

## Considering Considering Marvin Malone's *Wormwood Review*

In the context of writing a paper with the aim of receiving extra credit for a module which had already been graded on two exams and various methods of classroom assessment, one of which had already offered one opportunity for an improved mark, I feel obliged to admit to some scepticism when it came to the production of this piece at all. Of course, some of us are sometimes just too blind (or stupid) to accept, or perhaps even see, encouragement or support no matter how obviously and unstintingly it is given. Fortunately, there are people out there who will persevere in spite of an individuals or societies ignorance and continue in the name of belief, principle or both. As a recipient of such encouragement myself within my egocentric world of friends, family, tutors, artists and peers, I often feel blessed. Without it and the often associated affirmation of ability, or at least promise, that it implies I sometimes doubt I would have the application to persevere with either my academic career or creative pursuits. Over a period of 35 years, Marvin Malone applied himself to not only virtually single-handedly producing *Wormwood Review* but also fostering an immense breadth of talent with seemingly selfless dedication. In so doing, he also succeeded in curating a collection of poetry if not to say art, so formidable, that its legacy seems likely only to be enhanced with time. When I consider the scale of his achievement it is nothing short of breath-taking. One only needs to read the Marvin Malone tribute issue released posthumously by his daughter in 1999 to discover that not only this was true, but that he also managed to be a supportive, selfless and encouraging figure even when dealing criticism and rejection to the hopeful.

When studying for my recent exam in which I knew that some critique of *WR* was likely to feature heavily, my first instinct was to discuss at length the factors which I felt contributed to the longevity of the magazine. My intention was to analyse these in quite a sterile way based on Malone's oft repeated 'mission statement', in which he cites such seemingly obvious, yet in practise hard to follow ideals, such as avoiding backslapping, printing big names just because they were big, pandering to a popular audience and perhaps most importantly, not getting too big for its own boots (both metaphorically and metaphorically!) A few weeks on, I can't remember how much of this I did or did not write, but given a free hand with which to approach a re-visitation of the subject and freed of exam restraints, I felt a desire to try something a touch more creative. Unfortunately, for me at least, imagination is rarely the servant of desire, though would that the reverse were true, and a fruitless week of brain racking later I was pretty much resigned to giving this particular task a miss.

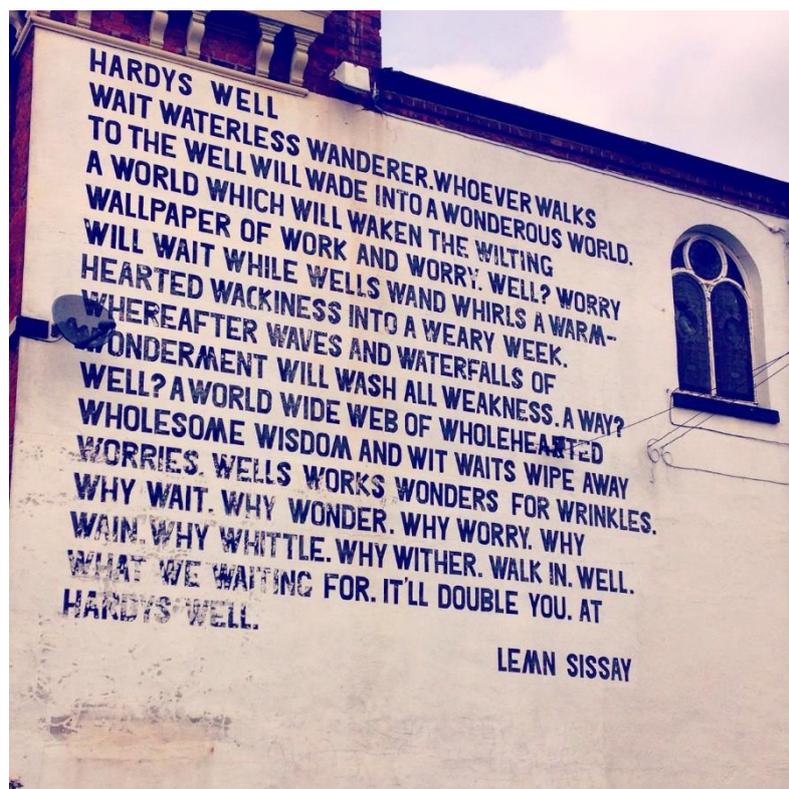
The setting of this assignment just days after the death of the iconic music legend David Bowie, had at first suggested some kind of poetry montage<sup>1</sup> made up of lines from previous *WR* submissions, something that would be a fitting tribute if not to Malone himself, then at least to the ideals of the magazine. Ultimately, the prospect of browsing numerous copies of the magazine in the hope of simply seizing upon lines that either just 'felt right' or fitted a particular theme was unappealing for two equal but opposing reasons. With a target of 900 words (I'm guessing minimum) for the task, I would need to select roughly 90 to 150 lines of poetry. By my own, only-even-vaguely-understood-by-me rules, no more than one line could be selected from each poem. Thus the task became both too

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<sup>1</sup> Bowie is widely known to have used the 'cut-up' technique earlier used by William Burroughs as part of the creative process in writing some of his lyrics. This would also have continued a theme from an experiment I and some colleagues conducted in the classroom during our studies of the magazine. In the experiment we set different groups the task of writing a poem in a style not dissimilar to the children's game *consequences* where some people wrote a line based on seeing the previous ones written, and others wrote separate lines unseen. The results were surprisingly successful.

big and too small. Either I could look at just a few issues, select my favourite lines and then cobble something together from the scraps, or... The big one, read every issue, pick *the* best line from each and start from there. In fact, there were even two ways of approaching this. I could instead pick the first line of my poem from the first issue, the second from the second and so on... In a way this might have been easier, as I would have known what to look for in each subsequent issue as the poem progressed. So either the scheme was just too grandiose or not grandiose enough. I could try and excuse myself from the former by saying I don't think I could actually access every issue in its entirety, but despite believing its truth at the time of writing, who am I kidding? I simply wasn't going to read all one hundred and forty odd issues in the time and for the reward available, though who knows if life were longer and my application substantially greater.

