

## Introduction

Michael Ryan

1.

The poems have always been finally the poet's own business in solitude—even if Hart Crane blasted the gramophone while he wrote, he kept the door to his room closed—to be approached, produced, and judged by him/her at his/her own expense. On the other hand, this doesn't mean criticism is either impossible or worthless. Nor does it mean that a primary form of criticism, the editorial selection which determines whose work gets read in the first place, is illegitimate or unnecessary. But editorial judgment *is* potentially the most pernicious of all criticism to the poet because, besides possibly denying an access to readers, the articulation of that judgment has traditionally been silent or, in any case, an articulation by the editor only to himself.

I'd prefer my enclosure within that role for the best of reasons: there is no ultimate public justification for personal taste. Even if I thought the psychological or aesthetic shocks I might uncover as sources of my taste were credible, they probably wouldn't make very interesting reading. But it does seem necessary to adopt a speaking role in this case, to describe if not to justify the unusual nature of the occasion, and although I'm not pretentious enough to believe that this Symposium will affect the climate in this country for reading poetry, I am pretentious enough to believe that it should. This Symposium, as I see it, is primarily an exercise in reading, an exhibition of how ten poets read poetry, and their ten responses to those ten readings. As for effects: like most poetry editors, I'd like to see a larger audience for poetry; I'd like to see even the miniscule audience which exists (mostly poets themselves) read poems closely; and, quite obviously, I'd like to see the work of these ten poets, among others, read. If this Symposium is nothing else, then, it's a promotion of these poets; if it is nothing else, however, it's probably a failure.

2.

A note about mechanics: after the ten poets to participate in the Symposium were chosen, and their poems which would be the focus were selected, each participant was given the opportunity to state preferences for the group of poems about which he/she would write a short essay. I thought it would be healthier and more interesting to avoid an organization in which two poets were writing about each other's work, to allow more interaction among the participants and reduce the possibility of either back-slapping or bad feeling. I did, however, want each participant to write on poems which particularly interested him/her rather than make arbitrary assignments, because I believed the resultant essays would be more interesting. This seems to have worked out fine. The variety of ap-

proach and the diverse personalities of the essays reinforce my conviction that poets often write the most distinctive criticism (Stevens, Jarrell, Roethke, Auden and many obvious others). Their responses to the essays are similarly various, sometimes speaking directly to critical issues, likes and dislikes articulated therein, sometimes ignoring the essay altogether. So, to return to the previous section of this introduction, perhaps the Symposium might not exist as only a promotion of these ten poets even if it doesn't change, prove or improve anything, and simply stands as a body of writing which occasionally "teaches" and often "delights" (obeisance to Sir Philip Sidney). Obviously, I'm convinced that it does.

3.

Just as obviously, thus far I've ignored the two most obvious questions: why *young* poets and why these ten. To the latter, besides the final *de gustibus* reversion I use earlier, I hope I add something in the way of an answer in the last section of this introduction. Even in my own opinion, however, I know of at least ten and possibly twenty other poets under the cutoff age (not to mention those whose work I don't know) who could have been included. But there's no question that the inclusion of these ten, as opposed to the exclusion of all others, does imply a judgment which can be scrutinized. Besides quality, I did have one criterion: I wanted the ten poets' work to be significantly different from one another's, for each to have developed to the point of writing distinctly and distinctively in his/her own voice. I think that is the case, in the prose as well as the poems.

The cutoff age I used when this project began in September, 1972, was thirty-two years old, and I used this cutoff to exclude from consideration the many terrific poets only a few years older who have already received much well-deserved exposure. Clearly, I believe these ten poets also deserve close reading, and I hope that this Symposium both reflects that kind of reading and increases their readership, however small that increase might be. It's right and just that the amount of critical attention a poet receives usually increases with age, but that attention can be exceedingly difficult to obtain for a young poet, despite the relative quality of the poetry itself. I would like to see "A Symposium of Poets" published in this or any other magazine; however, it does seem appropriate for this occasion to be devoted to *young* poets, if only because they might be more capable of becoming absorbed in another's poems because of a greater awareness of their need to learn everything they can for their own.

4.

Finally, I have yet to even mention what to me is an integral part of this

Symposium: the exciting complex concluding essay by Merle Brown. It's integral not only because it provides one possible overview for the poems, essays and responses by one critical spectator, but also because this particular critic interprets his role in such a way as to demand of himself an active and creative engagement while retaining the traditional obligation of organizing a coherent discursive discussion. Much might be said of Mr. Brown's use of the *persona*, his notion of criticism-as-fiction, etc., which are crucial to his essay and aspects of its very singular character. Nevertheless, like all the most interesting criticism I know, and like many of the essays of the poets, Mr. Brown's essay is an integrated mixture of description and evaluation; its coherence depends upon an interdependent relationship between the two. In other words, the terms of description ("The most striking thing about the poems is that the central self in each is so sharply delimited . . .") imply the terms of evaluation, and vice versa. A few of the judgments explicitly made, then, might seem harsh if taken out of the modifying context of the entire essay, but insofar as the prevailing explicit evaluation in the poets' essays is definitely positive, the tone of those few judgments by Merle Brown can be seen as a healthy counterbalance. In two cases, however, we have agreed it would be appropriate for me to simply register my disagreement with his conclusions: on Stanley Plumly's poems generally and Jack Myers' poem "The Family War" specifically—that Plumly's work is overly "self-absorbed" and that Myers' poem is overly aware of the "anonymous reader." Both these cases, in my opinion, clash with the notion of balance that Mr. Brown is looking for in these poems as a whole (and achieves in his own essay) in terms of that "central self." Although I might accept his description in both instances, I regret the implicit evaluative assumption that good poems can't by definition be written out of an excess of self-absorption or audience-awareness, or that these aren't good poems because they reflect one of those extremes. I do want to say, however, that given the three alternatives, I personally would choose to write from and toward that balance, if such things could be consciously determined.

Myers' poems and Plumly's poems, like most of the poems which I selected for this Symposium, convince me not only because of their urgency, or because of the fact that they're written well, but also because they make their own terms clear and fulfill (or come close to fulfilling) those terms. It would take a greater space than I have here to clarify this properly, but I find almost none of these poems boring or confused—boring because I have seen the stance, the diction, the same couplings of words over and over again, and confused because the real subject is never discovered or uncovered by the writer—as I do find most of the poems I have read as an editor or otherwise. It goes without saying that some of them speak to me personally in a very important way, and some don't. But they are all *poems*, and if anyone learns anything through them or about them because of this Symposium, I believe right now that is important.