

The Legacy of Dylan McGoon

A reply to Karl Shapiro's 'The Poetry Wreck,' a cranky essay on "the degeneration of the literary intelligence and the attendant confusion everywhere in our lives."

I.

Guitar in hand
and the adulations of even hard-core
pressmen
tucked securely up his duodenum,
Dylan McGoon, poet and rock star,
walked serenely away
from the unadulterated fiction
of Karl Shapiro's tired academic
brain

 through the well-oiled keys
of a late-model typing machine
only to become
this century's funniest character
since Lafcadio Wluiki
who
 like the proud author of *Poems of a Jew*
 (and another critic I once knew:
 a Pocket Poetess who hated Beats)
also failed to commit the perfect crime.

But no, this is neither the time
nor place
to further despoil the face
of America's literary image
or to pick apart the pros
and cons
of her fall from Whitman's
state of grace.

Eliot is dead
and likewise Pound,
but God help Shapiro
for shoving McGoon around:
dear Brother,
your thinking is most unsound.

I know,
the critic must play
his critical part,
trying to define Art

within a thin circle of recognition
felt only inside his poetic
heart.

But it never works:
either the horse runs away
from the cart
or hides behind it.

And I'm in the bushes
watching this scene
while inside my head
the defining critic wants to
scream:

how is it possible
for a mind that can see
all that Lao-tse Miller
has been to him and to me,
how can it be
that even this constantly changing
mind
can remain so unsympathetically blind
to all that is happening
at this particular point
in cosmic time?

II.

I have a friend
who wouldn't give you a dime
for Ravi Shankar
but swoons in wordless rapture
to the plucked strings
of an obscure Bengali sitarist
named Manilal Nag:
my friend also senses
the subtle gap
between entertainment
and more than minor Art.

But this gifted poet,
who in Bombay
of course stayed at the Taj
like all the other American Raj,
has mistaken the gap in
Art
for a breakfast-table fart
only because his heart is unable

(through overdoses of wit
and underdoses of fable)
to assimilate the pains
of evolution:
in him there is no revolution,
only the dry and dusty ashes
of an overworked life of
involution.

Now don't get me wrong;
I do not believe the choice of
hotel
need have a bearing on the truth of
his song:

 even Mick Jagger,
when he goes to Bali,
always puts up
at the Tanjun Sari.

The situation is not
the same:
Shapiro's Pulitzer Prize-winning
fame
is hardly the sort that needs
protection
from the long-tongued worship
of groupie detection.

One thing only does make me
smile:
while another poet, namely me,
strolled without rupees
along the sea
in Colaba,
his elder brother
sat stuck in a bath
at the Taj.

 But then let's see
what happens to me
should ever I become
a Haji.

III.

I will not lecture on the merits
of Ginsberg,
or say why the primal screams

of Lennon turn me on,
or why Kerouac failed
or Bob Dylan forgot
how unhealthy it is
to drive every week
to the bank:

instead

I will simply thank them all
and thank the others, too,
for what they have given me
and might have given you,
if only you had asked:
and in this medium
the only way to ask
is to listen.

Brother Shapiro,
if you don't have a turntable
you can borrow mine;
it's stored in my sister's
attic
along with the *Collected Poems*
of Robert W. Service
and a couple of down-home albums
from good old Johnny Cash,
who I readily forgive
for having hitched his star
for a while
to a slapstick preacher named
Billy Graham:

no, this is not a sham

of Art
but part and parcel
of a people's cyclic growth
toward awareness
and in some cases
a vivid record of their many failings.

You have built your own bridge
over troubled waters,
while your very sons and daughters
have left you behind
to wallow in the fruitless mire
of a self-defined bourgeois poetics.

Jump off your bridge
and float awhile downstream:
murky maybe, but like the Ganga

extremely refreshing.

Float awhile
and do not be afraid to dream.

IV.

The reality of Art
is neither turd nor fart
but an auto-erotic burning
in the heart of a big-assed bird
called Love.

And if above there is no
judge,
then why create one
down below?

You see,
I have another friend
who swears Ravi Shankar
can send him to heaven.

Brother Karl,
do let your bread leaven
just a little.

EDDIE WOODS
Kathmandu, April 1976