

Antagonistic artists essential in today's society, poet says

By Stan Nelson
Of the Emerald

The poet as an antagonistic force in society is needed more keenly today than ever before, said John Witte, a University English instructor who will give a poetry reading tonight.

"The poet and artist and musician, dancer and playwright is the guardian of the spirit and provides a vital and viable outlet for expression of the spirit," he said. Witte currently is editor of the Northwest Review, an English department tri-annual literary publication.

"Our society is engaged in a virtual orgy of materialism. It shouldn't be surprising that society at large regards poets as peculiar and outlandish and bizarre," he said.

By using intuition, Witte said he is better able to recognize poem ideas than by using the more traditional sense of inspiration.

And like other literary forms, poetry is 5 percent inspiration and 95 percent editing and continued learning, Witte said.

"When an idea for a poem occurs to me, elements of all of my experience and all of my understanding are drawn into that thought almost as if the particular word or event or image creates a magnetic field," he said.

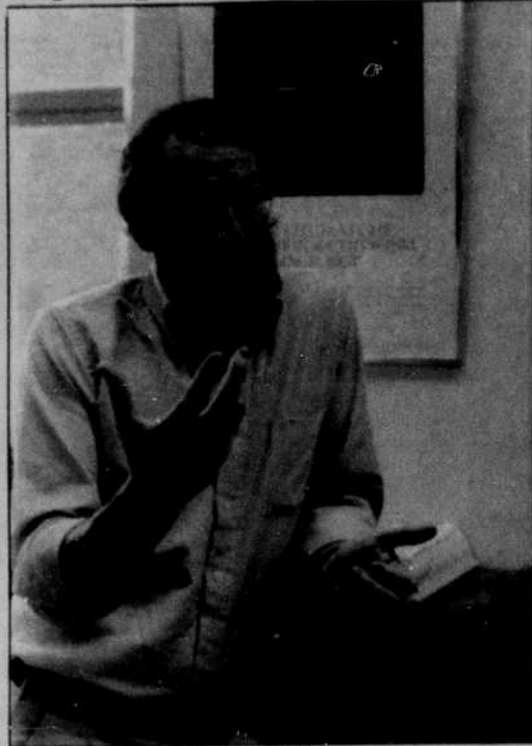
Witte expressed his dislike of the current developments in contemporary poetry, which is deviating from its traditional characteristics.

"More and more, artists are engaged with a passive attitude toward society. In the last few years, we are seeing a proliferation of very elegant and bandified poetry, which is disasterous and a betrayal of the essential obligation of a poet to be an antagonist and critical of society and her achievements."

Witte, who was born and raised in the Northeast, said Eugene is a relief from New York and the inevitable sense of competition and the unhealthy pressure to write in the accepted style of writing.

Eugene's setback for writing is the absence of literary excitement generated by major writers, Witte said.

But Witte added that local writers such as author Ken Kesey, science fiction writers Kate Wilhelm and Damon Knight and non-fiction writer Barry Lopez all are well-known in their fields. Internationally renowned South



John Witte

American poet Juan Epley is a member of the University faculty.

The Lane Literary Guild has provided readings and workshops for writers, Witte said. Likewise, the group Poetic Space has contributed to literary advancement in Lane County.

The Lane Regional Arts Council has begun to interact with University programs and break down the "town/gown" division between writers and artists in the community, he said.

"What results from that is a very vital exchange of viewpoints and attitudes about writing, which benefits everyone," Witte said.

In addition, Eugene attracts some writers who just want to be left alone with their work. "Writing is a solitary occupation, and writers tend to be solitary by nature," Witte said.

Witte will give a free poetry reading tonight at 7 in Room 338 Gilbert Hall. He will read from works in progress and poetry recently or soon to be published in the New Yorker and Ploughshare magazines, and "The Norton Introduction to Literature" journal.

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