

By Richard J. Margolis

Would it be a pardonable exaggeration to describe Scott McVay, the executive director of the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, as the second philanthropist in American history to take poets into account? Surely the first was Andrew Carnegie, the godfather if not the actual inventor of charitable foundations. In both instances democracy supplied the rationale and New Jersey provided the arena.

It was to a house in Camden, New Jersey, that a worn-out and discouraged Walt Whitman repaired in 1884, at the age of 65. Destiny and a prosaic public had not been kind to his expansive hopes. All the great poets, he had declared three decades earlier—confidently including himself in that select circle—conveyed to their listeners similar messages of welcome: "Come to us on equal terms, Only then can you understand us, We are no better than you, What we enclose you enclose, What we enjoy you may enjoy."

In Camden, with perhaps too much leisure to ponder his past, Whitman conceded a measure of defeat. "I have not gain'd the acceptance of my time," he wrote, "but have fallen back on fond dreams of the future—anticipation."

They Hear America Singing

*Americans' Ability to Use the English Language Is in Decline.
But When the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation Staged
A Poetry Festival, 1,200 High School Students
Showed That TV May Not Have Won Yet*

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INSPIRATIONAL use of the English language absorbed teenage listeners, right, filled crisp fall air at a dozen sites around Waterloo Village, above.



*"Language may be the distinguishing feature
of the human species, and poetry the
pounding heart of language."*

His earnings, seldom adequate, now seemed to sag with his spirits. Whitman's total income in 1885 was \$1,333, and more than half of it had come in the form of gifts from English admirers. It was then that Andrew Carnegie intervened, calling it a disgrace to "triumphant democracy" that financial support for America's greatest poet should have come from abroad.

Whitman's best biographer, Justin Kaplan, does not tell us how much Carnegie contributed that year to triumphant democracy; but two years later, when Whitman traveled to Madison Square Theatre in New York to deliver a lecture commemorating the twenty-second anniversary of Lincoln's assassination, Carnegie shelled out \$350 for his box.

If the cost of philanthropy has soared in subsequent years, the support of poetry has remained grounded, held down by the gravity of public in-

difference. Of the billions spent each year by government commissions and private foundations in assistance to the arts, less than two percent encourages literature of any kind, and only a scintilla of that pittance goes to nourish poetic appetites.

Now comes the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, with its heart and its headquarters both close to the center of New Jersey, hoping to revive Whitman's dream of a language, a music, accessible to all: *Come to us on equal terms . . . What we enclose you enclose . . .*

Genuine Milestone

Last October the foundation sponsored a brave event, a three-day poetry festival attended by an estimated 3,000 people. Andrew Carnegie might have frowned at the cost—

\$165,000—but he would surely have smiled at the cause.

What follow here are an observer's impressions of the festival's first 12 hours, along with some guesses concerning the foundation's first 12 years.

Friday morning, October 10. My wife and I right now could use an enclosure. The chill rain has driven us and quite a few others to the shelter of a great maple, one of several that embellish the Waterloo Village green. Waterloo lies close by the Allamuchy Mountain in northwest New Jersey. It encompasses some 10,000 acres of early American history—a steepled church, a canal decorated with geese and mallards, a stone gristmill, a forge, a tavern—all the customary symbols of restoration.



*Of the billions spent each year in assistance
to the arts, less than two percent encourages
literature of any kind.*

*The thought of you leaving
just breaks my heart in two.*

"Mary," exclaims the friend, "that's really good. It's so sad."

Emphasis on Youth

The youthful conversation reminds me what this first festival day is all about: it will focus exclusively on high school students, some 1,200 of whom have been bused in with their teachers from towns across New Jersey. (The public part of the show begins this evening.)

In point of fact, the celebration can be said to have gotten under way several weeks ago, when Festival poets began visiting more than 50 New Jersey high schools, reading their works, critiquing the poems of teachers and students, revealing the poets' touchability, the flesh-and-blood side of the Muse.

All this fits as neatly as a limerick into the Dodge Foundation's agenda, which among other things puts great store both in the arts and in the high schools. More than half of the \$5.6 million the foundation distributed in grants last year went to those two enterprises. (Another large sum was earmarked for what the foundation likes to call "Critical Issues," many of them related to environmental protection.)

