I met Hall, they’d reconciled, but the reconciliation was basically on a political level. Don never did agree with spontaneous composition. Don was personally friendly to Ted Berrigan, too, although their methods couldn’t have been more different. Ted and Alice Notley stayed with Hall whenever they were in Ann Arbor.

Hall has a paradoxical nature. He loves casual visits, animals, nature. He’s a country gentleman at heart. But, the deep reticence and conservatism of New England runs strong in him. He does *approach* the irrational, but he does it with great caution. (This is actually a theme in his work.) One of his great correspondents and friends is Robert Bly, and I’m certain that they’ve influenced each other’s thoughts over the years. (I can see Hall’s influence on Bly at this point, in Bly’s increasing formalism.)

Hall believes in poetic tradition. He speaks glowingly of his encounters with modern masters like Pound and Eliot. Perhaps these values were beaten into his head at Harvard. I went to a State college. I’ll never know. *My* visits were with Don Hall.

The question on the small press literary scene is whether Don Hall, as the new Poet Laureate, will do anything for the small press. My guess is that he will not. Our *values* are different. Spontaneity is greatly valued by small press editors, writers and poets, as a general rule, formalists notwithstanding. We have a tradition too, but our major poets were and still are of the wild kind. We are firmly in the Whitmanic tradition, as advanced by Ginsberg and Bukowski. We are street poets, or surrealists, or even anti-poets. We can be experimental, or conceptual. *We* are *non-commercial*. *We are non-traditional.*

The problem is that poetry needs us. Radical methods I used thirty years ago are being taught as standard strategies and processes to MFA students today, authentic content notwithstanding.

Does the literary establishment care? It seems unlikely. The commercial publishers continue to recycle the same old thing, forever in the shadow of the moderns. I see a tendency in the small press, too, toward traditionalism. It’s a *different* tradition, but dogma is dogma in anyone’s terms.

The difference is largely due to social class stratification. Let’s face this truth once and for all. The major established poets, published by the few remaining large publishers, mostly went to ivy league colleges and universities. Harvard and Columbia alone account for a majority of them. Out West, we don’t have gentlemen farmers - we’ve got cowboys and Indians! In the Upper Midwest, we tend to grow our poets wild. They have grey beards and tend to be outdoor types, and that’s just the women! We’re all products of our environments to varying degrees. Sociologists call it *class stratification*.

We *should* agree that there are many different kinds of poetic impulses, spaces and processes. *Vive la difference*! We *need* to respect this diversity for the good of poetry. Poetry is too big, or *should* be, to be limited to only one kind of poem, one kind of tradition, one kind of aesthetic, one kind of process, one kind of authority.

Whether the post of Poet Laureate *matters* is really up to Donald Hall at this time.  *Good luck with it, old bear*. *It’s almost spring. Time to wake from hibernation.*

Nostalgic Notes From A Golden Age

This short memoir is about how a young Midwestern college jumped into the national literary pool, as I remember it. I should begin with a brief personal back story for context: I enrolled in the ten year old Grand Valley State College in 1970. By that time I had already published three poetry chapbooks, a full length hardcover collection and my poems were being published in a few national literary magazines such as *Essence* (New Haven, CT), *Bitterroot* (New York, NY) and *The Cape Rock Journal* (Cape Girardeau, MO). I entered GVSC as a junior, having completed the first two years at Grand Rapids Junior College, where I’d produced an independent literary magazine I had named *Metamorphosis,* through four issues. I was a poetry activist. I had crafted my first little booklet of poems when I was twelve years old, in an edition of four copies.

I had declared myself an English major as soon as I entered GVSC. I was a literary fanatic. Consequently, I used all of my electives for more English courses, in addition to the ones required for my major. It was *fun* to me. I ended up with three times the required credits for a major. Naturally, I quickly became known in the English Department.

The Creative Writing teacher then was Ron Dwelle, a bright, creative, humorous man who had published humorous fiction in a few magazines. He introduced me to William Oldenburg, an associate professor of English who wrote spirited, often tongue-in-cheek poetry in the neo-classical mode of X.J. Kennedy. Bill too, had published some poems in national magazines.

