

'Why We Do It': editing a little magazine

This brief essay was requested by Michael Mackmin of poetry magazine The Rialto

I suppose behind many a little poetry magazine, at any rate initially, is a contrarian spirit. Until 1997, when I lived for two years as poet-in-residence in Hugh MacDiarmid's last home, Brownsbank Cottage in Lanarkshire, I had almost never lived in a house. My home had usually been a caravan and, for the previous twenty-five years, a caravan near the Ayrshire coast-- a harsh environment with a high local rate of unemployment. I was a "lonely literary amateur" in Dana Gioia's memorable phrase. At the back of my mind remains an empathy with literary outsiders, eccentrics, poetic gaberlunzies (a gaberlunzie being a sort of Scottish wandering tramp): perhaps because, at one level, I have felt I am one myself. I associate the type, no doubt illogically, with an aspiration to genuineness which I feel a little poetry magazine is one of the last homes for, as well as for licence (if not licentiousness), devil-may-care vigour, and an experimentalism which isn't just the empty fripperies of the *avant-garde* or the dessicated polystyrene of l=a=n=g=u=a=g=e poetry.

What I most admire in a little magazine is what most often pleases me in poetry, too: marked individuality, a wariness of solemnity, and a partisan streak which may be less a rebelliousness against prevailing convention than the more quietly radical fulfilling of an identity. The magazine, and the poetry, however, must be good enough to be taken seriously; eccentricity and individuality aren't sufficient by themselves. The art is paramount.

Starting up a little poetry magazine takes such energy that one's own emotions have to be implicated: it's not surprising that many are begun by disgruntled poets keen to promote themselves and their own view of poetry. I was a relatively late developer (I began writing poems seriously in my early twenties). I am also unlikely to produce the type of verse which will win prizes or competitions. I often find myself at odds with 'mainstream' poetic opinion, not because I necessarily enjoy being in opposition, but because I find the implied consensus of hype demeaning to readers with any individuality. It sounds simplistic, but I suspect that at least some of the roots of what I like to publish now are in what I liked to read, both poetry and critical prose, when I lived in Ayrshire and had no motive for reading other than enjoyment (in both the shallow and profound senses) as well as finding my own way as a poet. I remember in the 1980s, in my early twenties, being unengaged by many of the poems I would see, for instance, in *Poetry Review*. I was baffled as to why they were considered good. I was young. I was ignorant. I suspected that those poems were the work of writers far cleverer and wittier and more knowledgeable than me. I also believed, of course, that anything appearing in a venue as reputable as *Poetry Review* had to be good.

As I matured, wrote my own verse, learned something of the craft of poetry, and

read widely, I began to doubt less my own responses to poems in such publications; I began to doubt more the poems. Which is only another way of saying that the whole business is remarkably subjective. (And, of course, a little doubt about one's own responses, as an editor, is always healthy.) I still, though, retain a belief in a non-specialist, reasonably intelligent audience and, despite my earlier comment about hype, in a consensus of some kind as to quality. I like -- and partly distrust -- the thought of the "any honest housewife" of the Robert Graves' piece, sorting out good and bad poems as definitely as good and bad apples. It's a pleasing notion within its considerable limitations. My magazine's title, however, its implication of an unknown quantity, is also intended to indicate a willingness to spring surprises and to recognise those limitations. T. S. Eliot famously stated that the only critical "method" was to be "very intelligent". To paraphrase it where my own editing is concerned, the only method is to be, if not "*very* intelligent" -- which may be too much for me to hope for -- then at least as intelligent as possible. And you can only edit as well as your contributors can write. Every little magazine depends upon the excellence of its contributors.

I founded *The Dark Horse* in early 1995. I had the usual mix of motives: a desire for self-promotion, a dissatisfaction with simply writing my own poems, and an indignation that could amount in those heady days to rage that many of the type of poems I wanted to read weren't being printed. (I can still manage the indignation.) Also, I had recently been co-editing another little magazine which belonged to another poet; we fell out. Fuelled by the energy of our disagreement -- though not exactly in a spirit of competition -- and with, unusually, a little money to spare, I produced issue one in spring of that year. Dana Gioia, the American poet-critic, offered to be a conduit for new work from America. As I had had a long-standing interest in American poetry, this suited me fine. He also provided lightly-given advice and encouragement. This helped me to be ambitious for the magazine and to see it as a more than local venture: useful in Scotland, where most of the poets know one another, with everything that implies for robust literary debate. I devoted considerable amounts of time to finding a logo, deciding on a template design for the magazine, soliciting poems from admired figures, and typesetting. I decided the magazine would not only publish poems but reviews, essays, polemics, and interviews. It would try to create a forum for discussion about poetry. It would try to be the publication that, as a tyro poet ten years earlier, I had looked for, and not found.

Partly because of the connection with Gioia, the early Horse was associated with American New Formalism. For me this link was useful in that it helped give the new magazine an identity. Temperamentally, however, I am not a joiner of literary movements. New Formalism has been an interesting socio-poetic phenomenon (yet it has had no effect whatever in England or Scotland, where the literary cultures are quite different) though I find it a little tired now. There are fine poets associated with it, but much of the writing produced by the movement lacks the anarchy of sensibility that, as a

Scots-Irish writer, I look for. Nevertheless, the Horse's critical engagement with New Formalism remains a significant part of the magazine's history.

I also made a point of trying to publish famous poets alongside complete unknowns. The 'names' have included Richard Wilbur, Anthony Hecht, X. J. Kennedy, Wendy Cope, Edwin Morgan, Douglas Dunn, George Mackay Brown, Donald Justice, Iain Crichton Smith, Anne Stevenson, Seamus Heaney, and the Australian A. D. Hope. But I am never happier than when printing excellent work by unknown poets. And I have enjoyed devoting space to considerations of neglected figures: for example, Scottish poets such as William Neill or Kirkpatrick Dobie, or the American minimalist Kay Ryan, or those at the beginning of their career, such as the North Dakota poet Timothy Murphy. The magazine's interviews, too, have often featured mavericks or the unfashionable -- Anne Stevenson, Philip Hobsbaum, and Ian Hamilton. The interview with Hamilton, in issue 3, I consider one of the magazine's highest points. The contemporary poetry scene has a short memory which has less to do with quality than with fashion. I try to privilege literary quality over literary fashion.

I think of the Horse, with complications, as a social extension of my own work as a poet. One's own poetic practice is solitary, perhaps lonely, self-concerned, and largely private. To produce a little magazine, conversely, is social and practical; it has a public dimension; it seems the logical flip-side of the private art of poetry. It has taught me a huge amount about typesetting and layout. I enjoy the precision possible with modern DTP programs which, compared to the old setting processes, seem to me astonishing. I like the artistic element of ordering the poems: I always try, for instance, to set a poem which is over a page long on facing pages. I still get a thrill at the "ceremony of innocence" which is receiving the copies of a new issue back from the printer. It's a pleasure to think that you are involved in a part, however modest, of literary history, that the magazine is part of a cultural conversation, renewed issue by issue.

The best little poetry magazines are forums for the authentic life of the spirit. They may be read only by a few hundred people. They are, though, founded on the notion of a communicable humanity, on the reality of inner life and its exposition which is strangely satisfying and, unlike bombs, guns, and other signs of the end of discussion, perfectly useless.

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