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The Child as Poet

An Insidious and Injurious Myth

by Louis Torres

Are children natural poets? To Myra Cohn Livingston—a respected children's poet who has also taught in the schools—the answer must be an unequivocal no. But to many others active in education over the past two decades, the response to this question has been resoundingly affirmative.

Knowing the question to be an important, even urgent, one, with profound implications for both education and esthetics, Livingston has devoted a scholarly, comprehensive study to it and to the corollary issue of teaching children to write poetry. In her book *The Child as Poet: Myth or Reality?* she examines, in depth, the two opposing views and the resultant educational approaches. One view—holding that true poetry-making requires a certain psychological and intellectual maturity, as well as conscious creative effort—draws on established poetic traditions and sound pedagogic principles to introduce children to the writing and appreciation of poetry. The other, holding all children to be natural poets, is the transformation of a centuries-old mystique of the child-as-bearer-of-truth into a perversely deceptive pedagogical movement, one which beguiles educators into regarding the instant output of children as equal or superior to the mature work of adult poets. Exploring the implications and consequences of the latter approach, Livingston reveals practices which have impoverished the thought and esthetic sensibility of countless children. If this assessment seems exaggerated, consider the following product of the myth of child as poet:

Stapling My Face

India ink babies crawling on my linen.
roaches disfiguring apples, smoke making my eyes sweat, lashes fall out.
not noticing beggars clad in chinese silks, nor the windmill drowning in the tide.
passing the buck, paper dolls running the casinos of vegas.
dogs barking. city. city. valentine dates and purple hearts. tell that to the G.I.'s.

Neither the drug-induced hallucination of a Beat poet of the sixties nor the ranting of a madman, this "poem" by a fourteen-year-old girl is, as Livingston amply documents, no rarity. A steady stream of such nonsense has been produced in our schools for a generation, by students from the early primary grades on, under the tutelage of a cadre of modernist poet-teachers—with the encouragement of professional educators and considerable government support. (A more innocent example—by a fifth grader, writing "in imitation of Shakespeare"—reads as follows: "Will you come with me in the woods and hear the / birds chirp, the bees buzz, buzz, and the rabbit / going hopity, hop, hop.")

Kenneth Koch

The examples quoted above (from *The Child as Poet*) originated in American classrooms in the 1970s, in connection with the poets-in-the-schools project begun in the previous decade by the National Endowment for the Arts. As Livingston demonstrates, that project, which continues in various forms in schools across the country, owes its shape and success largely to the influence of one individual—Kenneth Koch, a writer who, with Frank O'Hara and John Ashbery, was a founder of the avant-garde "New York school of poetry" in the mid- and late 1950s.

An example of Koch's early work is "Lunch" (which he valued enough to single out for inclusion in a student anthology of "modern poetry" he compiled with another writer twenty-three years later). Written, as Koch himself has reported, in one afternoon in 1958 and changed "very little" after that, "Lunch" is a disjointed excursion into disparate feelings and sensations, ranging over some 150 lines, in rapidly shifting locales and styles. The briefest stanza reads as follows: "It is time to give lunch to my throat and not my chest. / What? either the sting ray has eaten my lunch / Or else—and she searches the sky for something else; / But I am far away, seeming blue-eyed, empirical . . . [ellipsis in original]."

In 1968, with funding channeled through the Academy of American Poets, Koch became a "poet-teacher" at P.S. 61, a New York City elementary school, where he continued to teach for several years. Based on his first year's experience there, Koch wrote *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams: Teaching Children to Write Poetry*, outlining his classroom approach and reprinting many of the "poems" produced by the children in his first- through sixth-grade classes. The title of the book refers to devices Koch used to inspire his students to write, such as suggesting that they begin every line with "I wish." The products are, on the whole, fragmented and incoherent.

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Louis Torres is Editor and Publisher of Aristos.

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Most are simply lists of one-line ideas or images, unified only by the repetition of (or variations on) Koch's formula phrases: "I wish . . ." or "I dreamed . . ." or "If I was. . . ." Some of the writing samples are undisguised prose, not even arranged to resemble poetry, yet Koch includes them under his all-encompassing term "poems," without offering one word of qualification.