The other English majors elected me to be the student representative to the English Dept. I was also elected as President of the campus English Club. I attended meetings with the English Dept. and chaired the meetings of the English Club. There was a lot of enthusiasm for creative writing among the students. In retrospect, the early seventies are now seen by many as a Golden Age of American poetry. The various post-modern movements, spearheaded by the Beats, the New York School, and the Deep Imagists, were in full swing. Poetry readings were becoming popular. I had already organized a series of readings between the Grand Rapids area colleges (Calvin, GVSC, Aquinas and GRJC) and it had led to a local anthology, *Best Of Four*, edited by Walter Lockwood. A thousand copies of *Best Of Four* sold locally. The book was also reviewed in *The Grand Rapids Press*.

The final piece of the puzzle came from Arend Lubbers. He took an active, personal interest in my poetry. When I sent him a copy of my first book (*Sand & Other Poems*, 1970), he called me in for a meeting. I found him to be personable, paternal and brilliant. He was a sincere reader of poetry. He said it relaxed and stimulated him at the same time. I started meeting with him regularly. Don Lubbers, while he was busy *building a university*, often took time off to be available to students. His leadership was one of Grand Valley’s greatest assets.

We talked about the poems in my book, and what interested me. I said I thought Grand Valley needed a literary magazine. Don said he’d support it, and sent me to see Glenn Niemeyer, who was Dean of the College of Arts & Sciences. Then, Dean Niemeyer agreed to ask Bill Oldenburg and Ron Dwelle to be the faculty advisors for the magazine. We could have it printed at the college printing plant. We could print five hundred copies, to be sold at 25¢ a copy.

Since I was already spending so much time in the English department office, Chairwoman Laura Wasserman decided I should have an office of my own, to support my three related roles. The magazine needed space for layouts and a file cabinet for submissions. An area of the office was blocked off with file cabinets and the magazine had a home.

Now the new magazine needed a good name. I compiled long lists of suggestions, but nothing felt right. They were undoubtedly excellent suggestions, but not to a twenty-two year old fanatic. Finally, I went to the dictionary. Then, before I got through A, there it was: a mythical flower that never dies: the Amaranth. *That’s what a poem is*, I thought. And it had a great sound too, with four assonant syllables: *Amaranthus*.

Initially, I did what I’d done when I started my previous two magazines: I sought out as many human resources I could find. There were many talented people to choose from at Grand Valley. Merry Zarafonetis handled sales and distribution. Don Nickles, Ronnie Lane, Winton Riffe, Herbert Woodward Martin and Katherine Graham served successively as my associate editors. Art editor Jan Andrews was recruited from the Art Department. I also sought out Bob Hart, the one-man Graphic Art Department. Bob’s keen sense of design was a huge asset to Grand Valley in its first two decades. He gave the college catalogs and other publications a sophisticated, hip look that I am certain attracted numerous students and teachers to GVSC. Bob was a fireball of energy, and a great guy. He was a red-haired, bearded gnome with a quirky sense of humor. I liked him so much that I started hanging around with him in his dungeon in the basement of Lake Huron Hall.

Bob Hart and I discussed his notion that *Amaranthus* should have an iconic trademark that would appear in every issue, to give it style and also a sense of continuity. I asked him to come up with some ideas, and he drew the long-haired female viper with sunglasses that appears on or in the first five issues. We eventually gave her up when we stopped printing artwork and photography, but the image gave a certain coherence to the first five issues.

The first five issues contained fiction, poetry, art and photography exclusively from Grand Valley students and faculty. Then, a major event occurred between issues Number Five and Number Six that catapulted *Amaranthus* and Grand Valley onto the national poetry scene.

In addition to a regular budget for the literary magazine, President Lubbers and Dean Niemeyer, along with the people at Thomas Jefferson College, had made sure that money was available for bringing in poets of national prominence for readings. These readings were very popular. Hundreds of people would gather to hear poets read from their works. Although it’s difficult to imagine today, the general public was actually interested in poetry in the early seventies.