"Our *primary* interest is in secondary education," McVay pointed out in the foundation's 1985 report, adding, characteristically, that in Dodge's diligent hunt for useful educational programs, "the best ideas came from the teachers themselves."

Those annual reports—chatty, elegant and strewn with the epigrams of seers and commoners alike—offer a fair reflection of Dodge's philanthropic approach. McVay and his board of trustees (chaired by William Rockefeller) tend to identify with bird-watchers—that is, with persons who can spot wonders that others might overlook. "We look and listen a long time to find out where the gaps are," says McVay.

Once a gap has been sighted, the

purse. For instance, since 1983 Dodge has spent \$1.6 million on a "Chinese Initiative" that promotes the teaching of the Chinese language in 40 American high schools. "Nobody was paying attention to the problem," McVay explained. "Even now, we have fewer than 5,000 high school students in the United States studying Chinese. In China 50 million youths are studying English—a one to 10,000 ratio!"

This festival, another gap-filling venture, has been in the making for more than a year, ever since McVay and the trustees decided that Americans in general and high school students in particular ignored poetry at their peril.

In the fall of 1985 a working committee McVay had assembled asked a dozen scholars and poet-watchers nationwide for lists of likely festival participants. The responses netted 134 nationally-recognized names, which in time the committee winnowed down to 23.

McVay soon found an ideal festival coordinator—James Haba, an associate professor of English at Glassboro State College. An accomplished poet himself and a passionate proclaimer of the craft, Haba seemed to have read everything and to have met everyone. "I'm not one of those teachers who publish," he would confide later with a touch of pride. "I teach."

In March, from the foundation's headquarters in Madison, Haba and McVay sent individually addressed letters to New Jersey's 3,700 teachers of high school English, asking them for advice on how best to blend poetry with pedagogy. "We got some astonishing responses," says McVay. "The words jumped off the paper like crickets in the field."

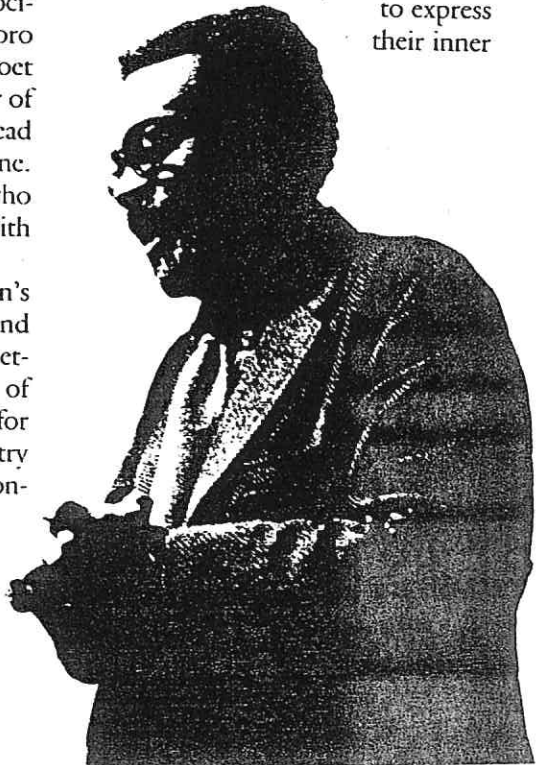
Some samples of those verbal hops and hopes: "Poetry is a dirty word in our society," lamented

Peter Murphy of Atlantic City High School. "It is the Rodney Dangerfield of the arts." He wanted poetry to gain respect, "to become acceptable, to thrive."

From Kearny High School Lynn Ann Hammer sent a letter emphasizing her students' concerns about "choosing careers" and "financial security," and their consequent need "to rub shoulders with [anyone] who has taken 'the road less travelled.'"

"I believe that opening students to poetry is more and more important in our society, with its emphasis on science, business, and 'earning power,'" noted Betty Lies, who teaches at a parochial school in Princeton. "In the computer and TV age, we need to help the young tolerate and appreciate ambiguity instead of expecting easy, quick, defined answers. . . ."

Julia Latzer, writing from her regional high school in Springfield, observed that "many young people write 'poetry' in order to express their inner





SURROUNDED BY POETS, Dodge Foundation's Scott McVay relishes Festival's success with, from left, Galway Kinnell, Sharon Olds, McVay, Festival Coordinator James Haba, Stanley Kunitz, Gerald Stern, Stephen Dunn.

turmoil." She hoped that teachers could learn "how to harness this kind of creativity to last beyond the ephemeral needs of the teen years."