One of Koch's favorite techniques was to have children collaborate on their writing in pairs or groups, often with each child contributing lines without knowing what the other lines were. In Koch's view, the finished product turned out to be "one poem—interesting, beautiful, funny, and *sometimes even making sense* [emphasis added]."

As for models, Koch deliberately avoided using any poetry written by adults, even that written *for* children. Disdainful of poetry for children by adult poets (for using rhyme, for not conveying serious emotion, and for being "condescending" and "cloyingly sweet"), Koch preferred to read aloud from the work of his students. He explains:

> The poems my students wrote were better than most of those in elementary school textbooks. Their poems were serious, deep, honest, lyrical, and formally inventive.

Would he include, one wonders, lines like those by a young student of his (quoted above) in which the rabbit goes "hopity, hop, hop"?

In 1973, Koch brought out another book, *Rose, Where Did You Get That Red? Teaching Great Poetry to Children*. The pretension of its subtitle notwithstanding, the book merely uses great (and not-so-great) poetry as a flimsy pretext to motivate students to produce their own freewheeling imitations. Not surprisingly, the student efforts resemble Koch's work more than they do that of the genuine poets represented in the book.

In 1980, Koch co-authored (with poet-teacher Kate Farrell) *Sleeping on the Wing: An Anthology of Modern Poetry with Essays on Reading and Writing* (which includes his "Lunch"). Written for high-school and college students to use on their own without the guidance of a teacher, the book gives Koch a direct line to impressionable young minds. The simplistic Introduction warns readers against "old-fashioned and false ideas about poetry" and extols the approach of modern poets, who have escaped the "limiting" effect of "logical connections" by engaging in "nonrational ways of thinking." Brief essays following the poems (and non-poems) exhort students to facile imitation and instant success. A remarkably patronizing end note addressed to professional educators offers such Kochian insights as "students are usually beginning writers and beginning readers of poetry."

Though some teachers and poet-teachers disagree with Koch's approach, Livingston points out, most praise his ideas and methods. His books have become teaching manuals in a variety of American schools, from inner-city elementary to competitive public and private secondary schools. And Koch, who is Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University, has traveled as far as China to spread his ideas.

"A well-turned phrase or an original metaphor is one thing. Being a poet is another."
—Lee Bernd

Langston Hughes

Of the poet-teachers whose ideas and pedagogical methods Livingston frequently cites in contrast with those of Koch and others like him, none is more admired by her than Langston Hughes (1902-1967), the only poet-teacher to whom she devotes an entire chapter of her book. In 1949, Hughes—regarded by many as the foremost black American author of the twentieth century—spent three months as poet-in-residence at the University of Chicago Laboratory School, teaching writing (fiction and nonfiction, as well as poetry) to students in grades six through ten.

Interestingly, at the Lab School, Hughes (who frequently championed the cause of his race in his writing and was openly, often bitterly, critical of the American mainstream) taught students drawn almost exclusively from middle- and upper-class white families. Radical as he was in his political and social views, Hughes was in important respects a traditionalist in his approach to writing and teaching, and could write simple, lyrical poetry transcending racial consciousness—such as this example quoted by Livingston from *The Dream Keeper* (a collection published in 1932, primarily for young readers):

Dreams

Hold fast to dreams
For if dreams die
Life is a broken-winged bird
That cannot fly.

Hold fast to dreams
For when dreams go
Life is a barren field
Frozen with snow.

