

Editorial advice

Dear Felipe,

Thank you for inviting me to comment on such an interesting project. I am afraid that I have little time at present but shall do the best I can.

I have read the text as well as I can, all of it, including that which I do not really understand.

Of course, I am limited to a considerable extent because of the dire poverty of my Spanish. I feel that as a great limitation whilst being aware of the widespread belief to the contrary. (e.g. **Lack of comprehension is no hindrance to asserting understanding**; Z. Obmyślanie, 2011)

I want to make it clear from the start that I do not much like the text that you have, apparently, under consideration for publication; and I am more than grateful that you have not named the author; the anonymity makes me feel better about making what may be harsh comments.

It is the number of worries that I have over the text which make it so interesting: the number, and I shall not list them all by any means if only to avoid repetition, and the breadth of my concerns.

On the other hand, I have long held to the principle, though perhaps it is just a belief, that one should avoid much harsh criticism and start from where the writer is in terms of writerly development, skill, ambition and purposes. That is good pedagogy, and surely criticism should be pedagogical; it is, too, a useful fail-safe, or potentially so, to avoid condemning the truly new for its very newness just because one does not recognise it as such.

I recall the late Eric Mottram remarking that the more original a work is then the more unrecognisable it may be. (First Sub Voicive Colloquium, London, 1990) Those are not his exact words and they are not, I think, written down anywhere. It was a response to something someone said during the colloquium. It struck me at the time though that Eric was making a rather important point. We need the familiar to know where we are and to orient ourselves; yet many of us seek the unfamiliar which truly innovative writing must be.

Thus the artist who would be popular must ensure that she takes her readership with her.

Thinking about that over the years since, I have seen that many favour the appearance of newness, gimmicks, words that are trendy and so on, rather than favouring the truly original, which often goes unrecognised, as I have indicated.

I suspect that your author is one such, one who favours the appearance of the new. Look at the occurrence of trendy and "trending" words. In the section written in a form of English, we have by my count three occurrences of

"issue" and none of "problem" although that is clearly the meaning in two of the occurrences. US English may be to blame though.

In this connection, I also have in mind something I discussed in my 1999 essay **Finding another word for "experimental"** in the magazine *Riding the Meridian*.

I remarked the use of the word "experimental" as a descriptor of some poems without necessarily conveying anything useful. There, I told the story of an author whose work I declined to publish because I could make nothing of it. The author retorted that of course I did not understand because the work was experimental.

As I said in the essay:

"At no time was I told what the poet's experiment was or what the results of it had been or why that pattern of words which he had sent me should be published."

Over the years since, I have several times observed, or thought that I have observed, those who have found "experimental" works which they cannot understand; and seem then to have concluded that such a difficulty is a sign of quality experimentation. And they proceed, by imitation, to provide more of the same, as they see it.

I suspect, if I have been right, that it is a result of unmerited self-confidence, and a disregard for craft and learning. I shall have a little more to say in that connection.

One difficulty I have with the work you have shown me is its diction. I'm happy to call that "vocabulary" if preferred: I have found some people don't like the diction of the word "diction". However, I like to limit the use of the word "vocabulary" to limited word sets from which one writes; and I have no problem with writing from such a vocabulary.

In my sense of vocabulary as diction, here, I am talking about the choices the author makes or has made from a whole set vocabulary, all the words available. The focus is therefore on choice and the appropriateness of that choice in each case, given its context. I am also, therefore, considering, amongst other things, the register of the writing.

And here I am implicitly asserting that poetry relates to the uttered or potentially uttered word rather than being a facet of a printed text only.

It seems to me that much writing, even poetry, is written to be read silently rather than being heard. My expectation, that is, my desire, is for a poem I receive to be intended for audition.

This distinction becomes more important than ever as the transmission of digital text increases, though I do not intend to say more on that here; but it is a distinction which has been with us, of necessity, since writing began.

Having clarified that, let me say that I think your author has a poor sense of

register.

This is not, contrary to a recent suggestion (**Class and its reflection in the telling words we speak**; A Zsibbasztó-Koponya, 2014) that much of a matter of relative status in society – and therefore something depending from political stasis – but it is to do with tone and other modes of meaning. To be sure, power relationships come into it; but our selection of vocabulary from the pool theoretically available are far more than the relationship of one social class to another, and are indicative of interactions and interrelationships between individuals.

We express aggression and kindness and sympathy and the lack of empathy, in great part, through the diction that we employ to express ourselves. In this case it is the lack of variation in diction which worries me but contrarily it is a lack of variation from a constant shifting of diction territory, if you follow me, which seems to serve no purpose.

I put this to you as a major worry in the hope that it can be corrected in this author in the future or perhaps identified as a major breakthrough – something that in my perhaps limited perspective I cannot see.

I do not wish here to impose or even derive rules, but to guide or else to seek guidance from you or the author. Some rules we may identify as useful, ensuring, for instance, that we know how to pronounce similarly to each other and therefore to be understood. And in itself that useful conformity allows space for the breaking of those very rules whether of pronunciation or syntax or something else, in order, one hopes, to create new manners of meaning. No, let me say new modes of meaning. Manners are not always good. And ambiguity in itself is not desirable!