Workshops, Courage and Criticism

Some of the creativity this morning may be harnessed beneath the little striped tent-roofs of yellow and white that adorn the festival green like sun-scoops. The famous poets are conducting writing workshops there for anxious acolytes. Diane and I go our separate ways, wandering from tent to tent.

In one workshop I find Herman Ward, a New Jersey poet and master teacher (now retired from Trenton State College), urging a student named Maria to read her poem. "If you're strong enough," he inquires, "can we criticize your work?"

Maria's work seems to be about racism in South Africa and the violence it engenders. There is a reference to the Cape of Good Hope and another to "the reddening sand . . . much like that of a Roman arena." But apparently the poem is unclear, for hardly anyone in the group can state its subject.

Ward smiles at Maria. "Here is a

question the poet should ponder," he says: "Am I being muddy or profound?"

It occurs to me that much of what Ward has to say about poets could apply with equal force to philanthropists and their Boswells. Do we have the strength to hear others criticize our works? Are we being profound or merely muddy?

Beneath a nearby shelter the poet Sonia Sanchez, a small, brown woman with a gleaming smile, seems to be enchanting her young charges. Sanchez's poetry can be insistent, even strident—"listen to me/ screeamers this song," she urges in one poem, a jagged appeal to her "young . . . brothas & sistuhs." But here on the green she is all gentleness.

A nervous student has just read aloud a poem of her own, which begins with a question: "Will our love stand the test of time?" Now Sanchez takes the poem in hand and gives it a second reading, her sweet cadences turning this halting effort into something surprisingly lovely.

"Thank you for having the courage to share your poem with us," Sanchez

says to the student. And then an apparent afterthought: "You may want to think some more about your first line. It doesn't startle us because we've heard it before. You see," she adds, laughing, "it's hard to write an exciting love poem. We all think we're experts on that subject."

Noon. Performing poets have been popping up everywhere: Ruth Stone in the Tavern, Galway Kinnell in the Church, Diane Wakoski in the Meeting House. One has no rational way to choose; even in this miracle-tinged setting, ubiquity is out of the question.

So I head for the Gazebo, which is really an open-sided cupola, where all of us non-poets have been invited to perform. Today, anyone who wishes can read aloud from the works of Langston Hughes. Walt Whitman will be the featured poet tomorrow, Emily Dickinson on Sunday.

I do not read; I feel just fine sitting on a folding chair within the little wooden rotunda, watching the students take their turns. "O, let America be America again—" reads a black student, her voice quavering with emotion:

*At their best poets do far more than simply
mirror our moments on earth—they transform them,
allowing us to view the world with a fresh eye.*

Others, like Wayne Slappy, who teaches English and physical education at Vailsburg High School in Newark, have beamed urgent messages toward their students:

*You think you're cool and act real tough.
Well let's see if you're rough enough.*

*... Let me tell you something before
we get started—*

*If you don't cool down, you'll be among
the departed.*

2:40. Wayne Slappy and I are sitting at a patio picnic table not far from the Waterloo Meeting House. In the distance we can hear Baraka in the main tent leading a group of rap poets.

Slappy is explaining why he uses poetry in all his classes, even in a course on first aid: "You get a real sense of the students' inner being from the poems they write—their family background, their personal problems. Sharing those things can make a school into a family instead of just a pupil factory."

He says he grew up in a public housing project in Newark but he attended a high school out of the district, two miles from the project. "I had to cut through a cemetery and a park, then past a lot of beautiful trees and houses. And every day as I walked through that rich neighborhood, I'd say to myself, *Well, I can have this.*"

His English teacher was John Silva, and "Mr. Silva was the best thing that ever happened to me. He taught me how to pay attention to clouds, to water on a leaf, to Shakespeare."

Slappy got his high school diploma in 1970. Tall, black and athletic, he had once entertained dreams of becoming a professional basketball player; but then, on reading A.E. Housman's "To an Athlete Dying Young," he'd concluded that "sports weren't so hot." Between us we manage to remember a couple of Housman's telling lines:

like all epiphanies, require occasional respite. Besides, I want to talk with McVay, who has providentially come by my picnic table. I hope to learn why he and the Dodge Foundation have gone to so much trouble.

