

Musings of a Bemused Author - Poetry and Process

In this musing I will discuss some aspects of poetry and process, such as ideation, gestation longevity, and the measurements of success (or failure).

When poet Simon Armitage discussed the ideation of his poem *Goalkeeper with a cigarette*, he stated that the idea “had been brought by the stork some six or seven months earlier in the shape of a newspaper article or letter” (Armitage, 1996, p.95). Although Armitage states that he was “struck immediately by the possibilities” (Armitage, 1996, p.95), he suggested that his gestation period from ideation, through writing and on to production, was an elongated one. This poem took over a year for Armitage to craft. That is not to say, he grafted solidly on a single poem, but rather, he went back and forth over time. When English poet Philip Larkin was asked about the year 1984 in which he only produced three poems, he stated that he “did write slowly, partly because you’re finding out what to say as well as how to say it, and that takes time” (Larkin, 2007b, p.236). Although the year in question for him was unusually less productive in numbers compared to other years, he maintained that the speed of production is relevant to the level of diligence in the crafting process.

As we have seen through the eyes of Armitage and Larkin above, each poet appears to have their own drive and associated timeline for production of poetry. However, this gestation process is not true of every poet. As we can see, there are some who require that level of time to ensure the poem in question reaches crafting maturity before release and subjection to measurements of worth. In terms of ‘when’ poets put pen to paper, for some poets, this can be an ethereal process; Poet Vicki Feaver describes it as involving “the end of a kind of innocence. It is about being

critical, separate. Experience is no longer experience. It becomes material” (Feaver, 1996, p.139).

In terms of whether a poem is successful, I argue that this is the most subjective of all aspects of poetry development processes. One of the key reasons for this subjective nature is because of the measurement criteria. For example, is the benchmark for success the number of purchases or readings of a poem? Is it the number of articles being written about the poem? Is it the number of readers who understand the poets' implied meaning? Or, if the poet wished for the poem in question to be presented in vague, mysterious or multi-faceted aspects, is the measurement the number of interpretations it elicits? Does the poet have a defined number of people they would want to like rather than hate the poem? The American poet, Ben Lerner, states that “There are varieties of interpenetrating demands subsumed under the word ‘poetry’ – to defeat time, to still it beautifully; to express irreducible individuality [...] to achieve universality by being irreducibly social [...] to propound a measure of value beyond money” (Lerner, 2015). Lerner argues that the measurements and demands on poetry lead many to hate the form. I Argue that *hate* is too strong a term, but rather readers will either like or dislike a poem based on simpler measurements of whether the poem speaks to them in their time of need.

Vicki Feaver attempts to provide a simpler view, as she doesn’t “think all poems work. But they matter. They don’t just cover the paper. They have a passion in their delivery” (Feaver, 1996, p.140). Feaver’s measurement of *matter* is problematic. It is yet another unquantifiable or arbitrary measurement which will differ from poet to poet and reader to reader. However, if we approach this measurement based on the ‘time of need’ I alluded to earlier, a reader in a time of great emotional

turmoil may indeed find a poem more likeable if it provides a level of solace or joy to match.

In summary, the process of poetry production and consumption differs from person to person. The acceptance of poetry as an art form and/or as a consumable published article appears to not only mirror the production process in terms of differential, but is further complicated by consumers (readers) times of need and emotional states. Each of these differences leads to a final and insurmountable conundrum in that, poetry and the processes surrounding them will forever be impossible to pin down to a single agreed upon view.

737 Words (excluding title, footnotes and bibliography).

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