

# Poetry in the Schools

## contact II

Let's take a look at the poets in the school program. This program has increased with enthusiasm over the past 10 years, and the poets seem to enjoy going into junior and senior high schools, and letting the students get a good look at a real life poet. Even the elementary grades are being treated to the experience. One wonders why poets should enjoy such a special distinction, that they should be so put on display. Why not also send pawnbrokers in the schools, and taxi drivers, and undertakers, and hookers, and loan sharks and lion tamers? What's so special about poets, that they should be looked at?

From the poet's point of view, there are several very subtle dangers inherent in the program. First of all, one must beware of the rape of the innocents. No

matter how awake or aware a high school audience may be, there is no reason to suppose it will be up to the sensibility of a mature artist. And the notion of "exposing" high school students to such a sensibility, for the simple sake of the exposure, seems to be slightly silly and pretentious. One wonders what merit there might be in having Stravinsky or Picasso appear in front of a high school audience, beyond the mere token excitement of the event.

The premise can also have subtle repercussions for the artist. It would be unfortunate if a poet really believed that he ought to be able to share his concerns with a high school audience. One winces at the thought of Wallace Stevens trying to relate the experience of "The Idea of Order at Key West" to a high school

audience.

When Yeats became a public school inspector, he did indeed visit many schoolchildren, but he was careful to see himself simply as

*A Sixty-year-old smiling public man*

and leave it at that, going off in his own mind on one of his incomparable Ledaean fantasies. He did not try to talk to the students about his reasons for being a poet, or what he felt the artist's role in society was all about.

So far as the schools themselves are concerned, I've talked with some regular English teachers who feel the poets in the school programs are casually insulting to them and to their efforts to get the kids

## William Packard

into the world of literature. The implication is that these regular English teachers are shtoonks and are not really pipelined in on the true muse.

But be that as it may. What I want to observe about all this is that for all the interest in bringing real live writers into the classroom, there appears to be a shocking decline in teaching of spelling and composition and grammar—forget the classics—and even the Romance languages are not doing so well these days. The undergraduates I teach at NYU and Wagner are all of them terrific kids but my gosh some of them are the worst prepared students I have ever met in my life, so far as the simplest skills of reading and writing are concerned. Doesn't anyone care about that anymore? And if so, what the hell relevance does sending real life poets into our schools have when the schools themselves seem to be teetering on the verge

of illiteracy?

Yet at the annual meeting of the literature advisory panel of the National Endowment for the Arts in Washington, D.C., in December 1975, the chairperson of the literature panel described the real need to send poets into the schools who were missionaries or zealots, poets who radiated enthusiasm naturally.

Well, here's an example of the kind of pap that is being put out specifically to help radiate an "enthusiasm" for poetry. A brochure made up of limericks, and paid for with our tax dollars, aimed at prompting the reading of books by children, has the following lines:

*If you have a furious need,  
An insatiable, curious greed  
To know more and more—  
Books open a door,  
If you really are curious—read.*

It seems impertinent to waste time in

saying that this poem is very bad news indeed, and, incidentally, the vulgarization of a zesty limerick form which in its headier moments did more good on lavatory walls extolling the prowess of certain notable ladies in Bangkok. Instead we have the above poem, totally insensible of the dactylic thrust of a true limerick, and offering such a phoney message that one would hope a young child might toss the book out the window before reading on any further.

But apparently that's what it's come to. The barbarians are not waiting at the gates—we are the barbarians, and our barbarism is being federally subsidized by the National Endowment and the various state agencies.

*William Packard lives in New York City where he edits New York Quarterly. He is a professor at New York University and has taught at many levels of public education.*