

Poetry Prompts

by [G. Tod Slone](#) (April 2024)



Political Exiles –by Peppino Mangravite, 1928

Let's now turn this topic inward, exploring our own writerly temperatures: Does your poetic degree of hotness or coldness match the natural temperature of your body, of where you were born, of where you currently live, of where you hope to live? Look at the length of your stanzas, where you choose to break lines, the musicality of your language (your pacing, use of rhyme, consonance, and assonance), how you utilize form on the page, how distant or present you are emotionally, how much the "camerawork" of your poems zooms in on the speaker and what they are witnessing, how you might turn the camera away before revealing too much, where you choose to locate your poems in space (outside or inside), and what the climate of that location allows for. See what temperature you may be transferring to your readers. –India Lena González, Assoc. Editor, Poets & Writers Magazine, poet, and multidisciplinary artist

To read more wisdom on the correct temperatures of poetry, examine González' *Poets and Writers (P&W)* article, "[The Poetics of Temperature](#)," an excellent example of the poetics of inanity, which in itself could serve as a poetry prompt. But rather than that, it is the most recent addition to the "Craft Capsules series," where "authors reveal the personal and particular ways they approach the art of writing." Hmm, now, I'm left wondering if *P&W* might be interested in featuring my approach in the series...

Often I quote Thoreau, "let your life be a counterfriction to stop the machine," although I'm not really convinced he followed his own advice. If he had, I suspect he would not have become the darling of the Concord Chamber of Commerce today, and its Thoreauan tentacles—the Thoreau Society and Thoreau Institute, as well as Shop at Walden Pond. Indeed, in Thoreau's light, I criticized those entities when I lived in Concord and was essentially "how-dare-you" ostracized for doing so (see "[Walden Pond State Reservation—Free Speech in](#)

[Peril](#).” As for writing, the “machine” constitutes what I’ve termed “the academic/literary establishment” –its icons, laureates, cultural apparatchiks, writing organizations, writing magazines, and of course government and foundation money in the form of literary prizes, grants, fellowships, etc.

To question and challenge that “machine” is clearly a literary taboo. How do I know? Well, I’ve been doing precisely that for over three decades ... and have been ostracized into oblivion for doing so. If a writer wants to get published, more than follow in Orwell’s footprints, then he or she must obey the thou-shalt-not-criticize taboo. Orwell, another writer who I often quote, had written in his essay, “[Why I Write](#)”: “I write because there is some lie that I want to expose, some fact to which I want to draw attention, and my initial concern is to get a hearing.”

The prompt idea for this essay stems from the weekly writing prompts featured on [Poets & Writers](#) website. In fact, a number of those prompts prompted me to respond critically—not quite in the *P&W* desired manner—sometimes in the form of cartoons and sometimes in that of essays. Indeed, the prompts have served as grist for my creativity, though, again, not quite the kind favored by *P&W* editors and staff. In fact, I have yet to come across a prompt that seeks to get writers to write something critical of the writing establishment. It seems the prime purpose of the prompts is to get writing fanatics to write reams of vapidness, which serve the writing industry, which absolutely abhors the horror of writer’s block. For some of my critical output regarding *P&W*, which constitutes a prime element of the writing industry, examine, for example, “[The Sad State of Poetry in America Today](#),” “[Notes from the Literary Landscape: Hot Air in the Blimp](#),” “[I, Poet Apostate](#),” and “[The Fragrant Ninth](#).”

The editors have simply ignored the criticism I’ve sent over the years. How might that jibe with their statement: “*Poets &*

Writers continues to champion the cause of freedom of expression"? Non-response likely results when uncomfortable/undesirable truths are evoked by unknown entities and brought to the attention of editors, poets, professors, administrators, journalists, etc. For the editors of *P&W*, I thus brought to their attention a simple, glaring example: freedom of expression, yes, but certainly not the expression you do not like. Another point I generally make is that truth and career do not make good partners. Writers need to contemplate that and how the latter might demand the shunning of the former. Non-response tends to constitute the prime *modus operandi* of predilection, even more so than *ad hominem*, for writing apparatchiks at the helm.

The prompt themes reflect the metastasizing of what the French term *l'art pour l'art* into *l'écriture pour l'écriture* (writing for the sake of writing). The writing industry is immense. Creative writing classes and workshops, for example, span across the country and monetize writing. Think of the salaries of those who teach and promote them in universities. Think of the government grants provided to them. What the industry succeeds in doing is castrating, coopting and corraling writers and writing.

Evidently, the prime defect in the literary "machine" is its absolute rejection of real criticism. "Machine" critics have really become nothing but "machine" publicists. As editor of a 501c3 nonprofit literary journal, I overtly counter that sad reality by requesting criticism regarding each issue I publish, including and especially the editor, and publish the harshest received in each issue and NEVER close the door on those who dare break the thou-shalt-not-criticize taboo. How sad that *P&W* does not publish an iota of criticism with its regard. And so in its world, it is somehow a perfect organization staffed by perfect editors. What else is new, eh?

