

31st July 2000

Dear Millie,

Thanks again for sending me a selection of your writings. Firstly I was impressed by your feeling for the sensuality and musicality (the slurp and crunch) of the English language. This shows me that you have a talent that you may wish to develop.

But I need to ask a question. Who are you writing for? If you're writing for other people then you risk losing yourself in their approval or dismissal and both are equally perilous. You don't have to be a writer for anyone but yourself and if you have to write then it must be for yourself first and foremost.

Only then is there the possibility that others may like what you do. (Please read the letter by Rilke that I have included. He says all this so much better than I can.)

But in order to hone your craft you have to write even when you have nothing to say so that when the inspiration does come you are there with your skills. (It's similar to music in that way.) And part of that honing is learning not to be afraid of simplicity. Simple does not mean stupid. It means clear, exact, unfussy. A simple thought or image does not need dressing up in fine or fancy words. In the pieces you sent me I can see that you enjoy playing with style (street talk rubbing up against high flown). Yes, learn the styles, play with them but know that they are not the whole show. I repeat, the most important thing is to stay true to yourself. Then maybe whatever the world demands you to do or to be, your writing will be a place where you can return to.

To summarise all that: You don't have to put on any poses. If you want to be brilliant, just be yourself.

Meanwhile, here are your instructions:

1. Keep writing

2. Dance! It's the best way to learn a sense of rhythm, to get rhythm into the body, then it will come out naturally in your words. That includes soul and funk, samba, salsa, reggae - whatever your body responds best to!

3. Play! Play in a small box. The tiniest space you can imagine. The most intimate details of life. Then play in the largest wildest most multidimensional playground you can find. Then all the spaces and times in between.

4. Be careful who you show your writings to. If your writings are an inner exploration or a constant redefinition of the shifting relationship between your inner world and the outer world then they are personal and raw. Not everybody will appreciate that. (See Rilke's Letters to a Young Poet)

5. You can only really assess the value of something a couple of months, sometimes years after it has been written. Jane Austen (I think it was) used to hang on to a piece for at least 10 years (!) before deciding whether to publish or not.

6. Don't throw anything away even if you think at that moment that it's rubbish. There may be something you can use at a later date.

7. Keep writing.

Allow yourself to be influenced by as wide a range as possible. This includes the work of foreign poets/writers in translation.

Here are some writers whose works I enjoy and whom you may also enjoy:

Gertrude Stein American modernist. Playful, crazy, nonsensical and very liberating for the writer. Try her "Tender Buttons"

Langston Hughes Black American poet of the Harlem Renaissance who used the rhythms of jazz and blues – any of his poetry.

Rainer Maria Rilke German Poet. "Sonnets to Orpheus"

Pablo Neruda Chilean poet. I like his "Twenty love poems and a song of despair"

W.B. Yeats Irish poet. Great sense of mystery.

William Blake English poet of the late 18th, early 19th century. His "Songs of Innocence and Experience". Visit the Tate Britain in London and have a look at his pictures as well.

Ezra Pound American poet of the last century. He helped introduce Chinese poetry and its use of images to the west. Read as much as you can bear.

If none of these make sense at the moment, then put them aside and read them later. Maybe years later.

Here are some other guide books

"Letters to a young poet" Rainer Maria Rilke. This book helped me a lot when I was starting out. I have included a translation of one of these. (link below)

"ABC of reading" Ezra Pound. Where Rilke is totally non-judgemental, Pound is opinionated and boorish. But he is the master craftsman.

I hope these opinions and comments make sense and are helpful to you.

My very best wishes

Brian Lee

Rilke's Letters to a Young Poet are available online at
<http://www.sfgoth.com/~immanis/rilke/letter1.html>

<http://www.nakedlight.co.uk>