POETRY IN THE ROUND

A Poetry Workshop

narration and poems by George Abbe

ABOUT MR. GEORGE ABBE

Winner of the Shelley Memorial Award and now Resident Poet-Novelist at Russell Sage College, Mr. Abbe has recorded his poetry for the Library of Congress and Harvard University, published five novels, one recommended by the Book-of-the-Month Club; five collections of verse; two critical works; a novella; and a verse drama; served on the staffs of writers' conferences in five states, Idaho, Texas, Ohio, Connecticut, and New Hampshire; and taught at Yale, Mt. Holyoke, Columbia, Wayne, the University of Maine, Springfield College, and the University of Iowa.
In interpreting poetry, age makes little difference. Often, the younger the person, the more astonishing, profound, and exciting the response.

Let us take my poem, "The Book," and then present interpretations of it at different age-levels as recorded by teachers in one of my creative-writing workshops who used my Poetry-in-the-Round theories in their classrooms.

SIDE I, Band 2: a. THE BOOK

I came to the margin of yesterday;
I saw a girl on the edge of flowers.
There were birds on a steeple, and clouds as high
as the stars of childhood in mystery's tower.
A gray stone library, red of roof,
stood by a sidewalk where people were small
but excessively kind, and their voices drew
the fish from the water, the fox from the hill.

The girl on the edge of the flowers stood deep,
so deep in the grass I saw only her head
and a bare arm held high. She looked rosy
and sweet.

Then I saw what she held - a book she had read,
far down in the insects, the drowsing, the pollen.
The words she had read shone like drops on
her brow
and glowed on her lips, and exquisitely shone
in eyes blue- eternal and grey here-and-now;

and from library windows, heads were thrust out,
the steeple birds paused, and the clouds swung low;
the fox raised his head, the fish made no sound;
the flowers were diamonds from the darkest unknown.

b. ANALYSIS

Here are two adult interpretations, the first by Joseph Segalla, a teacher in the workshop:
"The Book' holds for me the stimulation of an impressionistic painting. One is attracted by its opening line, 'I came to the margin of yesterday,' which reminds us that the closest we can come to any yesterday is by way of thoughtful looking. The use of light upon the setting achieves clarity, a quiet and warm total effect. Part of the harmony lies in the choice of words such as 'gray stone library' - the internal silence of the building, implied but not stated.... Everything combines to produce a quickening, a realization of having experienced something similar, which becomes important to our later periods of reflection; but the real excitement comes about by seeing it recorded as you would like to have it told."

"In the past," another teacher in my workshop wrote after using the author-audience method, 'poetry in the classroom has largely meant boring memorization of the works of the old masters. Instead of developing an appreciation and love for this medium of expression, pupils have responded with antipathy. They have felt no kinship, no stimulation, no self-realization. They have come to believe, as one ten-year-old boy expressed it when a teacher told him she was taking a course with a modern poet who was
interested in having youngsters like him write down their reactions to his verses:

"Why, I thought all poets were dead!"

"This author-audience method of interpretation offers an entirely new approach for teachers working with pupils of all ages. Here the student is allowed to tell in his own words how the poem makes him feel, what pictures he sees, what thoughts are aroused. He is creating as truly in his own way as the poet who wrote the poem. If some one new thought, or idea, or remembrance, or dream is awakened in his mind, then the poem has achieved its purpose, a new dimension has been reached. In turn, the poet gains an enlarged perspective of his own work; he and his reader share a common experience from which each derives growth and new freedom."

Next, reactions to "The Rock" by seventeen-year-olds. First, John Rodgers: "Men are uninformd about the world's mysteries. We are like the fish and the fox in our ignorance. It seems that the more we read and know, the more confused we become."

Another 17-year-old, George Romero, comments: "The girl struck me as having reached a turning point in her life, the change from adolescence to maturity. The margin of yesterday! I look as possibly meaning the termination of her childhood. Up to now she had been under the influence of ignorance of life, reading the book of learning until she could get up and face the world. Now, having learned enough, she rises out of the grass and is seen above the grass with her new knowledge written on her face as a sign of maturity."

