

There's no poetry in money either.

—Robert Graves

arts

Coles hot for quality over quantity in poetry

By JOANNE CLARK

"I think there's a widely held view among straight, traditional academics that teaching creative writing is a very questionable activity, and I think that kind of attitude is not unknown in this university even, in certain departments," says Don Coles, poet and coordinator of York's Creative Writing Program.

Coles makes no grandiose claims for what a writing program can do. He agrees with those who say that fine writers are not created simply because of the existence of a program in creative writing, but there are two things that he feels a workshop can do.

A workshop can save a person committed to writing years of "hit and miss" experiment through the "audience" response available from teachers and students in the workshop.

"Writing is essentially a very solitary activity," Coles explains. "The image of the writer is of somebody who's sitting alone in a room with a piece of paper and a pencil. The only outlet that person has for a completed piece of work is to send it off to some unknown person, and as we all know, what normally happens then is that it comes back months later with a form letter, and that's no help at all."

Secondly, writing creatively gives a person a sense of a different kind of relationship to a work other than the one that is there merely for the consumer of literature.

"You can take a lot of academic courses and never get the sense that a particular line could have been altered. Well, it could have been," says Coles. "And if you've done some writing yourself you know that the line occurred out of the flux of the possibilities in the writer's mind, and stopped at a certain point, not because it was engraved in stone or was the absolute Platonic ideal sort of line."

Coles has been teaching at York since the fall of 1965. "A long time," he decides, after calculating the 19 years. Previously he attended the University of Toronto and lived and studied in Cambridge, Florence, Scandinavia, and Central Europe. To date he has published three collections of poetry—*Sometimes All Over* (1975), *Anniversaries* (1979), and *The Prinzhorn Collection* (1982). Three-quarters of the poetry in these volumes was written either in summers or during sabbaticals or leaves of absence.

This "slim canon of work," to quote one critic, is partially due to the fact that Coles began writing poetry comparatively late in his life. He had originally considered himself a novelist; while living in Europe he wrote two novels, "neither of them very good," said Coles. He began writing poetry seriously in the early '60s and feels that it took him a period of writing poetry before he was able to understand what he now believes poetry to be about.

"The poet uses the poem as a way of investigating certain matters that lie deep within him or that move him when he comes across them," Coles explains, "and he doesn't necessarily fully understand why they move him nor has he reached the deepest parts of his relationship to them."



Creative Writing Coordinator D.M. Coles

You write the poem as a means of discovering that. You don't write a poem in order to present the reader with a number of already arrived at surfaces." Coles doesn't think that he had this awareness in his earlier work and is happy the majority of those early poems don't appear in his first book. "There's some advantage to not having easy access to publication," he remarks.

Another reason for Coles' sober list of published works may be that he does not force himself to write every day. Different poets have different relationships to such matters as 'quantity' and Don Coles "for better or worse, would like every poem to be a communication that has a chance of speaking in some real way."

He cites Philip Larkin, a poet, he respects a good deal, as an example. Every 10 years Larkin produces a volume of 25 poems—that's only 2.5 poems a year. Coles thinks it would be nice to do a little more than that, but if he has to choose, "then that kind of careful object which is the fruit of a lot of thought and a lot of re-working, is the direction that art, as distinct from journalism should move in."

Not only does Coles publish his work sparingly, he seldom gives the admirer of his style a chance to hear him read his careful words. He is not a great fan of poetry readings. Like many of his peers, he does them for the money.

"It is obviously an important way to earn extra money, and," Coles says, "I don't know anybody, including myself, who wouldn't be glad to have the extra \$200 that one gets for doing a Canada Council reading."

To Coles, the act of writing poetry is essentially a communication of language onto paper and may be conducted over as much time as the writer chooses to take. What happens then is an experience between the reader and that page; to become a performer and read the words aloud to a group of 100 people is to critically change

the work. The listener takes a less active role in interpretation as the performer tell him with lines to emphasize.

"There is a private communion that takes place between reader and poem," Coles says, "and the rest of it, well, it's very peripheral."

Coles is quick to add, however, that he thinks it was important in the development of Canadian poetry that some people were ready to go around and appear on public platforms. "One can be grateful," Coles says, "to people like Irving Layton for doing that. He's one of those people who made the public conscious that there were people writing poetry who weren't necessarily delicate plants."

There's a lot of back and forth nurturing going on between Coles' writing and his teaching. A teacher may be better able to teach poetry, for instance, if he has the kind of insight into the way in which a line of poetry might have been evolved. This kind of insight can only come from direct experimentation within that particular medium. Coles is proud of York's tradition of writer/teachers, a list which includes, among others, Eli Mandel, Frank Davey, bp Nichol and Miriam Waddington.