We had readings from Allen Ginsberg, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Diane DiPrima, James Den Boer, Nikki Giovanni, Ted Enslin, Charles Reznikoff, and many others, sponsored by the English Club and the English Dept. We also went to regular readings at Calvin and Aquinas. Robert Swets, Hugh Van Tol, and David Den Boer were three of the prominent poets at Calvin. Aquinas had the innovative Black poet Herbert Woodward Martin as poet-in-residence. He and I became close. David Cope was another local poet who became a friend. (He currently teaches at GRCC, where we first met. He is a Pushcart Prize winner. Allen Ginsberg wrote the introduction to his first book.) Allen Ginsberg visited Grand Valley regularly during those days, with Peter Orlovsky, his partner. Ginsberg would sing and play on his little harmonium, and chant ‘Om.’.

Etheridge Knight, who later won a National Book Award, was a personal friend of Ronnie Lanes. They had bonded as roommates at a conference on Black Poetry. After Knight’s reading at the Louis Armstrong Theater, Etheridge spent the evening in conversation with Ronnie and me. We published four of his best poems in *Amaranthus*.

There was even a popular song (*Poetry Man* by Phoebe Snow) that made the top ten. It was a heady time. Into this atmosphere, the First National Poetry Festival was hosted at GVSC. It was a hugely significant national event. Major poets from across the country participated, including Robert Bly, Gregory Corso, Diane Wakoski, Jerome Rothenburg, Al Young, John Logan, Phillip Whalen, Clayton Eshleman, Robert Kelly, Sonia Sanchez, Ted Berrigan, Jackson MacLow, James Wright, David Henderson, Armand Schwerner, George Quaska, Anselm Hollo, Joel Oppenheimer, Robert Creeley, Paul Blackburn, and many others. I received a fellowship from the College of Arts & Sciences to participate. There were a total of just under two hundred participants, all poets.

I had workshops with Robert Bly and Ted Berrigan during the week of the festival, and attended numerous readings by the great and near-great. I became keenly aware of the national scene and the various poetic movements of the time. Robert Bly was the influential leader of the Deep Image School, and Ted Berrigan was the main instigator of the second generation New York school, which had been seeded initially by John Ashbery, Frank O’Hara and Kenneth Koch.

Both Bly and Berrigan were deeply involved in small press publishing. Bly edited and published *The Seventies*, which was a vehicle for his poetics and for the Deep Image School that included James Wright and Galway Kinnel. He’d changed the name of his magazine twice. It had been *The Fifties* in its first decade, *The Sixties* in its second. He also published some books, such as *Twenty Poems of Transtromer* translated by Bly, and *Neruda and Vallejo: Selected Poems*, translated by James Wright.

Bly’s strategy was to stay at home on his farm in Minnesota near where he grew up. He stayed involved by doing readings all over the country and through his magazine. Ironically, he became one of the most influential poets in the country by staying home. He had received the National Book Award for *The Light Around The Body* in 1968.

Ted Berrigan addressed small press issues directly in his workshops. He was the editor of “C” magazine, based in New York’s East Village. He had self-published his first and most famous work, *The Sonnets*. The book was so well received that Grove Press picked it up for a large re-printing. It’s been continuously in print since 1964 and is considered one of the most important, influential post-modern, deconstructive works of the last half-century.

I will always remember Berrigan’s reading at Grand Valley. He read extensively from *The Sonnets*, to an audience of true peers. The auditorium was electrified by his charismatic delivery. I saw a tear roll down Robert Creeley’s face when Berrigan read his poem *People Who Died*. I sat nearby. Anselm Hollo grinned manically when Ted read *Words For Love*, his greatest lyric poem.

Ted advised the ten people in our workshop to self-publish. He felt strongly that self-publishing was a valuable part of the true poetic process. He was very persuasive. Although I had been pretty heavily involved with small local presses already, Ted opened my perspective to a national level and also affirmed ideas I had. We were on the right course!

*You didn’t have to go begging to big book publishers. You could do it yourself, and here was someone who had done it successfully.* Ted Berrigan didn’t make much money with his publishing, but it advanced his literary goals enormously. That was the real priority.