Finally, a group of reactions by ten-year-old 6th graders:

Lloyd Frankenberg has said that: "the child is the poet in each of us, the part that responds to vision." In these experiments, the teacher merely had the children read the poem, after reading it to them; then asked for the instantaneous effect it had on them; they were not allowed to communicate with each other or receive outside help. When asked to write down what they thought the poet was trying to say, one little girl protested: "I thought you were supposed to tell us that!"

Karen Fuller, of Canton (Conn.) Elementary School, wrote: "The girl in the meadows was happy. She had just read a book on God's creation, and she was glad that she could be with what God had made. All these people were looking out of the library to see why the girl was so happy, as though they were part of the book. When the people did this, it made the meadow quiet. The animals knew they were in God's world, and they hushed so they could be sure that they were not doing wrong. The people on the sidewalk were small. They were not as big as God, but they were very kind. They made the fox and the fish draw near to hear them."

Paul Hudon, also of Canton, jotted down: "I thought of a man reminiscing of his hometown and the girl he loved. She was as beautiful as flowers, and was a girl who loved everyone and everything. Whatever she said, all people heard. The book meant that she was the spirit of all knowledge, and through books he could learn about nature, the stars, and the kindness of people."

Gary Larsen, of Berlin, Connecticut, explained: "The girl in the garden is either small or the plants are very tall. And I think that the insects in the garden are quiet because they are watching the girl. When the poem said, 'The words she said read alone like drops on her brow,' I think that it meant that what she had read she was thinking about over and over again."

Carol Pulcini, also of Berlin, commented: "It came to dusk or nightfall of yesterday. You saw a girl standing near the place where the flowers were. A steeple is high and clouds are high in the sky and you don't know what is in the child's mind. It's a mystery to everyone except the child. The reason why they say 'birds in the steeple and clouds high' is because they want you to think of something tall or maybe even bright. You don't really know the child in his or her mind. They use the expression 'draw the fish from the water' and 'the fox from the hill,' to express the quality of their voices. They didn't actually draw the fish from the water and the fox from the hill. They wanted you to know that their voices were something worthwhile mentioning so they use those expressions. She wasn't really so deep in the grass that you only saw her head. This was to show her thought: it was a deep thought... Everything grew very quiet, for nightfall appeared, and it must have been a beautiful evening with stars shining brightly in the marvelous heavens above where mysteries still are."

Carol DeMarco, of Kensington (Conn.) Grammar School, said: "I think this poem means that years ago birds and the people and other things used to be peaceful and there was not so much racket. You used to see flowers that were not trampled down. The girl was so quiet reading her book and the insects were not drowsy reading so peacefully. Now everybody's running and jumping about. I think the author would like to go back to his childhood town."

Pamela Wallace, of the Willard School, Berlin: "My impression of this poem is that a person is getting older and he remembers his childhood sweetheart, the freshness of her youth blossoming more beautifully in his mind than the spring flowers. Her eyes were like stars, and her words shone like jewels in his memory... Then suddenly everything he had been thinking of seemed to shine very brightly, but all of a sudden everything seemed to stop; the birds no longer sang, the clouds swung low, the people stopped and looked. Suddenly he knew that it was an old picture in his mind. Dreaming of the past, and he knew that all the dreaming in the world would never let him live his childhood again."

One boy, apparently under the influence of the Chamber of Commerce, wrote: "Come to the town, meet a girl, and get married!"

Bill Eddy, also of Kensington, felt this: "The sun is turning pinkish red, on this late summer day. The flowers are glowing, the clouds are loving. It is getting later now. A girl stands reading, in a yellow meadow. A fox starts howling from the green hills. The clouds are turning pink. The sun is backing away under the green hills. People are talking in the library... You can see the steeple birds pause and look. The fox stops howling, the girl stops reading, kind people stop reading in the library, and they start staring. Night has arrived."