There are always criticisms of new universities and their programs. But, Coles says, "here we have serious practitioners of what they're professing. We don't have people who think that to paint a picture once in 10 years is a neat thing to do, we have Ron Bloore and Tim Whiten in visual arts; and the people teaching the creative writing workshops—it's a serious matter to them. It's all too easy for these established, traditionally-based institutions to point the finger at other sorts of operations, but I went to U of T and they're still doing the same things there. I'm not knocking it, I probably learned a few things, too, in spite of best efforts against it, but they have not moved a great deal."

ArtStuff ON CAMPUS

Continuing

□ British Artists Prints, 1972-77, an exhibition of 56 graphic works by 30 well-known British artists. Art Gallery of York University, N145 Ross. Through to Oct. 5. Hours: M-F 10-4.



Timothy Dougdale

□ Timothy Dougdale's collection of recent photographs opens at the Samuel J. Zacks Gallery at 109 Stong College. Through to Oct. 12. Hours: M-F, 12-5.

Oct. 10

□ Winters College presents the first of three lectures by Dr. John McQuarrie in their Gifford Lecture series. The first is a talk on Hegel's philosophy. 4 p.m. in the Winters SCR. Free.

□ Samuel Beckett Theatre, in Stong College, opens with a performance of Warren Graves' *The Last Real Summer*. Admission \$2. The theatre is in Stong's basement.

OFF CAMPUS

Continuing

□ *Something to do With Space*, a sculpture exhibition focusing on seven local artists' concerns with space. Featuring Brian Buignon, Jane Buyers, Stephen Cruise, Andreas Gehr, Mark Gomes, Olaf Hanel and Peter Hill. Art Gallery at Harbourfront and outdoors around York Quay Centre. Through to Oct. 21. Hours: T-F noon to 6, Sat. and Sun. to 9. Free.

□ Eugene Ionesco's *Man With Bags*, directed by Stephen Lloyd-Elliott for the Graduate Centre for the Study of Drama. Oct. 6, 10, 13, 8 p.m. \$7, Students \$3. 978-8668.

□ Alvin Ailey Repertory Ensemble continue their trio of works at the premiere Dance Theatre. Queen's Quay Terminal, 207 Queen's Quay West. Through Oct. 6, 8 p.m. \$9-\$16. Student rates. 869-8444.

cont'd on page 10

Green thumbs mundane readings, tailors show to audience

By STEPHANIE GROSS

Taylor Green proved that poetry does not have to consist of dry and scripted readings. Last week at Samuel Beckett Theatre, Green sang/recited her works to a small but attentive audience, offering a unique poetic experience that was refreshing in its deviation from the Pompous Monotone genre of literary readings.

Green's poems are more a progression of chant and ritual than a series of academic and refined creative works. By using childlike chants, singing and conversational tones, Green created a polarity dynamic which juxtaposed a jaded media voice with naive and sensual tones.

Her symbol system grapples with such themes as pornography, vulnerability in human relations and fear of the unexplored. Her singing celebrates solitude and individuality, self-reliance versus the "pablum of the media."

Green explains that all writers have their own symbol systems. For her the snake and the desert are important. "The reason why the snake is meaningful to me," says Green, "is because it is an animal that doesn't have arms or legs—it is undifferentiated compared to other animals on the planet. That's why we are afraid of it, because it's so different."

Fear of the unknown, to Green, is "a fear of things that haven't been divided, identified and categorized." She sees the desert as representing a womb stage—when old ways of doing things have become inadequate and so rather than try to hold onto these ways, one accepts the silence and emptiness of the desert, recognizing it as a womb in which something is gestating.

"The desert is then a symbol of development and process," explains Green. "A symbol of half-baked understanding. It becomes obvious why we need to welcome the desert and welcome the snake to increase consciousness in order to keep going."

In her piece "Three Spirits," Green takes on the persona of a red-headed country woman who sings about the three spirits in her car: A plastic Jesus (taken from a country song), a Virgin Mary, and her newly-visualized self.

In "Wabarah," she mimics a Wrigley's commercial, military general Werner Erhard, and at the same time gives a description of St. Barbe Baker. Then she will chant something that came to her during a ceremony and go on to pretend that she is Carl Sagan talking to Ronald Reagan.

Says Green, "I connect up three levels of the same thing, i.e., rape of the planet (ecological), rape of women (pornography) and rape of the



Taylor Green at Stong College

atom. Green defines rape as being any situation in which there is a 'power-over' versus a 'power-with' dynamic going on. Violence versus cooperation, in other words. For example, instead of working with nature (recycling, wind and solar power) we have set up a system of destruction and waste which is gutting our world and, ultimately, ourselves.

Green uses humor in both an uncritical and critical fashion. While she criticizes the current structures of society, she does not assault the

audience. Her naturalness and honesty allows her to communicate with, and not at, the listeners. She is a poet who uses herself and her own life experiences as a guide as opposed to following any philosophical system or school of poetic expression. Her poetry can be felt and perceived on many levels, even though the connections she makes may not be easily grasped. She bridges the gap between herself and her listeners through honesty and vulnerability.