There were poetry readings at Fountain St. Church, The Grand Rapids (Ryerson) Public Library, all the Kent County branch libraries, at the Urban Institute for Contemporary Art (which also started during the early 70s), at local high schools and at Calvin College, Aquinas College, GRJC, GVSC, Western Michigan University, Michigan State, U. of M., Ferris State University and Central Michigan University. I remember reading at all of them and attending more.

And then there were the private gatherings. Small groups would meet in one another’s homes or offices, or in local watering holes, to discuss poetry and engage in literary gossip. I remember some of the most significant discussions even now, forty years later.

My own small studio apartment saw visits from Charles Reznikoff, Herb Martin, Duane Locke, Ben Tibbs and many others. There was an ongoing poetic dialogue. In the English Dept. office, we had Limerick Wars. One person would hang the first limerick up on the door, and it would go from there. Sometimes we would string one hundred limericks together in a big, spontaneous group collaboration. Indeed, many of us engaged in poetic collaboration back then. Maybe that’s why I still do.

*The Grand Rapids Press* jumped on the band wagon, and asked me to review poetry books for the Sunday edition. These were lengthy reviews. It was unheard of before that for a general Midwestern newspaper to regularly review poetry books. Only an elite few such as *The New York Times*, published occasional reviews of poetry. But, the *GR Press* made a commitment, and stuck to it. The Book Editor, Wes Weitsma, became another close friend. During the early seventies I wrote reviews of poetry collections by Robert Vas Dias, D.E. Stewart, Clayton Eshleman, Jerome Rothenberg, Diane Wakoski, D.M. Thomas, Terry Allen, Charles Bukowski, Sarah Appleton, Richard Lattimore, Tom Raworth, R.D. Reeve, Carl Thayler, Dan Gerber, Rebecca Newth, Michael Heller, Keith Wilson, Nancy Cardozo, Robert Creeley, Nikki Giovanni, Tom Clark and Joe Brainard. This brought the general public in, in a major way. The *Sunday Press* had a statewide circulation of over 300,000 copies. Wes Weitsma even did a piece for *Amaranthus*, a review of a novel by Alan Sillitoe

Small literary presses were popping up all over the country in the seventies. Locally, David Cope published a magazine, *Big Scream*, which is still going today. The name came from one of my short poems. (*Butterfly*) Cor Barendrecht and Bill Oldenburg formed a partnership to publish *For The Time Being*, a quarterly literary tabloid. Hugh Fox, a professor of modern languages at MSU, edited *Ghost Dance - A Journal of Experimental Writing*. Al Drake, also in the English Dept. at MSU, edited *Happiness Holding Tank*. John Knapp, a chemistry professor at WMU, edited the *Westigan Review.* Ben Tibbs, a poet from Kalamazoo, published under the Stove Pipe Press imprint. Friends Dan Gerber and Jim Harrison ran *Sumac* magazine and press.

Ronnie Lane and I started Pilot Press Books. It was a two-man operation, like *Metamorphosis*. Ronnie learned to run a printing press and I handled editorial duties. We published many of the best poets of the day, with books by John Woods, Thomas Fitzsimmons, Albert Drake, Jeffrey Woodward, Herbert Woodward Martin, Kirby Congdon, Barbara Robbins, Ben Tibbs, Richard Jansma, Winton Riffe, Bill Oldenburg, Joseph Payne Brennan, and, of course, ourselves.

We created Pilot Press Books to champion the cause of eclecticism. We purposefully designed our list to be representative of widely diverse poetics. We purposely sought out books by minorities. Black, feminist and gay poets were published alongside traditional academics, experimentalists and other poetries from the cutting edge.

Eclecticism is vital to a healthy poetry scene. Poetry should be the epitome of free speech. Poetry has enormous value as a vehicle for the expansion of human consciousness. To appreciate a wide variety of expressions is to open up ones heart and mind to *relate* to the hearts and minds of others.

