

NOTES FOR BROADSHEET POETS 2 HAVING A MENTOR

Having a mentor could well be very important to you, as it is healthy to have an objective critic upon whom you can test your work and whom you admire sufficiently not to hate when he/she wants you to change your precious (just written) words. A mentor can take the place of time and point out flaws or clumsy lines which you might not recognise for months or years. A mentor can encourage you and also help you to develop your craft and suggest new themes. Even if you do not agree with what your mentor says, this disagreement can sharpen you and make you reconsider your words, usually for the better. Of course, there is the poem that comes all of a piece, like a gift, the one that can never be tampered with, but these kinds of poems are extremely rare.

I hope Brendan Kennelly will not mind me mentioning that he was my major mentor over a number of years when I was in my twenties, back in Dublin for a few months every year, but, in general, living abroad. Having responded most positively to my initial ramblings, never before shown to anybody, he got me to send him every single poem I wrote when I lived in Paris, for example, and he would write back with a warm, detailed, critical commentary which spurred me on and helped me to believe in what I was writing. His own handwriting in a fountain pen has the same flourish to this day. I think Brendan has been, and probably still is, most inspirational for many young poets and he is to be thanked and blessed for his generosity and selflessness in this.

Many aspiring poets today find mentors in increasingly popular schools of creative writing, in poetry societies, teachers or just among friends or relatives.

Dorothy Wellesley, who lived only about ten miles from where I reside, had Yeats for her mentor. Thus I would like to present, here, chosen extracts from *Letters on Poetry from W.B. Yeats to Dorothy Wellesley*, a cover-less rare book I happen to have in my keeping, which offers many useful tips.

**Extracts from *Letters on Poetry from W.B. Yeats to Dorothy Wellesley*:
(Oxford University Press, 1940)**

Yeats: Riversdale, August 11, 1935

When I get to Penns in the Rocks, I would like to go over your last poem, word for word, perhaps to read it out. There may be one or two absurdities in the syntax – I am not sure. You will grow into a great poet.

(Notes from D. Wellesley: ..I was anxious to persuade him to reconsider some of his selections and omissions for *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse*, and especially his decision to omit nearly all the war poets, including Wilfred Owen. On this point he remained adamant, holding that 'passive suffering was not a subject for poetry', just as a passive attitude towards nature did not make fine poetry. The creative man must impose himself upon suffering, as he must also upon Nature. I agreed in principle; but I did not agree with his application of this theory to certain poets.

He preferred sitting out of doors, even on windy days. In choosing my *Selected Poems*, his method was to collect all the copies of a volume in the house, and then to cut out crooked bits of pages with a large pair of scissors, throwing these scraps of paper to the ground with an impatient hand for others to pursue and paste together. Some of these had to be collected from the Rocks).

Dorothy Wellesley, Penns in the Rocks, Withyham, East Sussex
October 1st, 1935

...My head is full of new verse, singing, pounding even in my ears, but practical affairs must be dealt with. Do you think inspiration can be lost if not born with the first birth-pang? I fear this may be so. But perhaps no inspiration is ever lost, but recurs months, perhaps years later. It seems to me that poetry is begotten of a tune. More and more deeply I feel this, have never really doubted it.

Yeats, Riversdale, October 8th, 1935

...I like what you say about poetry being begotten of a tune. I have just finished an essay on this subject which I will show you. You ask if inspiration can be lost; no, not when creation has started (then it goes on like the child in the womb). One of the two reasons I am going to Majorca is that if I can start a great momentum to write, I can go on even in this turmoil.

Yeats, Riversdale, October 9th, 1935

...It is a queer thing that the folk lilt lost since the time of Burns has been discovered in our time. The essay I told you I was writing on tune and poetry is for the *Cuala Broadsides* and done in collaboration with F.R. Higgins who is a fine folk musician. We show that even the poet who thinks himself ignorant of music will sometime write unconsciously in tune.

Yeats, Riversdale, Monday, November 18th, 1935

...I send you under another cover some Broadsides, songs with their music, that to the traditional songs, mostly never printed before, this to the songs of living poets mostly newly composed. The pictures by Dublin artists are all hand-coloured by my sisters' girls. As I told you we shall follow with a second series of Irish and English poets.

Yeats, Riversdale, November 23rd, 1935

....The version (of 'Fire') is much improved, but I want to suggest two changes. Near the top of page 7 you have an indented line 'And the wind is wild'; I want to leave that line out, it holds up the speed and is too obviously put in to rhyme with 'child' which does quite well as an unrhymed line. The other change is at the beginning: I want to put a mark of exclamation after 'Modern Man!' Without that it looks as if 'Modern Man' was the 'core of life'.

D. Wellesley, Penns in the Rocks, December 10th, 1935

....I flirt with my Muse but she has evidently quarrelled with me. My half-born poem left me and I am dejected. It was crowded out by practical people – the old story.

Yeats, Hotel Terramar, December 21st, 1935

....Force yourself to write, even if you write badly at first. The first verse after long inaction is in my case almost always artificial, and then it branches out.