Having discarded the composite poem idea, a second and easier proposition caught my fancy. We had seen in *WR* some examples of visual poetry. I confess that with a few exceptions I was not generally impressed, though it's possible my eyes are gradually being opened, I still feel immune to many of the more abstract artistic propositions I encounter. That said, I feel that before one criticises too harshly the idea for the idea's sake it is necessary to try and understand it<sup>2</sup>, regardless, a visual poem made solely from the letters *WR*, where every word in the *W* begins with "W" and every word in the "R" begins with... "S"? No, "R" actually, seemed a possibility<sup>3</sup>. Three days before submission deadline this was the plan. 900 words? No problem. Actually, in discussion with a friend (who had also taken the course) I also proposed using joining words, "a", "at", "to", "or" and the like in order to make this a more workable proposition. Then I remembered a wall I walk past every day in Manchester:



<sup>2</sup> Readers from the 2015 Contemporary North-American Literature class at UAB may remember the visual poem I submitted to the forum.

<sup>3</sup> It has since been pointed out to me that this idea would have tied in nicely with Malone's own idiosyncratic perversions of the published magazines titles e.g. *Worm Would Review*; *The Warm Woolly Review*; *Worm Would Rape You*; *The Worm Oil*; *Wormwood AteTeen*, etc.

There is no doubt that this had somewhere made an impression. Unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately for the audience, the impression it made is one of badly contrived bullshit, though I guess it's all personal taste (and the pub it stands on – *Hardys Well* in case you hadn't guessed – is a nice place). Though I mentally pursued the idea a little further, with thoughts of using the whole magazine title -Writing or reading may work out our demons, Raising each view in every way?– I think it was dead the moment Sissay had resurfaced in my mind<sup>4</sup>.

So. A third idea was required. As luck would have it, or rather a persistent onlooker, it was already there. Two of the poems we had analysed in class had been suggested to me as a starting point. Written by Charles Harper Webb, there was an idea inherent to the suggestion that they could have a bearing on the presentation of *WR* as a whole. Given the digression from this idea already employed, I will not over analyse the idea here, but to summarise, the first poem –“Nice” – questions the idea of exactly what is ‘nice’. Suffice to say that the conclusion of the discussion was that most people try to avoid such a description being applied to themselves or their achievements. In the context of *WR*, I think it is safe to say that neither Malone nor any of his (published at least) contributors were aspiring for this either. A quick read of the poem should clear up any ambiguity here. The second poem suggested for analysis was “Reclamation Project”. Again, not to go into detail, but I found this one more interesting within the context of poetry and art in general, and particularly in relation to *WR*. The classroom argument centred around most trying to define exactly what it was the writer was reclaiming, and whether the poem had positive or negative connotations. Although I don't personally believe the author's intention was to bring up the recurrent question of the reclamation of poetry as a whole, it is undoubtedly a feature of each ‘generation’ of poetry, whereby each movement tends to rebel against or at least claim to supersede the vision of its forebears. To refer to the earlier principles that Malone eschewed, I think it telling that Malone makes no such claims for *WR*. His contributors may and do, but to the best of my knowledge he was assiduous in avoiding such.

One of the options offered to me during this process was that of being able to contact the author. This prospect made me fearful as it had during the preparation of a class presentation on similar lines. What do you ask someone who knows what it means to them? Is this even something you want defined? While preparing presentations regarding *Milk* magazine, a surprising (to me at least) number of students had asked poets what they meant when they had written a specific line or even the whole poem. An overriding theme to the responses that students had received from the poets had been that the meaning is not for the writer to impose but for the reader to infer. I couldn't help but agree. As a sometime writer of poetry and a long-time reader I feel this is always an aspect best avoided. It never ends happily. The one response we received in which the author imparted his own meaning completely ruined the meaning. From being ambiguous to me, it will now forever be a gender issue poem, instead of being firmly in the abstract. Despite my lack of understanding of visual representations of this, that was where I thought its strength lay. As a final note on Webb, it is interesting that in 1998 he received the Kate Tuft Discovery prize for his first book. Just twenty years after Malone had given him the *WR* award for the “Most Overlooked Book of the Year”. A further confirmation, if one was needed, of both his forward thinking and eye for talent.

A few years ago now, before I started on the career path I am now on, I had this idea that I was “constantly seeking approval” to the extent it became almost a personal mantra. When I started writing this paper I was doing it because I believed I was seeking the approval of the person who asked

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<sup>4</sup> Examples of his work are to be found in many public places in Manchester, some are better than others, and regardless of my opinion on individual works, it is great to have them there.

me to do it. As the writing progressed, I realised this was not the case. I am doing it because I am seeking my own approval. I want to be, if not the best I can be, at least not that guy who sits at the bar saying “what if?” The phrase “I coulda bin a contender” is too often one of which I have heard a variant of from my own mouth. If I learn nothing else from Marvin Malone, and the person who introduced me to his magazine and legacy, it will be this:

Do the work.

-James Storer