After this massive infusion of contemporary poetry, the sixth issue of *Amaranthus* reflected its influence. One of my own pieces in Number Six was an experimental sonnet sequence dedicated to Ted Berrigan. Number Six was perfect bound, sixty-eight pages. Nearly twice the length of Number One. We began to review prominent poets. Number Six also has my review of *The Yellow Room* by future Poet Laureate of the United States Donald Hall. Later, Hall and I became friends, initiated when he wrote to me about the review. I learned that he and Robert Bly were close friends who had attended Harvard together. They corresponded with each other *daily*. Don taught at U. of M. at that time. I spent many long days arguing about poetry with him at his house in Ann Arbor. He usually made us homemade soup or fried green tomato sandwiches. He’s a good cook. Sometimes we drove around Ann Arbor doing Don’s chores and arguing.

In the last issue of *Amaranthus* that I edited (Number Seven), the transition to a national focus was complete. The issue contained mainly works from prominent, non-Grand Valley writers, although several Grand Valley writers were also included. What had started life out as a humble, stapled, typewritten production of only thirty-six pages had become a perfect-bound, typeset literary journal of one hundred twelve pages. The issue contained work by Donald Hall, Diane Wakoski, future National Book Award recipient Etheridge Knight, Dan Gerber, Thomas Fitzsimmons, Herbert Woodward Martin, future Pushcart Prize winner Christine Zawadiwsky, Kirby Congdon and many others. The title page bore the proud subtitle: *National Literary Magazine*.

Then came the Michigan anthologies. The first one was *10 Michigan Poets* (1972). The book collected sizeable contributions from each poet. We sold five thousand copies. Nearly every library in the Midwest bought a copy. It sold for $3.50. Today, a copy is worth upwards of $200. The poets included were Ronnie Lane, Herbert Woodward Martin, Bill Oldenburg, Barbara Robbins, Albert Drake, Barbara Drake, John Knapp, Joseph Dionne, Cor Barendrecht and myself. Half of the contributors were from GVSC. I served as the editor. This book was very influential, and spawned several other Michigan anthologies that were admittedly more inclusive, but must necessarily feature fewer poems per poet.

The first of these was *Michigan Hot Apples* (1973), ably edited by Gay Rubin, of Bloomfield Hills, Michigan. It included nearly all the poets in *10 Michigan Poets* plus works by poets Hugh Fox, Thomas Fitzsimmons, Conrad Hilberry, Joyce Carol Oates, Ben Tibbs, Stella Crews, James Tipton, John Woods, Donald Hall, Faye Kicknosway, Robert Swets, Stephen Leggett and several others. Hugh Fox and Albert Drake edited one called *Michigan Signatures* (1973). The usual suspects were included. The cover was decorated with poets’ actual signatures. These also sold well around the State.

Next, Ronnie Lane and I decided to do an anthology that featured Michigan’s rich Black poetry heritage. (Dudley Randall’s Broadside Press located in Detroit was at the epicenter of the Black poetry movement. His star was Don L. Lee.) We obtained a grant for the project from John Hunting of the Dyer-Ives Foundation. (They also sponsored the annual Kent County Poetry Contest.)

The resulting anthology was entitled *Face The Whirlwind - 10 Black Michigan Poets*. It included generous selections by Robert Hayden, Naomi Long Madgett, Dudley Randall, Stella Crews, Herbert Woodward Martin, James Randall, Jon Randall, Richard Thomas, June Whaley and Jill Witherspoon. It was edited by Ronnie Lane. One of my large oil paintings was used for the cover art. We published it in hardcover. It sold a thousand copies.

Later, the English Dept. at WMU did a major Michigan anthology entitled *The Third Coast*. The book was so successful that they transformed it into a periodical that still publishes today.

Eventually, the energies culminated in a large week-long conference at Ferris State University on The Michigan Poet. I was one featured poet at the conference, along with Donald Hall, Judith Minty, Gregory Orr, Ben Tibbs, Conrad Hilberry, Radcliffe Squires, Ronnie Lane and others.

The relationships I began at the First National Poetry Festival allowed me to solicit work from a high caliber of poets. *Amaranthus* had maturated. During my editorship, *Amaranthus* published two hundred thirty-one poems in seven issues, plus a considerable number of essays, reviews and short stories. The expansion of the magazine mirrored the larger movement of Grand Valley toward university status, because a university is less insular than a college, involved in an exchange and dialogue with the community at large.

