

Editorial

A FEW MONTHS AGO, the writer Michael Ondaatje welcomed the announcement of a new lucrative prize for Canadian poetry with his hope that this might do something about the almost total invisibility of serious poetry in this country. It won't, but he's right about the current situation, here and elsewhere. Poetry encountered by Everyman will most likely be the drivel inside greeting cards, or the lyrics of pop songs, which are banal sentimentality, or jingle, or unintelligible beneath the noise, or nasty rant, or word-salad probably the result of illicit pharmaceuticals.

This last form of popular poetry is interesting. How did it come about that song lyrics are judged the most poetic when they're the most random? It's Ezra Pound's fault. Modern poetry, as Pound invented it, is too obscure for anyone but English professors and their graduate students. Pop poets, rarely very well educated, figure that to be highbrow poetry it has to be meaningless: they are the eggmen, I am the walrus.

Real poetry, even when not intentionally obscure, takes some language skill to write and to read, but almost no one under thirty is able to tell the difference between "it's" and "its." And there is no highly trained profession doing serious, difficult, and valuable work that pays less, on average, than that of poet. It would not be surprising if poetry were going extinct.

But when I joined the editorial staff of *The Dalhousie Review*, I was delighted and astounded to discover a healthy, lively poetry-culture. Our journal receives submissions from hundreds of poets every year, and almost everything we get is serious and skilful, rarely obscurantist, usually enjoyable. Submitters' biographical summaries show that many of them have already published poetry in tiny journals with odd names, and some of them have produced books, published by companies I had never heard of. Poetry lives! There's a large thriving community of poets and poetry-publishers out there, producing wonderful literature, in the corners where the general public never looks, almost nobody making a cent off any of it. It's all for love. It's splendid.

A few words about some of what's in this issue:

We have several not at all sentimental poems on the death of a dog, by Geoffrey Haresnape, a South African poet whose work we also sampled in our last issue. Collectors of rare poetic forms will be delighted to find that one of these poems is a villanelle. Another author also submitted a villanelle to us a few weeks ago. What's going on?

Virgil Suarez's two poems talk movingly about pre-exile days in Cuba. The speaker recalls his father; the father/son relationship is also central in Francis Blessington's poem "To Market" and in Shalom Camenietzki's short story "The Atheist's Bible." There's nothing political in Suarez's poems, but there is in Eugene Dubnov's absurdist fantasy of life in the Soviet Union during the last days of Stalin.

Dawn-Marie Zampa's knockout poem "Ripened Raspberries" is intensely erotic, mixing up (as it should) sex with the sensuality of cooking and eating. Another sexy item in this issue is Nancy Lee's short story ironically titled "Love Story." This one features sweaty steamy sex and drugs and rock 'n' roll, and if you feel you're a bit too old for this sort of thing, so does the narrator of this story, though it still means vitality and an antidote to the stodginess and smugness of post-teen-aged maturity. Inside the gym, a dance marathon; outside, a serial killer.

The central figure of "Allergic Reactions" is a man haunted by his wartime cowardice, marginalized and out of place in his world. Hemingway fans may feel that this is an old story, but it bears re-telling with the convincing detailed treatment it is given here by Lauro Palomba. The protagonist of "Fiorello" is also plagued by recurrent dreams. Why are fiction writers so interested in dreaming? Maybe Freud was right in claiming that fiction and dreaming both function as imaginative representation of our anxieties.

In our first article, Nicholas Maxwell argues in favour of ethical objectivism, the view that there are real ethical facts which can be discovered and known. The non-cognitivism Maxwell argues against is a legitimate contemporary philosophical position, with arguments in its favour that many philosophers find convincing, but it also occurs as the facile relativism popular among my undergraduate students, who think that morality is a matter of personal taste, like preference in ice-cream; and as the post-modern ten-

dency to see ethical views as merely parochial, self-serving social constructs. Maxwell agrees that objectivism is associated with cultural imperialism and fundamentalist religious dogmatism; but he argues that undogmatic “conjectural” objectivism is consistent with respect for diversity.

In our second article, the historian Michiel Horn tells the sad “cold war tale” of the departure of an eminent physicist from the faculty of the University of Toronto and from Canada during the early fifties, a victim of a pusillanimous university administration sensitive to political pressure and unwilling to stand up for its faculty and for academic freedom. Ahh, but that was a long time ago; nowadays, university administrators are steadfast fighters for faculty rights and freedom of enquiry. Yes, they are. Yep. They are. Oops, I just swallowed my gum.

Peter Melville’s essay talks about one of Immanuel Kant’s many personal peculiarities: his hypochondria. Melville points at connections between this neurosis and Kantian philosophy. Kant’s health worries included his suspicion that his organs were jammed together too tightly to allow proper breathing, and this may have a connection to Kant’s theoretical concerns that Melville doesn’t mention: in Kant’s theory of humour. (Yes, this most ponderous of philosophers does consider The Funny, and even produces a few—terrible—jokes.) Kant theorizes that we find something funny when “a tense expectation is transformed into nothing,” and, because our thoughts are “in a harmonious connection with some agitation in the body’s organs” this mental switch corresponds to an “alternating tension and relaxation of the elastic parts of our intestines that is communicated to the diaphragm” with the result that the lungs “rapidly and intermittently expel air.” (He means: we laugh.) And this, opines the great philosopher, explains why we enjoy humour: because the rapid breathing is “conducive to our health” (*Critique of Judgment*, Pluhar trans., Section 54). Oh well. Even the smartest philosophers sometimes have a few deeply goofy ideas.

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