The following letters were written in response to Louis Terris’s The Child as Poet. An Brodsky and Anthony Myer (1988) in an essay review of Myra Cohin 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 nature 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 what they are and are cheated in later life. Indeed, the new swing to “process” writing is equally ridiculous, but let me go no further on that.

I would like to comment on your feeling that I did not define poetry. To do so would have been fatal, I believe, for certainly the New York School and I do not agree on what poetry is—not does any one school agree with any other. But on that point, as well as on the points of Romanticism and what you call “modernism” (and I call pseudo-modernism), I choose to remain silent. There were actually six more chapters in the book which had to be deleted. I think your point on philosophy vs. mythology is valid. I suspect that, knowing my audience, you 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. These are none.

Myra Cohin Livingston Beverly Hills, California

I found the January 1988 issue of Ariadne well worth reading and appreciated 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. Rhyme cannot be the test, since good prose has rhyme too. You must mean metre, which is a 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 a defining feature—e.g., the Bible. In English, the variations of form and substance, from Peter Panzer to Robert Bridges and from Walt Whitman to G. M. Hopkins and William Carlos Williams are enough to defy definition.

Coledge 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 this is a direction which follows one by most readers as individuals. One says “this is poetry” and another says “not on your life” about the same words. If it is a divided system of life, as I believe, this disunity 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 Barran
New York, New York

Civilian historian Jacques Barran’s A Little Matter of Sense, an essay on the language of criticism, was reprinted in the March 1998 issue of Ariadne.—Ed.

I have valued articles in each issue of Ariadne, and am pleased to support the voice of reason and discretion in the arts. Your remarks in your essay review of 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 Reaheads in Revolution: The Art of the Boston Parnassus reviewed in Ariadne 1(1).—Ed.

Thank you for the copy of Ariadne with the cogent review of The Child as Poet and the article by Judie Jerome. Ariadne 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 Cool Times 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 Terris replies:

As I indicated in my essay review of The Child as Poet, I have considerable respect for Myra Cohin Livingston’s thesis on poetry and education (as well as admittance for her own poems for children). And my esteem for Jacques Barran extends (or beyond that expressed in our editorial “The Courage to Say So” (1988). That it is particularly vouching that both writers maintain that poetry cannot be defined. For they cannot hope it both ways. That is, if Mr. Barran says it is not possible to “name a set of requirements for poetry,” then on what ground can be take issue with those who argue that “any ‘sentiment’ in cut-up lines is a poem”? (Concerning the issue he bases of meter versus rhyme as a distinguishing characteristic of poetry: my emphasis on the term rhyme derives in part from the cogent article on poetry in A Handful to Literature by Thrall Hibbard, and Holman, rev. ed., 1963.)

Further, if Mrs. Livingston maintains that she does in The Child as Poet that “those of us who seek to define poetry do so in vain,” how can she be anyone—_as I asked in my review—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 Ariadne, the problem of definitions is, I believe, central in the survival of the arts today. We can no longer afford to ignore the distinction between real poets—like Coleidge, for example—and those modernists who write nonsense, not poetry. Whatever Coleidge might have said about ignoring the distinction between verse and prose and about finding poetry “wherever his sense of it dictated” (to borrow Mr. Barran’s words, he cannot have meant by it what today’s avant-garde poets do)—as evidenced by him by them—who are one and the same unhappily 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 last question: What is literature? and What is art? The answers are, of necessity, grounded in an aesthetic theory based on objectivity, not subjectivity. I will turn to such a theory in detail in a forthcoming essay.

An Appreciation
Ariadne 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 Haddock
Dallas, Texas