I learned that one must indeed think globally and act locally. The literary scene at Grand Valley, then as now, was an intergral part of the larger State and National scene. During tough economic times such as these, it becomes crucially important that human voices be heard.

About a year after the festival, Paul Blackburn died of cancer. Bill Oldenburg also died, in a car accident. He was thirty-six. I had published his only collection of poems. Berrigan is gone now too. He died in 1986. He was only forty-eight. Creeley, gone. Whalen, gone. Corso, gone. Ginsberg, gone. Donald Hall moved to New Hampshire and became Poet Laureate of the United States in 2006. Don Lubbers and I still exchange books and correspond.

As for me, I publish more now than ever, in eclectic magazines like *The New York Quarterly, Edgz, The California Quarterly, Bogg* and *The South Carolina Review*. My poems have been translated into quite a few foreign languages, including Serbo-Croatian, Thai, Italian and recently Japanese. The National Library of Australia maintains a collection of all my books, as do many poetry collections in American Universities such as Brown, SUNY at Buffalo and the University of Wisconsin. My poetry website gets a lot of hits from Russia and Greece. One of my books from the early seventies sold in London for $670.oo (A mint copy of *Iron Rose*.) Another (*For The Living Dead*) won the British *Purple Patch Award* for a Best Individual Collection of 2009. I am, at this writing, under nomination for the seventh time for a Pushcart Prize. My experiences at Grand Valley gave me a foundation for all of it.

Years later, I was quite gratified to learn that *Amaranthus* didn’t die when I graduated. It couldn’t, after all. It was resurrected a few semesters later and survives today, forty years later, as the sophisticated *Grand Valley Review*.

Poems have a life of their own. Once they’re released into the world, they no longer belong to the poet. Probably they never did. They live on, like the mythical Amaranth.

Toward A New Eclecticism

**1. Literary Social Stratification**

The major problem we face in American poetry today is narrow-minded intolerance of the various forms taken by poetry itself. The obvious division along social class battle lines is a symptom of elitism and mutual intolerance, rather than it being based in legitimate, fundamental, aesthetic differences.In the fifties, in the wake of sudden public awareness of Beat poetry, William Empson correctly recognized that the big cultural schism in poetry would be best described as the Palefaces versus the Redskins. The gulf has intensified along class and occupational lines.

It is clear that American poetry is stratified by social class. Anyone who doesn’t recognize this basic reality has a lot of catching up to do. For example, MFA programs generate the most reliable financial resource to *Poets & Writers* magazine. University publishers largely restrict their authors to those with MFA degrees. The major difference between the two main factions is not educational, but occupational. (Lyn Lifshin completed a Ph.D. program.) It’s the English teachers versus everyone else. Many of the poets and publishers of the independent small press have advanced degrees too, but they don’t work in *the system* that distributes poetry to general readers.

Small press defectors from academia, like Hugh Fox or Duane Locke, were largely shunned by their academic colleagues. So-called ‘small press purists,’ on ‘our side,’ often shunned them because of their Ph.D.’s, in a blatant example of ‘reverse classism.’ One of my teachers, Ted Berrigan, sent his M.A. degree in Literature back to the University of Tulsa, believing that he’d lose street credibility if he kept it.

Each side perceives the other as a cancerous growth on the body poetic. The circle is a closed one, if you are a poet of vernacular language of less than upper middle-class origin. If you also happen to be Black, undereducated, experimental, or a number of other ‘categories,’ you will most likely be relegated to a small niche of similarly cataloged people, and to a limited niche readership.

Over the past few years, I have received many literary magazines, both academic and independent. It is clear that there are two major factions. Each “class” has its major stars, publishers and readership. If you publish in the independent small press, your poetry will not be available to the reading public through book stores, because when distribution developed for university publishers and for the other larger, well-established independent presses, nothing changed for the genuine small presses. Ironically, many small Indy presses publish more books per year than the average university press. The university press has distribution because it shares the financial stability of a university and the budget that supports it. They get an official seal of approval.