Is it any wonder that I, who merely wrote down the words in the beginning, find the horizon of my poems widening with each new interpretation?

One can see now why I believe poetry should be shared, should become a part of community activity and enjoyment, like children at play.

No matter how varied, how extended or brief the thoughts and feelings in response to a poem may be,
they should be recorded as part of the history of the art; for all of them, exactly as much as the words the author put down, make the poem itself; they are the poem.

SIDE I, Band 3: UNDERGROUND

I entered a subway at bleeding noon. Its waiting caves were ribbed with dust; its sweating metal empty shone; faintly its motors beat with remorse.

Four men entered, never known in any country where I'd been. The long cars started, as in pain; the dark whirled by with ultimate haste.

And one cried: "No, I cannot stop!" and dashed the windows through with fists; another, bending through a trap, let the fast wheels cut through his wrists.

Another, leaping to a seat, stretched downward, holding to a strap of terror and repentance preached, though nothing heard nor turned to wait.

And last, the fourth, lofty and hard, with cheeks of basalt slashed by thought, raced to the car-end, struck the door, the steel that sizzled with friction's flame.

"O motorman! O name the track, the station, and the usual fare!"

His hands clung; he could not pull back; clothing and flesh broke open and streamed against that sucking steel blown hot, against that tiny window black with tunnel coming, no human there.

SIDE I, Band 4: A FAT MAN DIES

I heard a woman soft with fat cry out she saw her husband dead, that he had risen from his bed a certain way, and, just like that, had fallen, and when they lifted him his limbs were lard, his heart a crumb.

I saw her, gentle and piteous, whose fleshliness had melted his, torn from her dream, and there upon tomorrow's white and icy screen he rose, he fell, he died the same as in that most meticulous dream.

And now, her softness, large and giving yearned at his live obesity, his kindness slow and darkly striving; yet all her size could vainly do was make his lips more certain gray; with each caress his own fat grew;

till, sick, from their sad bed he rose, and fell, and died as in her dream, - with one thing added: he was so large from life, from her, his burial mound, big beyond custom, drew men's eyes and gave them pause for miles around.

SIDE I, Band 5: THE HAND-CAR

Down railroad track, pumping the hand-car,
straining men held up cylinder-blocks.
I pushed through dangling cables and chains;
crashed, I sought everywhere, I ran.
But none was the repairman, none my car.
Wherever it stood, helpless and spent,
my dog was inside, all my belongings.

I flung myself into another booth; my voice
boiled in the mouthpiece, under the close roof,
like scalding water: "Which part
of the garage are you in?
Is it fixed? The dog, you say, is gone?
The luggage was never there!"

I stared through my sweat, past
the scratched and grimy phone-booth glass;
and tall
and horrifying hung cranes and chains and

cables,
a forest through which
the click of the repairman's voice seemed
to come,
humming into the phone over long wire, too
far.
too tired. "I can't tell you how to get
to this level. I don't know what's wrong
with your car.
The doors are unlocked and the luggage and
dog are gone."

THE ANTIOCH REVIEW

SIDE II, Band 1: THE ICEHOUSE

I came through sun
to touch the icehouse door,
the lintel framed in majesty
of shadow, the threshold beam
so deep it shook my heart.

I felt the branding iron of mountain light
glide from my back; I stood
in the blue-fountained shadow of a world.

Now, vaguely powerful
swathed in the sleep of sawdust time;
now, rhymin blocks of Grecian stone
frozen in habits of dream,
free me of the familiar's heat and blindness;
let me
kneel upon the cold of all the rivered
unpossessed:

the crested pillars of that Roman doom
long rooming now in crumbled underworlds:
the petals of Egyptian flowers
bowed in everlasting of stone, in chill
of lips seduced to artifice,
the ice wherein the mastodon of fury fell
all fully armed, and wrapped in mystic valor.

