Judges Notes for All Entrants

The enigmatic modernist Ezra Pound repeatedly warned young poets not to pay too much attention to critics, so my advice to you would have to be tempered by recalling his warning. Believe in what you do! So have a think about my comments below (and those of two really good poets) but when all is said and done follow your own directions and desires.

One other important admission: taste is a powerful determinant in our reaction to anything, especially the arts. If someone else were judging this competition we would probably agree on the membership of the most convincing group, but we may strongly disagree on the winning entries. It might be cold comfort for you but if you didn’t win you can take heart in the notion that were someone else judging you might have done.

This year the quality of the poetry submitted is excellent, impressive, varied both in form and content and from time to time quite disarming. I can say without hesitation that every poem submitted—without exception—is was worth reading. This is a credit to the thoughtful effort made by all. There is not a single entry that gives the impression that the writer does not care deeply about the subject matter at hand. I came away from the judging process not thinking about a collection of entries from school students but as responding to poets with much to offer. Some of you are poets in the making and well on the way. A goodly number of you are poets already. It is encouraging to see that the art of creative writing is well and truly alive and productive.

All that said there are still some ways you could improve what you are doing so I will present advice that will help you to continue to develop the obvious talents you have. To do so I will use the wisdom of two admirable poets who were particularly keen to encourage new writers. The first is from Polish writer Wislaw Szymborska who had a weekly newspaper column responding to questions from new writers (http://www.illinois.gov/poetlaureate/Pages/advice.aspx). The second is from Illinois Poet Laureate, Kevin Stein (http://www.poetryfoundation.org/article/178592).

First Szymborska:

1. Write about the real, know world around you. While imagination of something not experienced can produce a poem, it is unlikely to have the sensual touch of your tactile, visual experiences.
“Rilke warned young poets against large sweeping topics, since those are the most difficult and demand great artistic maturity. He counseled them to write about what they see around them, how they live each day, what’s been lost, what’s been found. He encouraged them to bring the things that surround us into their art, images from dreams, remembered objects.

2. There has to be something approaching longing at the heart of any poem that the reader can sense through the images presented:

“A definition of poetry in one sentence—well. We know at least five hundred definitions, but none of them strikes us as both precise and capacious enough. Each expresses the taste of its own age. Inborn skepticism keeps us from trying our hand at our own. But we remember Carl Sandburg’s lovely aphorism: ‘Poetry is a diary kept by a sea creature who lives on land and wishes he could fly.’ Maybe he’ll actually make it one of these days?”

3. If there is a common problem in many of your poems it would their wordiness. There is a feeling that “I am a poet therefore I have to use lots of clever or esoteric vocabulary.” The best poetry submitted (in my view) understands the power of simple language. Using simple language does not imply superficiality, and complex vocabulary does not necessarily betoken rich implication:

“You’ve managed to squeeze more lofty words into three short poems than most poets manage in a lifetime: ‘Fatherland,’ ‘truth,’ ‘freedom,’ ‘justice’: such words don’t come cheap. Real blood flows in them, which can’t be counterfeited with ink.”

Now Stein

1) Be brave and adventurous in your writing. Don’t be afraid of using your sense of humour, or writing on something that nobody else would consider an appropriate topic for a poem:

“Don't play it safe with your writing. While it's smart to be a safe driver, playing it safe with your writing will ensure that it's dull and predictable. Risk intellectually. Think big thoughts. Risk emotionally. Allow yourself to examine your emotional life. If you don’t surprise yourself, you'll never surprise your reader, as Frost remarked. Imagination loves chaos as much
as it does order. Trust in the redemptive interplay of these opposing but life-giving forces.”

2) Look closely at a poet you admire greatly. Try to copy the style and approach that poet makes, then leave him or her behind and move on by using your own voice. As the Beatles were revolutionizing rock music as composers as well as performers they admitted time and time again that they started with someone else’s model, language or idea—someone they admired a lot:

“As poet Theodore Roethke advised, pay attention to the mode and manner of other poets’ work. Try out these forms in your own poems. In effect, try out these other poets’ voices and see if they fit in your mouth. After a while, you’ll learn how to think and move and write like these other poets. Then, in a process both paradoxical and magical, you’ll move beyond them to find your own voice. But first, try on these others as you would try on a pair of jeans. See what fits, and make it your own.”

In addition to this great advice above, remember that feelings alone, however sincere, will not necessarily produce a memorable poem. An issue or political point however deeply felt will not automatically produce a poem. With feelings or issues you must invite your reader into them through the images you select. Or as W. H. Auden advises: a good poem must SHOW not TELL. As you seek to improve your already obvious talents as wordsmiths keep this in mind.

One last, and important reminder for the improvement of your work: As you edit a poem read it aloud many times. Faulty rhythm or clumsy vocabulary or lumpy syntax will jump out at you. If you simply read internally you will not notice these faults so readily.

I would be more than happy to answer questions or respond more to your individual poem if you would like. Feel free to contact me on gwatt@umac.mo if you would like to do that.

Many thanks for the privilege of reading your work and looking forward to reading more in the years to come.

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Prof. George Watt
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