In teaching poetry, Hughes maintained high standards. He used exemplary models from both the past and the present, and taught his students the value of formal elements such as rhyme and metrics. Unlike Koch—who values spontaneity, above all, and regards the spontaneous creation as a finished product—Hughes emphasized the importance of reworking one's writing: "Those manuscripts which seemed to need revision (and most of them did) were returned to be polished up and brought back the following week." Yet Hughes's teaching was neither dry nor impersonal. From his first meetings with his classes, he stressed "the pleasures that lie in individual creation—not in imitating anyone else but in making one's own world in words on paper." (One former student interviewed by Livingston movingly recalled that Hughes's classes were the "first and last time" a "school situation was so filled with excitement, openness and creativity. . . . I remember that suddenly, words became so important.") Hughes also stressed the relationship of creative writing to reality in a way few poet-teachers do today. He taught his students that their writing—even fantasy—must be based on known facts, on careful observation of the world around them. Again, unlike Koch (who recalled with pride the "lovely chaos" and "maelstrom of creation" in his classes, whether students were working on "collaborative poems" or independently), Hughes pointed out to his students that

> seldom is serious writing done in groups or in a room full of people, and that, if the spirit moved them, poems should be put down quietly at home. Some did write at home, and a few lovely little poems were brought to class as a result.

This brief remark speaks volumes about Hughes's sensitivity toward children and poetry.

What Is Poetry?

Central to *The Child As Poet* is the question, What is poetry? Livingston answers this question indirectly, writing knowingly about the attributes of poetry and about the creative process. She sees creativity as the interaction of the self with external reality, and believes that reality disciplines the poet to "go beyond raw self-expression."

> Poetry is not a series of self-engendered images; it is not pure subjectivity. The poem must discard the *image* and present a *symbol* that is understood; it must shed its *subjectivity* and give *objectivity* [emphasis in original].

Livingston further declares that objectivity is essential for the poet to communicate his vision to others. Moreover, when she indicates that all literature worthy of the name "humanizes mankind" and "extends self and social consciousness," she implies that poetry communicates fundamental values. The "countless pedestrian listings" and "meaningless alignment, stilted diction, and lack of voice" that have come out of

the Koch approach are, she maintains, clearly *not* the stuff of poetry; they fail to broaden or enrich the life-experience of the reader in any substantial sense.

Stressing the importance of logical structure, Livingston approvingly quotes the poet I. A. Richards's description of poetry-making as "the ordering of what in most minds is disordered," and notes elsewhere that the insistence on writing irrational poems "eventually leaves the reader bereft." But she ultimately hedges on the issue of formulating a definition of poetry (and is often ambiguous in her use of the term). Her view that "those of us who seek to define poetry do so in vain" unfortunately reflects a pervasive critical attitude in all the major arts, and in the culture at large. And yet, if poetry cannot be defined, one must ask, how can we know who is a poet, much less judge who qualifies as a poet-teacher?

Thus it is worth noting here that poetry *can* be defined, and that most definitions have focused on *rhythm* as the principal attribute distinguishing poetry from other branches of literature. For example, the English man of letters Walter Theodore Watts-Dunton, in a classic article on poetry, prepared for the ninth edition (1885) of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (and retained through many subsequent editions), wrote: "Absolute poetry is the concrete and artistic expression of the human mind in emotional and rhythmical language." More precisely, poetry might be defined as *a form of imaginative literature distinguished primarily by rhythmical language.* (A full discussion of this definition would be beyond the scope of the present article, requiring a detailed explication of the concepts *literature* and *art.* For such an analysis, the reader is referred to novelist-philosopher Ayn Rand's *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology,* which includes a discussion of the nature of definitions; and her *Romantic Manifesto,* which contains articles on the nature and function of art in general, and of literature in particular.)

Romanticism or Modernism?

Livingston suggests, in her Preface, that today's mythology of children as natural poets is a "Romantic attempt on the part of adults to impose order on chaos in a perplexing age," and later refers to the Kochian approach to poetry as a "new sort of Romanticism." In thus linking the two movements, she emphasizes their shared flouting of conventions and their untrammeled expression of personal feeling. She fails, however, to identify the much more fundamental distinction between the two. Whereas the emotions expressed in the modern approach to "poetry"-making tend to be disjointed and capricious, the passions associated with true Romanticism spring from individual systems of deeply held positive values. And, though the Romantics themselves often explicitly (and erroneously) denied or rejected "reason" and "intellect" in favor of "intuition" or "emotion," rationality was implicit in the choice of positive values they lived and worked by. Likewise, for all their vaunted rebellion against poetic conventions, their works were imbued with meaning and form, both of which are products of the rational, ordering faculty of the human mind. Non-poems like "Stapling My Face" (and Koch's "Lunch") represent not the influence of Romanticism, then, but the influence of modernism, with its wholesale rejection of positive values and its flouting of all tradition (not merely convention). Oddly, Livingston never explicity refers to modernism, though everything she criticizes in the non-poems she cites can be ascribed to this anti-rational, fundamentally anti-humanistic movement.