Now pallor of light
at high, dim window, ancient beams,
the clear and aching violet of shadow.

The sun, the sun is gone! Alone
in cold I kneel, secure; and fail, and fall,
and stand to gaze
on seas of Vikings and Balboas, over deeps
beyond the last subliminal, beyond
the town's last fence and faltering, grassy rise.

SIDE II, Band 2: THE VIOLATION

Hard by my window, under the frost
of the last shadow of night,
a late and patient iris hung,
whose hope was my footstep, whose only star
the fair hand of my mercy that might permit her
to endure.

I drew the fragrance from her soul, I drained
the clear arbor of her skin,
and chilled my own impatience with the ice
of her wise meditation; and step by step I took
the good of her thought, the tincture of her
flesh
and crushed her into withering with my want.

The frost of shadow covers again
the pain of day. I look to see
the gleam of iris for my sleeping.
Deep to the sands of absence she has gone,
brought under by my love, thrust down
by my lean and terrible desire
for the pure.

What tender wish could be defiled
with viler avatars? What trust broken
with grosser lust? Abandoned I sleep,
and dream of one betrayed
who rages beautiful as a leopard beyond
the wall where she shall face me when I die.

SIDE II, Band 3: I SAW AN ARMY

I saw an army coming against the sun.
Its men were faceless and its banners dead.
No cheering voice was lifted — no, not one.
The broken flesh of wounds forgot to bleed.

Upon their shields they bore their children's
limbs
Seared in the oven of atomic glare;
Their belts were fission; and their armor
gleam
The dust of blasts beyond the stratosphere.

Pricked was their skin and threaded white with
steel;
The flame of rockets writhed along their thighs;
A chemistry of missiles bent the knee
And clothed the sorrowing mouth, the darkened
eye.

Yet in their ranks they marched upon the sun,
With hands hung weaponless, with cindered cheek,
And spectral footstep faint as desert wind
That fails before it finds the strength to
speak.

From death, the burning core of light, I
watched,
And cried with soundless throat, "Beware! Beware!"
But deaf they moved, straight to what I had
sought:
The fire of mastery, the target of power.
SIDE II, Band 4: THE ANIMAL

That March had a neck like an animal;
its pussy-willow eyes watched me
approaching.
0 the snow in the tops of my boots,
the melting water
cold through the rubber to my shins!
I think the taste of sky was threads
of scarlet
cut round my body like glittering
fever;
and I was breaking out my bones like steel
to reach and rake the last ice out of
hills.

Over, over the meadows hiding their hair
under death till the whipping wind of June,
alone I dashed, approaching the wood I
knew.
And there was that different animal,
March,
meek with its pussy-willow eyes;
its neck of alder brown outstretched
to ask me to be merciful. I took
fewer than my sister had told me to.
I hate
to break the body of March, to kill the
living.

SIDE II, Band 5: THE LONE IMMORTAL CAR

Take, now, the lone, immortal car;
bar from all roads the rest;
press holy foot to pedal, shock forward far
to west, to sliding south,
dry-mouthed, and springing flame on head.

Can you see, alone, the country is more
sane?
The rain of heaven beats upon your dust;
love is the rising fire, and motor hush,
roads shorn
of mortal, staring
with bare eternal evenness
of speech. For here the empty
teaches, and the eye can search
time’s work within the wheel of here,
fearless with God’s care.

Burn the white gas of pensive speed.
Agree. Agree to be singular and fleeting
and at rest
with the vast, barren road.
Goad the late heart with steel-precision
hurry
that carries the one car, mortal-redeemed,
verbatim grace.
And trace, O trace your fine tires in the
endless dust!

