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Camelot II?

Readers will recall the pain and anguish which gripped the Poetry Community in the winter of 2003 when Laura Bush, the Dark Queen, invited a group of poets and critics to the White House to celebrate American poetry. As soon became evident, Mrs. Bush had sharply underestimated the persistence of adolescence among certain representatives of that craft and sullen art. The United States was preparing to rid the world of a monstrous tyrant in Iraq. For the poet and publisher Sam Hamill, this was cause not for celebration but an excuse to relive the anti-war protests of the 1960s. Mr. Hamill, one of the invitees to 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, took to cyberspace and mounted an email campaign calling on his fellow scribes to boycott the event and organize a series of demonstrations against the impending conflict in Iraq. It was, Mr. Hamill noted, an opportunity to "reconstitute a Poets Against the War movement like the one organized to speak out against the war in Vietnam."

Ho-hum. Hamill had his fifteen minutes of notoriety. He has since receded to the obscurity he so richly deserves, but his bad manners garnered enough attention at the time that Mrs. Bush wisely cancelled the event, thus depriving many writers the opportunity of visiting the White House in so collegial a setting.

Fast forward to the spring of 2009. Michelle Obama, Poetry Lover, invites a group of poets and musicians to the White House to perform. What George W. Bush called the global war against terror has been renamed "overseas contingency operations," but it proceeds apace. Neither Mr. Hamill nor any of his fellow protesters were in evidence at this event. Possibly they were invited. Jackie Kennedy paraded artists like Pablo Casals through the White House. It was quite a different crowd that gathered at the invitation of the President and Mrs. Obama. "I'd guess," Mike Hale wrote on *The New York Times* arts blog, "that it was the first time anyone had said 'placentas buried under avocado trees' in the East Room, at least in front of an audience." We think Mr. Hale is on safe ground with that speculation.

He was doubtless also correct about the significance of the musicale as a bellwether of the new administration's inclinations in the arts. The jamboree, which took place on the same day it was reported that the President's nominee for chairman of the National Endowment for the

Arts was the Broadway producer and horse racing enthusiast Rocco Landesman, was doubtless "meant to signal a new White House taste in the performing arts. All of the performers were either of color or married to Michael Chabon or Michael Chabon himself."

> The live broadcast began like a lot of other parties I've been to: late, dark, out of focus and with the (single, stationary) camera staring straight into a woman's back. The production values improved, though the sound remained iffy: the louder people spoke, sang or played, the more likely they were to be drowned out by static. This was a problem on a bill that included poetry slammers, jazz singers and Lin-Manuel Miranda. Unfortunately, the spousal stand-up act of Mr. Chabon and Ayelet Waldman was perfectly audible, though mercifully the picture cut out completely a few times. A note was quickly posted on whitehouse.gov saying that a "full quality" recording would be up in a day or two.

> The president began the program by introducing "the star of the show, somebody who brings a lot of poetry to my own life" and handed it over to Ms. Obama, perhaps signaling that the arts will be a part of her personal portfolio. She said that she had wanted to hear poetry and spoken word in the White House from Day 1 and hoped that the work would take audience members out of their comfort zones. It seems unlikely that that happened, unless there were people there who still didn't have cable TV.

Mr. Hale's evocative account of this event prompted us to ponder those little warnings the Surgeon General requires on packages of cigarettes and on medicines that are likely to make you sleepy or nauseated. In this age of full disclosure (not to say overprotective regulation), shouldn't events like the White House Poetry Jam—"the hippest performance staged by the Obamas in the White House," as another, more reverent account on *The New York Times* political blog put it—come with some sort of advisory? Even as we write, President Obama is forcing what's left of the U.S. auto industry to adopt stringent new emissions standards that will add more than $1,000 to the price of an automobile. Shouldn't something be done to regulate other gaseous emissions that are proliferating with such noxious abandon?

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