Yeats, Hotel Terramar, December 22 (I think)

....You get much of your effect from a spare use of adjectives and the using as much as possible of such necessary and usual ones as in 'Modern Man', 'Cheap Jewel', mere statements of fact. It gives your work objectivity.

(Notes from D. Wellesley:....W.B.Y. speaks like Zeus. Within two minutes of our first meeting at my house he said: 'You must sacrifice everything and everyone to your poetry'. I replied: 'I have children and cannot'.

W.B.Y. is forever trying to revise my poems. We have quarrelled about this. I say to him: 'I prefer bad poems written by myself to good poems written by you under my name'. When he has made a suggestion for altering a certain line in my verses and I demur saying: 'I shall make a note saying this line was altered by W.B.Y.; otherwise I am cheating', he says, 'No! It has always been done in a company of poets', which is true. He adds: 'Lady Gregory wrote the end of my "Deirdre" on my fundamental mass'.

However, I shall do as I intend.

....We were sitting in the garden talking of Irish politics when he suddenly said:.....'Poetry is always present in my mind'. We then agreed that great rapidity of mind which gives the average person the impression of disordered thinking, or lack of concentration, is a marked characteristic of the poetic mind. He has it himself most strongly marked).

Yeats, Casa Pastor, Palma-de-Mallorca, Spain, April 6th, 1936

....I may point out to you one or two places where in my selections from your work the thought is good, but the words are not in their

natural order – ‘the natural words in the natural order’ is the formula. I would never alter a fine passage to conform to formula but one gets careless in connecting passages and then formula helps.

Yeats, Casa Pastor, May 3rd, 1936
....Our words must seem to be inevitable.

Yeats, Casa Pastor, May 22, 1936
....We want, not a new technique, but the old passion felt as new.

Riversdale, July 2nd, 1936
My dear, Here you have a masterpiece. (I have just put in the rhymes, made it a ballad).....This is far better than my laboured livelier verses. This is complete, lovely, lucky, born out of itself, or born out of nothing. My blessing upon you and it.

Yeats, Riversdale, August 5th, 1936
....We all have something within ourselves to batter down and get our power from this fighting. I have never ‘produced’ a play in verse without showing the actors that the passion of the verse comes from the fact that the speakers are holding down violence or madness – ‘down Hysterica passio’. All depends on the completeness of the holding down, on the stirring of the beast underneath. Even my poem ‘To D.W.’ should give this impression. The moon, the moonless night, the dark velvet, the sensual silence, the silent room and the violent bright Furies. Without this conflict we have no passion, only sentiment and thought.

My wife will send you the Turner poems and their setting and also a poem by Hugh MacDaermid – there are so many ways of spelling that name....

Yeats, Riversdale, Thursday, August 13th, 1936
....My dear, you must be prepared for silly reviews until you are so old that you are beyond caring & then they will only take another form of silliness. For twenty years I never sent a book for review in Ireland knowing that any review here would be an attack. The more alive one is the more one is attacked.

....Write verse, my dear, go on writing, that is the only thing that matters. Beardsley said to me, ‘I make a blot & shove it about till something comes’.

Yeats, Riversdale, December 4th, 1936
....I feel that one’s verse must be as direct & natural as spoken words. The opening I sent you was not quite natural.

Yeats, Riversdale, December 21st, 1936
....O my dear do not force yourself to write, it should become as natural to you as the movement of your limbs. When I cannot do

anything else I take up some old fragment & try to add to it & perfect it. ...I have just turned out a thing of joy, just such a fragment.

Yeats, Riversdale, February 8th, 1937

...I am most anxious to see your new poems – all that you need I think to perfect your style is to prevent any departure from the formula ‘Music, the natural words in the natural order’. Through that formula we go back to the people. Music will keep out temporary ideas, for music is the nation’s clothing of what is ancient & deathless....

Yeats, Riversdale, February 26th, 1937

....Why did you make the poem so difficult to write by rhyming every line instead of alternate lines as in my ballad? This has made you call the lover first ‘knight’ & then ‘squire’, incompatible titles (in one place you call him Lord). I suggest you put the poem aside for a time & then read it when you have forgotten the associations that arose during the act of writing.

D. Wellesley, June, 1938

I think I once wrote in a letter that all man’s life was a rhythm: his waking, his sleeping, his loves, the passing of his loves, his despair, his peace, his acceptance of old age and death. The musicians have understood this. I do not think that the poets have understood in any way to the same degree. Perhaps they are too passionate.

Yeats, Riversdale, 3rd July, 1938

The first poem ‘Love’ is very moving and profound. There are words I would like to change. First there is the old point, never employ two words that mean the same thing.

(Notes from D. Wellesley: Yeats once said to John Sparrow: ‘The tragedy of sexual intercourse is the perpetual virginity of the soul’.... I think he hated all his early poems, and ‘Inisfree’ most of all. But one evening I begged him to read it. A look of tortured irritation came into his face, and continued there until the reading was over....His later poems he was always willing to read, also those of other contemporary poets....The strangest thing concerning his excitement about ‘words for music’ is that he declared himself to be tone-deaf).