

A poetry magazine thrives, at least initially, on a certain contrariness.

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, quirky individualists, poetic gaberlunzies—a gaberlunzie being a Scottish wandering tramp. It's perhaps because, at one level, I feel I have been one myself. I associate the type, no doubt illogically, with an aspiration to genuineness and an indifference to “market forces”—qualities for which I believe a good poetry magazine provides one of the last outlets—as well as with licence (if not licentiousness), devil-may-care energy, 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, a keen eye for the Emperor's new clothes and an iconoclastic streak which is less a rebelliousness against convention than the more quietly radical fulfilling of an identity. Both magazine and poetry, however, must be good enough to be taken seriously; energy and individuality aren't sufficient by themselves. The art is paramount. Starting up a poetry magazine takes such effort that one's own emotions have to be implicated. It's not surprising that many such publications are begun by disgruntled poets eager to promote themselves and their view of poetry. I was a relatively late developer. I began writing poems seriously in my early twenties. I am relatively indifferent to prizes, competitions, and all that hoo-ha. I sometimes find myself at odds with “mainstream” poetic opinion, though I don't particularly enjoy being in opposition. It sounds simplistic, but I suspect that what I like *The Dark Horse* to publish now is rooted, in part, in what I liked to read, both in poetry and critical prose, when I was a solitary living in a Scottish caravan and my main motives for reading were enjoyment, in both the shallow and profound senses, and finding my own way as a poet. But I was also reading for *life*, for my life. Why was I as I was? Where was I in my life? I was looking for poems capable of speaking at that fundamental human

level—a level which does not preclude humour, exuberance, delight and even, at times, sheer daftness.

In the 1980s, in my early twenties, I was unengaged by many of the poems in reputable poetry magazines. I was baffled as to why such poems were considered good. I was young. I was ignorant. I was a fanatic nature photographer far more used to photographing things like the ommatidia of *Cordulegaster boltoni* than comprehending poetry. I suspected that those poems were the work of writers far cleverer and wittier and more knowledgeable than me. I also believed that anything appearing in such reputable venues had to be excellent.

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 can seem remarkably subjective. (Many of us must have had the experience of reading an eminent critic rave about work in which we can see little or nothing.) And, of course, a little doubt about one's own responses, as an editor, is always healthy. Yet I still believe that a nonspecialist but intelligent audience for poetry exists. Despite my distrust of literary hype, I hope that even a small consensus is possible as to quality. It's a pleasing notion within its limitations. *The Dark Horse's* name, however, with its implication of an unknown quantity, is also intended to indicate a willingness to recognise those limitations and to spring surprises. T. S. Eliot, asked what his "method" was as a critic, famously stated that the only critical "method" was to be "very intelligent". To paraphrase it where my editing is concerned, the only method is to be, if not "very intelligent"—which may be too much to hope for—then at least as intelligent as possible. And you can only edit as well as your contributors can write. Every poetry magazine depends upon the excellence of its contributors. Back in the days when I was critical of reputable magazines, I didn't realise that filling an issue of such a journal with high class work is no easy matter. Prose tends to be more reliable, but the poetry an editor receives falls into three categories: the immediate rejections; the immediate acceptances; and the possibles. The first is a depressingly large group. The second, a depressingly small one. The last is the one that takes time to consider: numerous readings may be needed to tell whether, for instance, a poem is just needlessly obscure or more intelligent than you are.

I founded *The Dark Horse* in early 1995, on the kitchen table of the Ayrshire caravan I was living in. I had the usual mix of reasons: a desire for self-promotion, a dissatisfaction with simply writing my own poems, and an indignation that could amount in those heady days to anger that many of the types of poems I wanted to read didn't seem to reach print. (I can still manage the indignation.) Also, I had recently been co-editing a 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, unprecedentedly, some spare money, I produced issue one of the Horse in April, 1995. The American poet-critic Dana Gioia had offered to be a conduit for new work from America. As I had nourished an interest in American poetry for the previous decade, 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 more than a local venture: useful in Scotland, where most of the poets know one another, with everything that implies for literary debate. I wanted the magazine not only to publish poems, but to be a forum for discussion about poetry. I wanted it to be the publication that, as a passionate outsider ten years earlier, I had looked for and not found.

These days I think of the Horse, with complications, as a social extension of my work as a poet. If I have any insight as an editor—ably assisted by the American editors Jennifer Goodrich and Marcia Menter in New York, both practising writers too—it is because of my involvement in the art. One's own poetic practice is solitary, perhaps lonely, self-concerned, and largely private. To produce a distinctive "little" magazine, conversely, is social and practical; it has a public dimension; it seems the logical flip-side of the private art of poetry. 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 poetry magazines, after all, are forums for the authentic life of the spirit. They may only be read by a few hundred or a few thousand people. They are, though, founded on the notion of a communicable humanity and on the reality of inner life and its exposition—an exposition which is strangely satisfying and, at least if one takes bombs, guns, and other signs of the end of discussion as a baseline, perfectly useless.