I recall a one time colleague who corrected me on my use of the word “taste” when I said to him that a poem by someone or other was “not my taste”.

He said “The great man said that we shouldn't use that word.” (The great man in question was the aforementioned Professor Eric Mottram, by then deceased and unable to explain himself further.)

What word? I asked

“Taste,” he said.

I had no idea of the context in which Eric was supposed to have made the remark; but I made what I believe was an informed guess to explain what Eric might have meant: publicly-agreed terms about what is considered tasteful rather than what I meant, personally like and dislike of a poem on grounds other than “taste”.

This man would have none of it: a rule had been revealed and then been broken.

For every Christ, if Eric would indulge me by not objecting to the comparison, there will be a Paul, one who takes the detail of an utterance and adheres to

it, probably adding to it with something of his own, until it is an elaborated system, rather than taking the original in the mode in which it was intended.

This is, I think, akin to the difference in quality of thought which might be indicated by Coleridge's distinction between primary and secondary imagination (**Biographia Literaria**; S T Coleridge, 1817). Some originate while many copy. (I do Coleridge a disservice with my crude summary; but I mention his work only as a guidance and not as a strict reference.)

Unfortunately, the many who copy, rather than originating, often also wish to proselytise by extracting rules where there may be little or no basis for doing so; and such proselytism may suggest that anyone can bring into existence the poetically true and reliable. The result is that the true and reliable in poetry are frequently misidentified.

The same happens with much poetic achievement. I am told that at a recent (2014) seminar on the late Bob Cobbing it was asserted, without any argument or evidence for one, that Cobbing did not intend his visual poems to be used as scores to be followed in performance. In fact, anyone making an inquiring study of Cobbing would know that he did want them to be used that way; and anyone in doubt might wonder what he was doing all the time he spent making his poems.

It was further asserted, I am told, that he wished his poems to be taken only as starting points for improvisation.

It is true that he did often improvise from his poems; and his performance reading method was inherently improvisatory, his poems, seen as scores, being indicative rather than directive. That is not the same thing as what I have been told was said.

For the record, generally, to a greater or lesser extent he had an idea of the perfect reading. I used to chide him for his neo-Platonism and he affected to not understand. (He affected also not to understand a thesis written on him by Chris Cheek, and then produced a cut up of that thesis which rather suggested that he did understand rather well.) He aimed at something readable, a reading which required attention and practice to achieve. Yet he also valued any genuine attempt to make such a reading and welcomed a variety of interpretations, referring to family resemblance between performances, usually referring to his own performance but including others when others obliged..

I even saw him sit through a performance in apparent amiability in the late 70s in Berlin by *Trio Ex Voco* who wrecked his intentions with great virtuosity.

Rules derived in encounters with a new original approach do tend to simplify matters even to the destruction of the author's intention. When Cobbing, I and Jennifer Pike performed at *291 Gallery* in May 2001, I was interviewed by a student who asked for an insight into the process by which a visual score was realised as performed sound. My answer was interrupted by "Can't you say it simpler? I only want 100 words."

It seems to be thought democratic to make ideas “accessible” to those who do not wish to make a mental effort to understand. The result may often be gibberish written about doggerel.

Your author writes such a free verse that it might be thought that the term doggerel is inappropriate to their work. I do not think so.

She says “I was happy at the beginning. That is, at the beginning of all this. Mind you, I would not have said that I was happy when I was happy though I might have said that I was content. Since then I have been less than happy.”

And so on. And on.

A free – relatively free, of course, of regularity – use of rhythm is not an absence of rhythm. It may well be harder to write without fixed metre than with it; yet it seems that some will take it as proven that anything will do. Obviously, it will be easier to write if you accept no constraint but continue to keep adding words.

I pick that phrase, “will do”, deliberately.

Who is to say what will and will not do? There is no especial arbiter. Those who seek a judge and rule-giver may assume that what I have just said means that anything is good enough.

With nothing to judge against, they think, surely, they think, anything will do.

Well, I do not think so.

We could do with thinking that has some thought in it.

The artist who says that their work is experimental, invites the question: what is the experiment?

Similarly, we might ask more widely “What is the point of making a poem at all?”

Your author asks just that question, I believe, in their fourth section (**El niño y el Dragón**); but it is not answered. Perhaps it is unanswerable.

The question “¿Cuál es el punto de escribir la poesía?” appears without any great force to it and just lies there rather like a bubble on washing water.

It is not that there is anything wrong with the question so much as in its placement. Simple language can be very powerful and effective if it is used appropriately. The words “I was happy” already quoted could work well.

As I recall, the novelist Edna O'Brien built character and narrative from the use of such simple language (in *The Country Girls* and in a few of the immediately following novels; I have not read later work by her.)

It takes craft to work with relatively little in that way, except occasionally and intermittently when by chance. Just writing simply is not enough.

Too often, I fear, the real answer to the question 'Why write poetry?' is “self-expression”; and that is a dismal answer. Do we really want to listen to each

other *express ourselves*? We probably do too much of that already. One might envy the almost languageless animals.