SIDE II, Band 6: TRAFFIC QUINCE

When you see the traffic light
brighten with red, and reach
the clear thorn of warning far,
starred the city air, - then there,
there is the quince bush within whose flare
the tired driver plunges flash
the mesh of Christ, no less, the love
swung forth from wires and poles of grace.
No face of Jesus rose more clear
to bare the fault, to still the weary.
He cared for traveller whose eyes looked up.
Ah trust of beauty and discipline,
win me to wait, leaning on wheel
till feel of distance, cosmic rest
bursts from that bush of traffic glow.
Know how the driven, flagging hate,
the lateness, panic, haste to be foiled,
in soil of patient moment fades,
to raise red quince of heaven’s bush
in hush before the traffic moves.

SIDE II, Band 7: HORIZON THONG

Go back now; pause to mark
that hill town cut in two:
one half, green summer’s charm,
the other, chained in snow.
Horizon, a thong of red
knotted by smouldering sun;
wind, the wind in the drifts,
and crystal blossoms flung
downward - so near, so warm -
to where orchards bend and lift.

And father, - father who kneels
to pull snowshoes from his back,
looks down to the shining field
where his son runs, easy and fast;

he must follow, follow to save,
but the snowshoes will not free;
they are rooted to shoulder blade,
they are flesh of paternity.

Only a quick run down,
but helpless he kneels in cold,
watches his young boy run
over meadows lyric and full
towards woods, a wood of his own.

Wrenching, and wet with pain,
the father downward bows;
the village of homes and men
grows faint in the blizzard’s glow.

The boy flashes under trees
and fades. The horizon mark
binds throat of man on his knees;
the sun-knot tightens to dark.

SIDE II, Band 8: FROM THE MOTIONLESS TWIG

This wisdom I learned from the motionless twig:
there is no place to go, and haste is illusion.
The things I would fashion from small into big
are already as large as my heart could have
chosen.
And what I believed I could master was there,
precisely achieved in the act of my prayer.

Why fear? Why reach out?
I am here. I am done.
For movement means only a doubt.
The world I will shape to my resting;
no light will fly out from the sun;
no petal will blow from the bough;
the storm will drive not the cloud,
will be always arresting.

There is nothing but now,
and whatever’s begun is through,
and each hope I enlisted has won.
The plane leaned, the city grew, rose to
ensare
brain's eye, blood's finger-tip, all desert
hope.

Yet lovely far, yet hung like rose,
yet known to thirsty and the proud,
suspended out of time, ungaured
from mesh of soil and flesh and metal,
released, as was the angel from stone,
flown, out-flung as virtue's rocket
locked in God's dream, wistful as man.

SIDE II, Band II: THE EXPIATION
Where I lectured, the platform was ankle-deep in
water.
The crowded stadium soared, dimming from view.
The people read programs, laughed, played cards,
ignored me.
Down the center aisle, ankle-deep water flowed;
the shoes of latecomers descending made no splash;
through diamond liquid, brown and black leather
glowed.

My notes slid down into wet; I bent and shook them.
Knew suddenly this was wrong lecture, crowd, and place.
Leaving by the center aisle, my shoes made no sound.
Down long meadows of shallow water I hurried,
recalling
my love. I had betrayed her; but how and where?
Here, in the winters of youth, we had skied.
Was this water that melted world? Had she passed
this way, fearing?

Now a dam, hissing, and thunder; but under it,
canyons of dryness.
I walked far. I was naked on a vast beach.
There was no horizon, no water anywhere; I burned
with invisible sun. Then in that void of yearning
I felt arms about me. They were hers. But when I
turned,
she kept at my back, behind me always.

Violent,
I twisted, revolved; but always the soft arms
clung;
she was there, but evaded. I stood on the sand,
the expanding and limitless beach, the wind cool;
but I could not
face her, or ever draw her to where I could
see.
There was no horizon; only wind without variation.

SIDE II, Band 12: LAST PATCH OF SNOW
I'm not sure why I touched it.
A crocus-tip can be more dazzling,
and a boy would rather throw dice
or marbles than be soft-hearted.

