

The following letters were written in response to Louis Torres's *The Child as Poet: An Insidious and Injurious Myth* (1/88), an essay-review on Myra Cohn Livingston's *The Child as Poet: Myth or Reality?*.

Although my book was reviewed in the *New York Times* and many professional journals, yours was such an insightful review that I am moved to write and thank you.

You may be certain that my position on the matter of children as poets is not widely held; it is much easier for teachers to have formulae and call whatever is written, poetry. The horror is that children have a false impression of who they are and are cheated in later life. Indeed, the new swing to "process" writing is equally ridiculous, but let me not go into a screed on that!

I would like to comment on your feeling that I did not define poetry; to do so would be fatal, I believe, for certainly the New York School and I do not agree on what poetry is—nor does any one school agree with any other. But on that point, as well as the points on Romanticism and what you call "modernism" (and I call "pseudo-surrealism"), I chose to remain silent. There were actually six more chapters to the book which had to be deleted. I think your point on philosophy vs. mythology is valid; I suspect that, knowing my audience, I chose the word "mythology" because the very word "philosophy" can be frightening. As it is, the book is difficult for the teacher who clings to Kochian methods, and wants simple answers. There are none.

Myra Cohn Livingston  
Beverly Hills, California

I found the January 1988 issue of *Aristos* well worth reading and applauded particularly your article on children's poetry. It is absurd that schools should encourage in the young the idea that any "sentiment" in cut-up lines is a poem.

But I was surprised at the definition you offer as a criterion. *Rhythm* cannot be the test, since good prose has rhythm too. You must mean *metre*, which is regular rhythm, recurrent rhythmic patterns suited to the particular language. But even with metre all you have defined is verse, not poetry.

I do not believe that it is possible to name a set of requirements for poetry. In several languages, mere parallelism of thought is one defining feature—e.g., the Bible. In English the variations of form and substance, from *Piers Plouman* to Robert Bridges and from Walt Whitman to

G. M. Hopkins and William Carlos Williams are enough to defy definition.

Coleridge brushed aside the distinction between verse and prose in order to be able to find poetry wherever his sense of it dictated, and I think that his way is the one followed by most readers as individuals. One says "this is poetry" and another says "not on your life" about the same words. If art is a contrived extension of life, as I believe, this dissensus is to be expected. One person says "life is good" or "life is a vale of soul-making," and another says "life is bad," "life is a tale told by an idiot, signifying nothing."

Jacques Barzun  
New York, New York

Cultural historian Jacques Barzun's *A Little Matter of Sense, an essay on the language of criticism*, was reprinted in the March 1988 issue of *Aristos*.—Ed.

I have valued articles in each issue of *Aristos*, and am pleased to support the voice of reason and discernment in the arts. Your remarks in your essay-review "The Child as Poet" could as well be applied to an article titled "The Child as Visual Artist."

Don Koestner  
Silver Bay, Minnesota

Don Koestner was one of ten artists featured in "A Survey of Outdoor Painters," in *American Artist*, October 1988. He was also a contributor to *Realism in Revolution: The Art of the Boston Painters* (reviewed in *Aristos* 3/86).—Ed.

Thank you for the copies of *Aristos* with the cogent review of *The Child as Poet* and the article by Jud Jerome. *Aristos* is a most handsome and high-minded journal, which I plan to recommend to our local library.

X. J. Kennedy  
Bedford, Massachusetts

X. J. Kennedy's most recent volume of poetry is *Cross Ties: Selected Poems*. He is also the author of *An Introduction to Poetry*, a widely used college text; and co-editor, with his wife, Dorothy, of *Knock at a Star: A Child's Introduction to Poetry*.—Ed.

Louis Torres replies:

As I indicated in my essay-review on *The Child as Poet*, I have considerable respect for Myra Cohn Livingston's ideas on poetry and education (as well as admiration for her own poems for children). And my esteem for Jacques Barzun extends far beyond that expressed

in our editorial "The Courage to Say So" (3/88). Thus it is particularly vexing that both writers maintain that poetry cannot be defined.

For they cannot have it both ways. That is, if Mr. Barzun says it is not possible to "name a set of requirements for poetry," then on what ground can he take issue with those who argue that "any 'sentiment' in cut-up lines is a poem"? (Concerning the issue he raises of *metre* versus *rhythm* as a distinguishing characteristic of poetry: my emphasis on the term *rhythm* derives in part from the cogent article on poetry in *A Handbook to Literature* by Thrall, Hibbard, and Holman, rev. ed., 1960.)

Further, if Mrs. Livingston maintains (as she does in *The Child as Poet*) that "those of us who seek to define poetry do so in vain," how can she or anyone—as I asked in my review—know who is a poet? (It would be illuminating to know what Mrs. Livingston would say if she decided not to "remain silent" on this issue.)

As has been frequently emphasized in the pages of *Aristos*, the problem of definitions is, I believe, central to the survival of the arts today. We can no longer afford to ignore the distinction between real poets—like Coleridge, for example—and those modernists who write nonsense, not poetry. Whatever Coleridge might have said about ignoring the distinction between verse and prose and about finding poetry "wherever his sense of it dictated" (to borrow Mr. Barzun's words), he cannot have meant by it what today's "avant-garde poets" do—as evidenced by his poems, which are unmistakably works of poetry, not prose, and which make considerable sense.

There is an answer to the question, What is poetry?—as there are answers to the larger, related questions, What is literature? and What is art? The answers are, of necessity, grounded in an esthetic theory based on objectivity, not subjectivity. I will turn to such a theory in detail in a forthcoming essay.

\* \* \*

### An Appreciation

*Aristos* is the most welcome and refreshing magazine I've ever subscribed to. You have opened much of the world of art to me (by making it understandable, i.e., rational) and that is priceless. I am now in the middle of the exciting task of reading all your back issues. Thank you.

David Haddad  
Dallas, Texas