The writing prompts, under the banner of "[The Time Is Now](#)," consist of three categories: creative nonfiction prompts,

fiction prompts, and poetry prompts. “The Time Is Now offers three new and original writing prompts each week to help you stay committed to your writing practice throughout the year,” notes the anonymous prompt editor. A short paragraph notes the reasoning for the prompts, including: “Whether you’re struggling with writer’s block, looking for a fresh topic, or just starting to write, our archive of writing prompts has what you need. Need a starter pack? Check out our [Writing Prompts for Beginners.](#)”

The prompts often begin with verse from a poet, then a suggestion that one imitate them though in line with ones own experiences. Thus, the most recent prompt, “Eponymous Poem,” begins by citing Molly Brodak: “I am a good man [sic]. / The amount of fear / I am ok with / is insane. / I love many people / who don’t love me. / I don’t actually know / if that is true. / This is love. / It is a mass of ice / melting, I can’t hold / it and I have nowhere / to put it down.” Brilliant, right? And so the anonymous prompt editor suggests: “How can you bring your own deeply personal responses to questions about your life and relationships under poetic scrutiny in a way that represents your individuality?”

The prompt subjects are numerous, including Nicholas Cage’s *Con Air* movie, an essay by a Palestinian killed in Gaza by Jews, a miniseries featuring Edgar Allen Poe, the color orange, gothic glory, deep space, local news, wedding bells, animal self, traveling nouns, nationhood, and on and on. Anything, of course, but hardcore criticism! The anonymous editor further notes:

[Prompts] can help you get unstuck if you’re in a rut and the ideas aren’t flowing. But even if you’re not experiencing writer’s block, writing prompts can offer a fresh take or a new approach to a work-in-progress. Writing prompts can also provide the motivation to experiment with

a new form, try out a new genre, or learn about other writing techniques. And writing prompts are an invaluable tool for teachers who want to encourage and inspire their writing students.

Again, anything but ... get off your arse, question and challenge a local writers workshop, a writing magazine like *P&W*, local cultural apparatchiks, poetry festivals that ban dissident poets, protest in front of a censoring library, criticize the Library of Congress and its autocratic selection of poets laureate, etc., etc. Hell, I've done those things ... and never even attended a writing workshop. Personal experiences with corruption, especially in higher education as a professor, pushed me to become a writer, certainly not vacuous writing prompts.

Finally, the following serves as an example of a taboo prompt, which of course was sent to the *P&W* editors, who did not respond. Why precisely would it or something similar be knee-jerk rejected as a prompt possibility? How might rejecting such prompts help encourage critical thinking and writing? Why are poets being shielded in safe spaces? Are they generally so fragile? With that regard, read my essay, "[10 Poets Who Definitely Will Not Change the World](#)," which challenges *P&W*'s "[10 Poets Who Will Change the World](#)." How does poet fragility help the poetry industry earn more money? Absence of criticism and conformity pay? Perhaps so...

Poets of the Machine

The ostracized, untenured, ungranted, unprized, unlaureated, unfellowshipped, uninvited, and banned dissident poet, P. Maudit, penned the following poem:

The Silence of the Poets

Hey, homeys, the cat got your tongues
or rather has the establishment got your *cojones*?
Oh, yeah!
The great poet performance—Chen Chen and Joey Rios*
up a tree k-i-s-s-i-n-g,
blind-eye turning, backslapping, kowtowing,
and—oh, but of course—unoriginal identity politicking.

Oh, where, dear fellows of dubious fellowships and
awards,
might the unsafe, un-comfy, unremunerative truth be
hiding???

Aha! I see it—o'er yonder behind the muzzled poets—
a crumpled beacon in the trashcan!

**Both poets were anointed as two of P&W's "[10 Poets Who Will Change the World](#)," featured on the front cover of a [2018 issue](#). That title, however, was in small type. Perhaps even the editors thought it aberrant.*

So, besides the rhythmic uncanniness, note also the pejorative terms employed, as well as the two actual poets mentioned by name. Write a poem using caustic terms as a means to sharpen rude truths, while pinpointing critically one or several actual establishment poets. Name names because naming names is a form of accountability. Then perfect the poem and send it to the poet(s) in question, as well as, to the magazine(s) and organization(s) praising them. Criticism in the form of poetry has become quite rare nowadays. It could possibly help poets, especially those who tend to receive nothing but adulation and even virtual deification, as in the "10 Poets Who Will Change the World."

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G. Tod Slone, PhD, lives on Cape Cod, where he was permanently banned in 2012 without warning or due process from Sturgis Library, one of the very oldest in the country. His civil rights were being denied because he was not permitted to attend any cultural or political events held at his neighborhood library. The only stated reason for the banning was “for the safety of the staff and public,” yet he has no criminal record and has never made a threat. His real crime was that he challenged, in writing, the library’s “collection development” mission that stated “libraries should provide materials and information presenting all points of view.” His point of view was somehow not part of “all points of view.” In November 2022, he requested the library [rescind its banning decree](#), which it finally did. He is a dissident poet/writer/cartoonist and editor of [The American Dissident](#).

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