How sad that people think we are interested in the details of their emotions in a raw state.

If the artist were to ask themselves What am I trying to do? now and then, we might have a more interesting literature.

When the question is not put, even by the artist... the author.. the writer – whoever is responsible, and when they still go ahead and make more poetry, the chances are that the effective motivation is in itself to make another poem, ideally like poems that others have seen, or perhaps so unlike all the others that people will cry “Wow! That’s really innovative.”

In the free market place, innovation may often be the same thing as already exists but dressed up to appear new in a market already saturated with product. There is no purpose but to sell more product to satisfy a need which has already been satisfied.

Getting back to the text you have sent me, yes, I could make suggestions as to words which might be changed and so on; but what would be the point?

Would it matter much if one just deleted some at random? I ask because they appear to have been written at random, certainly without any over-riding purpose.

It seems to me that the language used here has been sampled largely from the broadcast media as if that were one thing, one approach, one linguistic set, rather than a mixture of language and language effluent. There are the words of true experts on various subjects and the words of people sitting on sofas smiling at the camera. All mixed together.

The sample of language as actually spoken sought by Wordsworth and Coleridge (**Lyrical Ballads**; William Wordsworth and S T Coleridge, 1798 & 1800 – the second edition contains the preface, subsequently expanded) always was a doubtful though an exciting idea, sound in its opposition to inanity and laziness; but lacking itself in any solidity, which is not true of many of the poems, which are often so strong as to remake our receptivity.

Things are worse now in the language uttered by the many. Often they seem to imitate their suppliers; and the suppliers sit on those comfy chairs facing a camera, talking; but what are they talking about? The news goes out 24 hours a day and seven days a week, but it is inadequate content to fill such a long time span; so it is repeated. Bad food served in large portions.

Sampling such wordage and no more will hardly do. I am open to approaches; but feel sure that sampling and framing randomly is not enough. I favour defying the subtext of what is said. I favour craft.

Here I see a text which has no aim in itself but to be published. It aims to please an ill-defined readership which does not yet exist, is unlikely to exist

and will do none of us any good if it ever does exist.

It may well be that it is the product of one who has not yet worked enough at their craft.

In that case, publishing the text will be no use to anyone, including the author.

Some years ago I was introduced to a poet I was told was promising. We had a polite awkward conversation as, it seemed to me, we each sensed that neither had much to say to the other. We kept talking because our mutual friends thought we would enjoy it. In due course, I said something – I forget what – which upset the other, who signalled their anger by declaring strongly: “I have been writing for four years.”

Four years isn't very long at all. It may be that it is long enough, but I doubt it.

I am reminded of the conversation between the Red Queen and Alice in Chapter 2 of Lewis Carroll's **Through the Looking Glass** in which the Red Queen says it is necessary to run faster than one has been able in order to make progress (my words, not Carroll's).

Perhaps the world in which the new author finds themselves is one in which as the Queen says “it takes all the running YOU can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that!” I can only offer the call of Writers Forum since 2010: Ambition for the Poetry, not the poet. And that takes time, not speed.

It is sustained effort and openness to learning from others which is necessary to acquire skill in making Poetry.

I suspect that it takes no longer to acquire the skill to write passably than it does to fake that ability. Usually, those who fake it -- and I do not say that your author is faking, but I am suspicious – aim very high indeed; and the claims that attend them may be an indication of insincerity, the way that many flies circling one place will indicate the presence of a sticky cake.

But the fake can be achieved and survive viewing in many lights.

Some years back I was publisher of one such small volume. I encouraged the author and gave them freedom. I was pleased with the result right up until they began to speak at its launch.

Then I knew.

It utilised the vocabulary of a language I knew nothing of. That did not worry me. As “sound poems” they seemed to me fine and I took the rest on faith.

Faith often misleads.

The author, before their audience, looked at the text and giggled uncomfortably to themselves before saying “There are some very rude words in here”.

The author read very well. It was an impressive performance, but for me an embarrassing one. Things were communicated once one understood the

context of “rude words”. Rightly, or wrongly, I heard a nasty tone, one that included misogyny and was perhaps something incipiently fascistic. I felt more than a little grubby.

So, in such a situation, where it seemed no one had been concerned by that opening remark, one thanks the author for their work, aware that one is being used, providing a listing of their name in the records of a press which is well thought of.

I shall not labour this point more. It is sufficient, I believe, to indicate that we might like to think we know what we are reading but bias and expectation break through often without announcing themselves.

However, to end, let me pick up on that idea of grubbiness. Your author makes great use throughout the sections in English of the word “lascivious”, “enticing” and so on; and in nearly all cases I think they mean “erotic”.

They speak of “licentious intertwinings and copulations” when the narrative, if I read correctly, indicates that sexual intercourse is taking place. Why licentious? That word, here, worries me.

I think of D H Lawrence's essay on **Pornography and Obscenity** and writings which “tickle and excite to private masturbation”.

Yes, there is writing like that, and I have no great problem with it (unlike DHL), but it is a different purpose to the one which engages me.

I put it in a box with self-expression, which is OK in its place but surely not the primary motivation for making poetry.

Lawrence Upton

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