

by SEAN SINGER

QUIET AS IT'S KEPT: POETRY AND CRITICISM

Theodore Roethke complained of the critic's attitude: that the poem exists for a critic to verbalize about it. An artist cannot carry the weight of a critic's opinions, and my mentor, Carol Frost, wisely instructed that a writer should never receive any criticism that's greater than he'd give himself.

At their best, a critic can show the reader what to notice, illuminate whatever obscure exists in the poems, and demonstrate the connections among a group of poems. But there tends to be a leap between the critic and the poet because they critic can't feel empathy for what has produced the poems in the first place.

As an artist, if I am affected by a review, for instance, should I alter the way I make poems to better suit the critic's ideas? Is clarity my goal, or to please people? What is the purpose of a poem at all? I think every writer must answer such questions for himself.

The best thing a critic can do is to bring new readers to the poems. Even a negative review can do that, and so it was better to have negativity surrounding the poem than mere apathy. I have admired the steadfastness and support various critics have offered when they enjoyed what was the product of my labor.

Likewise, I have felt uncharitably towards those who were ignorant of the labor, or had some political bubble they wanted to float towards the artist, or were expressing transference that they had not become poets themselves. But in either case, I have feelings towards external points, which have nothing to do with the source of the poems, and therefore have nothing to do with writing. This explains why poets can get so aggravated about criticism; they

are drawn away from writing, and when they're writing, they feel most like a person.

The energy in a poem is psychodynamic and is a unifying force. Any additional critic who receives that energy is probably a good thing, whether or not the critic's judgments are sound.

PUT ON ALL THE LIGHTS

Three of the R&B singers took refuge in the darkest plush of Bamako nightclub. A sound erupted between them. Here the velveteen memory grows weak, so I don't know if it was a fight or a wakeup call. But I can still see one of the women they had abandoned, standing by the bar, with its ochre padding and brass pins, yelping like a ragga, her hair thrust out in a pool, fighting for supremacy. Her ping-like crystal yells proclaimed above the fizzling light...Was she a victim? I have no idea. The gods of noise—her sisters—had condemned her to the backwoods of AM; but the chandelier above her head, hailed its beams like dust upon her head.

BABY

Baby like a water flower
devours the cool leaves
 from the tubs
of my eyes.
Our ways of living
 differ.

BRUNO SCHULZ

There's never an end for the sea:
Four blue springs screeching on a loam.

Four blood hounds blacked his eye
Not liking his seaworthy ways.

Four ugly little figures
Look into the glass and smile.

The sea's hotel said reap what you sow
Get ready for the ice blue snow.

There's a tattered basket
And four names written in ribbon.

Liquid salmon float in four rivers.
Feed the grains of sugar to a fly.

ITALO SVEVO

"Theory is good, but it doesn't prevent things from existing."

—Jean-Martin Charcot, as quoted by Freud

No one thinks of submarine paint, but if it has
white lead, turpentine, verdigris, cresylic acid, stearin, arsenic, and soluble
naphtha
it is a collection of chemicals, the way we, man and woman, are vats sloshing
with liquids.

Things go wrong in life: a button comes loose and the square dancefloor panels
illuminate the violet, spinning boots like flame!
A frivolous moment appears as a velvet backdrop,
which is a door, but it opens into a submarine's darkness.

In Murano, beside the Serenella Lagoon, a workman
lugs a pail, and it swings like a hatless rack, gray as gooseflesh.
Italo Svevo, Mr. Big Seller of these submarine paints:
"I have to stand over them as you stand over a *crème frite*
to see that it doesn't burn."

Keeping watch on the thermometer, fixated on the factory,
he paces, along the rafters, but a fellow can't be drowsy.
in the dream the factory is a vampire land.

One can taste metal flavor of blood, as it crackles and fills the container.
the irradiated orange synthetics rise like circuitry!

"Who will release me from my machines, so many machines?
I wake up early with ventilators and mixers
and the devil knows what spinning round in my head.
The ventilators blow out what small spark of fire
there is still left within me,
the mixers stir up ugly stuff from my soul
which I would rather forget,
the condensers condense all the fine gases in my head."

Inside his head, too, are a complete range of anti-fouling topcoats,
anti-osmosis treatments. Beneath the gray waves, the ripples of sea
wash the impermeable gray paint, hidden beneath the gray world.
To opiate means "to praise" and the gray world is a vampire-dream.

The drying umbrella in the hallway
clearly represents the disgorged penis
but what does it mean if it's a glove turned inside-out?
We're flying over the ocean, and it's a sphere...
Do you think you can make an end? Us sublunaries
are under the inflated bag, like the gland of a crocodile.

Blood is draining, and we feel submerged.
The moon-mass like whole-flecked vinegar spirals around us
cartoon stars and we step in and go down, dark as pile,
into the gray hotel, holding the rope, clutching one another—
Ralph and grandfather and palomino grapevine, and through the portholes
like blood cell rail-yard as we sink, loose-leaf and footfall until ocean.

Until ocean until erasure as clean as can be, with ocelot spots and rippling fur.
Until sea salt enters the lungs and nitrogen narcosis as we slant
off into yellow soup and pull of the rope with neon, nitron, and martini.
Ocean me as gold might become liquid and near and rare.

The earth will become a nebula, free of germs and parasites.