Private small presses are reluctant to contract with distributors who want exclusivity. Exclusivity denies the small press the right to sell books directly to the public and to collectors, one of its best sources of income. The presses, the poets who publish with them and the general reading public are all negatively affected by the present system of distribution. On the bright side, the internet is leveling the playing field, by-passing the book stores.

This situation has led to the isolation of pure poets who are unaffiliated with a university, and do not teach for a living. A pure poet is defined as one who writes by calling rather than as a career. Even within academia, there is a big difference between a teacher-poet and a poet-teacher.

The isolated, independent group, historically, has contributed the great poetry of any given period. Only a tiny percentage of seminal poets have been teachers. This theses is historically accurate and valid to the same degree of deviation as a Harvard medical study. (Oops. There I go again.)

The original Beats have been canonized and thoroughly anthologized. Perhaps because of their popularity, the academy had to recognize them. But their *poetic values* were never accepted, nor were they ever published by commercial presses. The next generation of common speech and experience poets has remained invisible to the same general public that eventually embraced the poetry of the Beats, even though they have expanded the scope of poetry as an art significantly in the past fifty years. The commercial system is unresponsive to contemporary poets who have worked in the most popular vein started by Whitman, recapitulated by Ginsberg, inherited by Bukowski. Now we’ve only got a half a century to catch up with.

But the real invisibles may turn out to be the teacher-poets, called poets during their lifetimes but mediocre, uninfluential and easily forgotten in the long haul. Historically, seminal poets have felt a calling to poetry and a dedication to it as a primary or dominant activity.

Readers who rely on book stores to keep up with the cutting edge of contemporary poetry are unable to access the full range of it. They are given the false impression of contemporary poetry that it doesn’t relate to common experience. Linguistic anecdotes written in code, accessible only to the initiated caste, is only one kind of poetry.

**2. Suppression of Common Experience**

Initially, the defining criteria that divided the Redskins from the Palefaces was the use of common speech. In American poetry, this struggle began with the putative father of American poetry, Walt Whitman. Significantly, Walt Whitman, who was one of the first self-publishers, championed freedom of natural speech in poetry. It is also significant that he is the most internationally popular American poet of all time, followed by Ginsberg. Older cultures haven’t lost all their poetic values, yet. The academic poets of Whitman’s era stubbornly continued to model their work on the language of England, the most class stratified society in Europe.

The American public education system has systematically and thoroughly suppressed most of contemporary poetry. When an elementary or high school teacher refers to contemporary poetry, they usually mean the famous post-modern poetry of a half century ago. For them, the canon *ended* with the Beats.

Allen Ginsberg began as an outsider, but a half century later he is canonized by the system. But they don’t teach him in high school, because he used common language and had radical ideas. The slightly more liberal college teachers include a few of the Beats in their contemporary literature courses. The few remaining Beats are in their eighties now. Some advanced English teachers only go back twenty-five or thirty years. They are the educational avant-garde.

After Ginsberg, Charles Bukowski emerged. Like Ginsberg, he published exclusively in the small press. City Lights had achieved commercial-level sales for Ginsberg, and Black Sparrow did the same for Bukowski. Bukowski’s sales were phenomenal even though his role was always the quintessential outsider. Following this strong historical pattern, the next great popular poet should have emerged in the seventies, a baby boomer active in the small press. He or she may well have done so, but it was unknown to the masses, because that poet would have emerged in the underground press. Ginsberg had Lawrence Ferlinghetti and City Lights. Bukowski had John Martin and Black Sparrow. Who will be there for the next poet who speaks the language of the people?

The institutional time-gap isn’t the only layer of repression. Another layer is the selection of poets to be included in the canon for a given period. For that, English teachers turn to the ‘Best of’ anthologies or other big commercially published anthologies that represent English-teacher-poets. The academic poets are usually blamed for incest and nepotism but blame should go to the roots of the system. The vicious circle can only be broken when the teachers have *access* to alternative literature. Right now, they really don’t have much choice, do they?

Could the unpopularity of poetry with the general reading public be related to the problem that common speech and experience are not reflected in the poetry that is *available* to them? More people do read poetry than ever, but the *percentage* of the population that reads it has continued to decrease. Why?

