



*Howard Halpern, a second year McLaughlin student, attended the Basic Poetry course offered last fall by the New Writers' Workshop. The course is being offered again in the spring term.)*

**T**en minutes before the hour. Class over. You leave the room, and as you walk down the hall you spot a college newspaper lying on the floor.

Pick it up. Take a minute to leaf through it. A poem catches your eye. You read it.

It touches you. You like it. But something seems to be missing. And you feel you don't quite understand what the poet is trying to say.

Whose fault? Yours?

Have you failed to grasp the meaning on the page?

Or maybe a poem doesn't have to have a meaning. Maybe you can appreciate it anyway.

Or do you have a feeling something is missing from the poem? That it's not all there on the page. That somehow, what the poet was really trying to say never got into the poem.

According to Tom Arnett, program director of the New Writers' Workshop, poetry begins with an emotional experience. The poet must feel something. He is stimulated by an experience and has a compulsion to record it.

While writing, the poet undergoes catharsis, a purging of his emotions.

Fine. But what if no one else has any idea what the poet is saying? Then is he writing poetry? Tom Arnett says no.

**F**or the past four months, Tom has been teaching Basic Poetry at the New Writers' Workshop on Markham Street.

Operating under the theory that poetry is communication, he tries to get young poets to look at their own work objectively and from the reader's point of view. Ultimately, only the poet himself can decide whether he has communicated everything i.e. wants to say in his poem.

In order to help the poet learn how effectively he is doing this, a good part of the Basic Poetry course is spent "in workshop". This gives the poet an opportunity to read his poetry to the class and, more important, to observe their reaction.

Poetry is an art.

Art is communication. The purpose of any art, says Tom, is to evoke a specific response from an audience. The poet must therefore learn how to predict and control his audience's emotions.

The workshop provides an ideal situation for the poet to test his skill. He is asked to write out in advance the specific response he expects from the other members of the class.

In the workshop the poet hands out carbon copies of his poem, so that each person can look on while he reads. When he has finished, Tom goes quickly around the room asking each student, in turn, for his immediate reaction to the poem.

This enables the poet to determine how well he has succeeded in evoking a specific emotional response. Unanimity of response on the audience's part is often an indication of a good poem, even if the reaction was not correctly predicted. But the poet should learn from his mistake.

A wide variety of audience response, on the other hand, is generally an indication that the poem is too vague.

The success of the workshop method depends on three things. First, the members must be honest with each other. Second, they must be willing to give feedback. Third, they must not be afraid to criticize, even though criticism sometimes hurts.

In our workshop last fall I noticed some members were reluctant to open up in front of the group. It is not easy to do. That is why Tom is there. If you are not communicating with him, he lets you know.

**A**nd he has a way of helping you, although it might seem a bit unusual. Tom believes that the first draft of a poem is a catharsis, an emotional outpouring. You become aware of feelings you never knew you had.

But you can not expect your first draft to be a clear expression of what you feel. Deep meanings are often

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