McVay is not one to answer mechanically. "For me," he begins, "you start with a song"—which happens to be precisely how he started his own career: not with poetry but with the songs of whales, dolphins and porpoises. He has published 25 papers on the subject and has traveled twice to the Arctic with expeditions studying the bowhead whale.

From "Songs of the Humpback Whales," a paper McVay wrote with the biologist Roger S. Payne (*Science*, August 13, 1971), we can pick up some clues regarding this festival's origins. The paper begins by evoking "the quiet age of sail," when whalers could sometimes "hear the sounds of whales transmitted faintly through a wooden hull." But "In this noisy century . . . of propeller-driven ships," sailors can no longer hear the songs.

When McVay joined the Dodge Foundation 11 years ago, not long after the foundation had been created, those whale songs continued to echo in his mind, bespeaking the delights of careful listening, the dividends of respectful vigilance.

"Language," he says, "may be the distinguishing feature of the human species; and poetry may well be the pounding heart of language"—something we all desperately need to listen for above the technological din.

4:30. On my way to "Conversations with Poets" in the Meeting House, I cross paths with Haba, who tries manfully to smile. He mutters something about an urgent need to remove a church pulpit—or maybe to install one. I can't

we have paid for our truancy. Gwendolyn Brooks and Ed Sanders started without us, as did the talented mime, Yass Hakoshima. At least we are in time to hear the Paul Winter Consort, that lustrous quintet of musical speculators.

Diane and I stay close to each other, hoping to discourage the sharp night chill. Surveying the tented scene, we see that most of the teachers and students have departed. In their place has arrived an older but fresher contingent of poetry fans, perhaps 600 in all. Like us, they have made themselves small against the cold—but no one is leaving the tent.

Now Paul Winter, holding a golden soprano sax, appears on stage with his wondrous colleagues: a pianist, a cellist, a flautist and a man who plays all manner of percussive instruments. Later, they will improvise accompaniments to Gary Snyder's poems, but for the present they are on their own.

Incredibly, they begin to play whale songs, or rather to accompany the plangent underwater tapes in which we are suddenly drenched (courtesy of Rosewood Sound). First we hear those eerie whoops and blasts, song-spouts that to my land-locked ears sound both sad and joyful.

Then, one by one, the musicians take up the lush themes, playing *tutti* to the whales' *solo*, and reminding us that from the deepest realms comes music. For the next 30 minutes we are all sailors, our hull a canvas tent, awash in this festival of melody and mystery.

Andrew Carnegie had a piece of the truth, and so does the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation. "The problem of our age," he observed in 1889, "is the proper administration of wealth, so that ties of brotherhood may still bind the



WITH BACKGROUND SOUNDS from his Indian harmonium, Allen Ginsberg rocks, rolls, recites. Kinnell, center left, trades lines with Newark teacher-coach Wayne Slappey. Governor Thomas Kean, below, recites with Pulitzer Prize winner Carolyn Kizer.

term husbanding and its just apportionment; as pressing as harmony between classes is human harmony with creatures great and small—with the singing whale, the gliding hawk, the tiny fish beneath the dam.

Indeed, the amount of binding together we now require of ourselves is awesome to behold, embracing the whole earth and its heavens. "I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journey-work of the stars," Whitman professed—and he was right as usual.

Yet such truths, if truths they be, appear far from self-evident. Most of us function most of the time as if they did not exist; we prefer our own short sums, our everyday bottom lines, to Whitman's grand totals.

It may be that science and technology, for all their wonders, have kept us small-minded, draining our vision even as they have laden our table. No one has devised a technology for peace; no one has invented a geometry of love. That sour tune we keep humming under our breath is probably a postindustrial blues.

Poetry enters here, for the cadenced "proofs" it advances can make such notions manifest. We hunger for those harmonies; we yearn to glimpse the ties that bind us to the universe and to each other, all the half-sensed connections between beauty and truth.

At their best poets do far more than simply mirror our moments on earth—they transform them, allowing us to view the world with a fresh eye, even with a fresh resolve.

The lesson of that festival weekend in Waterloo was not that poets could save us, but that by paying strict attention to one another we might just possibly find a way to save ourselves. The foundation's unexpected gift, it now seems clear, was hope. □