The anti-rational aspect of the Kochian approach to poetry calls to mind an essay on modern education by Ayn Rand entitled "The Comprachicos" (published in *The New Left: The Anti-Industrial Revolution*). Written in 1970 (the same year Kenneth Koch's *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams* was published), it presents a sharp contrast to Koch's views. Maintaining that the young child's ability to distinguish between external reality and his subjective consciousness is stifled by the kind of teaching she censures, Rand argues that the child's "precarious hold on reality" is shaken in the process. She concludes that such an approach to education "conditions [the child's] mind to an anti-conceptual method of functioning that paralyzes his rational faculty." Though Rand was here referring to the teaching of very young children, the same charge can surely be made against those who, like Koch, explicitly recommend to students that they engage in "nonrational ways of thinking."

"A New Mythology"

Having succeeded admirably in discrediting the myth of the child as poet, Livingston rather surprisingly concludes toward the end of her book:

> People must . . . have their mythologies; some semblance of belief and order by which to explain their very existence and resolve the chaos of their lives. If one mythology disappears, it must be replaced by another, and this new mythology must *not* be rooted in fancy, but in . . . reality. . . .

Apart from the unexpected pessimism of her phrase "chaos of their lives," Livingston's suggestion that a new mythology, rooted not in fancy but in reality, must be found to replace the old, is puzzling, since myths are, by their very nature, rooted in imagination, *not* in reality. What is needed, of course, is not a *mythology* but a coherent *philosophy.*

The "new mythology" Livingston proposes is, in fact, not a mythology at all, but a bold manifesto and rational program for preserving the poetic traditions of the past while creating new and exciting learning experiences for the poets (and poetry lovers) of the future. In Livingston's new classroom, children would strive to make their writing coherent and meaningful; they would base fantasy on fact; they they would learn from carefully selected models of the past and present; they would know they are not yet (and may never be) true poets, but would still revel in the creative exercise of their minds. And they would be guided by adults like Lee Bernd (an elementary school teacher cited by Livingston), who knows that when we accept less than the best each child is capable of, we are not only doing a disservice to poetry but "are failing in a miserable way to do justice to the arts and artists in general." In a larger sense, as Bernd asserts,

> we are failing the children themselves. . . . How can we, in conscience, give children the impression that a work of art, or any work of worth, is *easy*? . . . Use praise, but set the standards high. A well-turned phrase or an original metaphor is one thing. Being a poet is another. Λ

About the Author

Louis Torres obtained an M.A. in the Teaching of English from Teachers College, Columbia University, in 1971, having previously completed a year of graduate study in Child Psychology at the University of Minnesota. Prior to founding *Aristos* in 1982, he taught English and esthetics in public and private high schools in the metropolitan New York area for fifteen years. He also taught sixth grade and served as a substitute teacher in other elementary grades.

Myra Cohn Livingston

Poet, teacher, and critic Myra Cohn Livingston has written a number of volumes of poetry for children, including *The Way Things Are* (1974), unfortunately out of print, and *Worlds I Know* (1985)—both excellent. Her most recent volume (which *Aristos* has not seen) is *I Like You, If You Like Me: Poems of Friendship* (1987).

"The Child as Poet"

Published in 1984 by The Horn Book, Inc., *The Child as Poet* can be purchased directly from the publisher. The 1987-88 catalogue, with information on this and other fine publications on children's literature, can be obtained from The Horn Book, Inc., Publications Division, 31 St. James Avenue, Boston, MA 02116.