**3. Pride & Prejudice**

We believe that the great responsibility for this deplorable situation falls squarely on the poetry snobs, territorial reactionaries who protect their turf. In false pride, we all recognize who they are. Or do we? A poet who only reads outlaw poetry may be a poetry snob. (He may also tend toward competitive, misogynistic, macho, anti-intellectual hostility.) A ‘New Formalist’ may be a poetry snob. (He may want to escape the emptiness of his content.) The too often repeated “No tanka or haiku, no nature poems, no L\*A\*N\*G\*U\*A\*G\*E poems, no, no, no!” smacks of snobbism. Some even declare openly that they are not interested in *anything new*. I say they really don’t like poetry.

I am prejudiced against poetry that rhymes (except used for children or humor), religious poetry, poetry about poetry or poets, poetry that is prose (but not prose poetry), rhetorical political poetry. I have been mostly closed to the possibilities and positive energies of these diverse types of poetry. What have I missed?

These are some of my own prejudices, my personal self-righteous, convergent beliefs. If I have prejudices, I am an elitist. There are many different kinds of poetry snobs. Elitism is usually a defense mechanism used to cover inadequacy. It denies the fundamental truth that *all* poetry can be essentially valuable. The best poetry expresses the universal, and it transcends stylistic concerns and cultural barriers to connect with common human nature and experience. The best poetry integrates and synthesizes seemingly disparate styles into a higher style.

There is a difference between false pride and real pride. False pride never lets you admit you are wrong, thus insuring that no thinking or learning will ever take place. Real pride is the knowledge that you can learn through error and allegiance to the higher calling of always seeking the truth, no matter how uncomfortable.

**4. The Big Picture**

It may be useful to compare poetry as an art to other, sister arts. As a poet who is also a musician, I have often observed that one earmark of a superior musician is a love of all music. Although a superior musician may perform best in a particular genre or modality, he usually *listens* to a wide variety of others. This is why the seminal musicians, like Bob Dylan or The Beatles, absorbed many widely divergent influences and made them their own. Enlightened musicians are never Music-Nazis. Musical pieces vary, from short popular songs to long film scores. Likewise, a musical experience may be presented by a single performer or a major orchestra. All forms are equally legitimate, relative to content. Shouldn’t poetry have the same sanctioned range?

The principle also applies to the visual arts. It is well-known that Pablo Picasso went through distinct color periods as his art evolved. Picasso went from impressionistic to expressionistic, through a cubist period, etc. At an exhibit of his painted pottery, I was surprised at how ironically amusing his designs were. Throughout his career he used a variety of mediums, and his work also showed glimpses of his many and varied influences. Indeed, an artist with a sense of art history understands the opposiitonal values of divergent types of art and incorporates them into his own. Visual art takes many forms, from black ink gesture sketching to multi-colored, multi-media works. If poetry is the highest art, as Plato stated, then why aren’t our poets sanctioned with the same artistic freedom as the presumably lower arts?

Open-mindedness of poets should at least be equivalent to that of musicians and painters. It is imperative for the growth of the poetic art that poets become more tolerant and eclectic readers, *in deed*. For the academic ‘palefaces,’ reading and publishing in the independent small press is essential if they are to avoid homogenization & repression of natural poetic impulses. For the university and other mid-sized publishers that have bookstore distribution, expansion to non-MFA poets would be a wonderful way to serve the public and document and preserve the true width and depth of our current literature. Personally, I am trying now to go beyond my own prejudices, to open up to poetry that comes from other spaces. I am trying to read poetry without expectation, whether the poet has an MFA or has down and dirty street credits or experiments with language. I hope that other small press poets and publishers will do the same.

We (I) need a holistic outlook. We (I) need to be more open to diversity. We (I) need to appreciate the positive energy of the very poetic impulse itself. Poetry is bigger than the vision of any single artist or group. We (I) need to concentrate on what we hold in common, rather than what divides us. If we can achieve a new eclecticism, maybe the great divide can be bridged. Tolerance may lead to greater strength. We have seen the enemy, and it is us.