But the snow was the last,
in a corner between trees and wall.
The far crow answered things I had never
asked,
and the wind, nearly April, moved
the buds. I almost remembered what I'd felt
in the long blizzard; I nearly recalled
the power of my legs driving the skis.

Or was it the thought of a kitten, white,
who slept under earth I'd turned
myself in spring, a corner of the garden
withdrawn and secret, where, shaken,
the white wild cherry blossom fell?
I cannot tell. But I know
as I did when told, in older people’s prayer,
and taking the snow upon my palm;
saw the warmth of sun turn it to water,
the shudder and tremble, a tingling light.
I heard the crow, crying toward the river land,
the corn to fall, the hot suns of tomorrow;
and sorrow older than my memory flowed
from the fierce cold into my palm’s blood.

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SIDE II, Band 13: THIRST, AND A DOG RUNNING

Open the pure door of that summer air
and see again gold dog loping through heat,
past blueberry bush and orange-paintbrush fur
toward legs of desire, the depthless lake.

Tempered with sadness, slanted on turquoise sky,
ready to yield the soul to summer thunder,
grave animal, long-nosed, lank, and too-sharp-thighed,
racing the ball of sun, the dry earth’s tinder,
brushing the grass whose cool touch is a dream,
fighting for breath where rocky hilltops steam . . .

Did you ever reach that water? Did I ever learn
what God-ordained content is in a thirst slaked?
In my blood stretched with your running gold to where
light burned
incredibly like Arthur’s shield on hampered lake.

You paled from sight. Only when ice hung sharp
its coat-of-mail upon the lake’s side,
did I, dead spent from skating swift and far,
bend to the hole out by fisherman’s pike,
and in the fury cold of water aching the throat,
welling dark against my grateful lips.

see all that you had found, whether gained or lost,
whether reaching water or carried on hopeless ships
beyond your summer’s thirst, and death’s frost.
Seeking or finding, prayer is the self made quick.

SIDE II, Band 14: CHANGED

I saw a man turned into money:
His head became a bank vault door
in which the wheels were seen to hurry,
The valves were heard to quintly purr.
The breast was soft as brown purse leather
in which the bones were solid coin.
The bullion heart, held fast forever,
red stocks and bonds through copper veins.

Lithe arms of greenbacks wound to cable
cleaved over and tomb and mortal tower;
with special joy reached to inveigle
the tender child with twist of power.

And looking down, I saw, amazed,
that the reproductive organs set
in wax and most conspicuously placed,
were nothing more than cancelled checks.

SIDE II, Band 15: THE INVADERS

The birches slash at the shadow
with the pure white of joy;
the dark fur pour upward
to stain the mountain.

Out of the rocks come shouting,
immense, hospitable people,
hands like slabs of laughter,
hearts as gentle as moss.

To right and left they shower
all the coin in the world;
it lies like slag in the foothills,
like lustreless ash.

Up icy streams they stride,
breaking trout in their fists,
hurling to thrush and sparrow:
"No money! Not ever again!"

And out of the village doorways,
drunken and blazing with mirth,
shining like metal with glory,
the people pour to greet them,
no purse, no past, no guile;
only an open tumbling
caught and buried in dignified
illimitable.

THE NEW MEXICO QUARTERLY REVIEW

The following poems have appeared in:

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Thirst, and a Dog Running
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The Invaders

The Poet (Glasgow)
The New Orleans Poetry Journal
The Saturday Review
The Saturday Review
Atlantic Monthly
Anchro Review
Atlantic Monthly
The Southwest Review
The Ladies’ Home Journal
Atlantic Monthly
Quicksilver
Poetry, The Great Therapy
(an extended essay I published)
The Atlantic Monthly
New Orleans Poetry Journal
The Saturday Review
New York Herald-Tribune
The Saturday Review
Pragmatic Voices (an anthology)
American Poetry Magazine
The Sparrow
The New Mexico Quarterly Review