

Hijacking Poetry

Poetry lovers should spare a thought for the way in which poetry has been hijacked in recent years by various self-interested parties, such as educationalists, politically correct lobbyists, reformers and internet practitioners. Of these, the politically correct lobbyists are the most vocal, using poetry competitions as opportunities to air their opinions, especially the better known competitions which offer a wider platform for their views. A recent example is that of a Guardian journalist, writing about the shortlist for the 2017 T.S.Eliot Poetry Award, who criticized the fact that there was only one collection (out of ten) by 'a poet of colour.' He then went on to claim that: 'for those who have championed crucial interventions in poetry publishing, reviewing and prizes, this nearly all-white shortlist cannot help but seem inexplicably naïve and regressive.' A similar view was offered by a Telegraph journalist who unfavourably compared the T.S.Eliot shortlist with that of the Forward Prize which had eight non-white poets on their shortlist of fifteen participants. These sort of comments not only exhibit a condescending attitude towards 'poets of colour' in that they apparently need a favourable quota system to enter the prize lists but are also a direct challenge to the judges' independence and impartiality.

Poetry competitions also provide a fertile ground for individual agendas to be pursued by the organizers as to what constitutes their idea of poetry. The founder of the Forward Prizes, William Sieghart, has called for no less than 'a re-classification of what the P word is,' adding that he wants 'to broaden people's understanding that actually poetry is in greeting cards, it's in rap music, it's in the copywriting for the advertisements you read, in jingles on the radio, it's all around us.' Leaving aside the reflection that if poetry is in everything, then it is nothing in particular, one could be forgiven for thinking that this all-inclusive characterization of poetry is aimed at extending the shelf-life of poetry competitions which must soon run out of barriers to break down and horizons to explore. This would actually be a good thing as there would then be less focus on 're-defining the possibilities of poetry' which detracts attention from five hundred years of continuous poetry tradition or what is now often disparagingly referred to as 'literary heritage' – as if it is to be visited occasionally like a National Trust property. William Sieghart is also responsible for one of the strangest uses to which poetry has been put, that of spiritual agony aunt. Having recently published his book 'The Poetry Pharmacy: Tried-and-True Prescriptions for the Heart, Mind and Soul,' in which he declares that if 'you are suffering from loneliness, lack of courage, heartbreak, hopelessnessthere is something here to ease your pain,' he has followed this up with travels around the country conducting poetry surgeries, where people can come to him for a poetic remedy.

The most blatant appropriation of poetry to give validity to a practice can be seen in poetry that is written specifically for the internet. Its intention is to gain freedom for poetry to be expressed in new ways. The more light-hearted practitioners stick snippets from the web together and call it poetry. The more serious operators combine other art forms to create images in the name of poetry. But their dependence on the web for material underlines the derivative nature of their efforts and overlooks the fact that poetry is, and always has been, a direct exchange of feelings and thoughts between sentient human beings. This obvious observation ought to disqualify poetry written for the internet as having anything to do with poetry, and yet, in the 2016 Felix Dennis Prize for Best First Collection (run by the Forward Arts Foundation), information was posted about one of the shortlisted poets who was doing 'a lot of work in the field of electronic literature – hypertext fiction, twitterbots and procedural generation.' By any measure, this would appear to be an endorsement of poetry written for the internet as poetry.

In education, poetry has been hijacked at primary level as a teaching resource to aid literacy lessons. This is a policy actively encouraged by The Poetry Society in its 'Teaching

Poetry' programme when it declared that 'Poetry is a powerful tool for raising standards of literacy and developing language skills.' The emphasis in these exercises set by teachers is on pupils learning to express themselves by imagining and describing a given subject which is then equated with writing poetry. This approach also fits in with politically correct concerns in the teaching profession that pupils (especially immigrants and those from ethnic minorities) should not be made to feel disadvantaged or intimidated by centuries of English poetical tradition. This is well illustrated, for instance, by one of the Poetry Society's 'Teacher Trailblazer' lessons, in which famous past poets (such as Tennyson and Dylan Thomas) are paired off with present day performance poets with the apparent intention of popularizing the former.

This is by no means a complete list of all those who would appropriate poetry for their own purposes. One could mention the conspiracy theorists, such as those with revisionist views of literary history, who claim that previous centuries' poetry has been in thrall to capitalist printing presses, which have dictated poetic taste and culture. Then there are those who have a political agenda in wanting to 'de-colonize' English literature and free it from its colonial legacy – a view which had its counterpart in the recent 'Rhodes must go' campaign at Oxford University when students tried unsuccessfully to have the statue of the controversial colonial figure, Cecil Rhodes, removed from the facade of a college.

Of course, poets have always used poetry for their own ends to write about what they want to say. The satirical verse of the Eighteenth Century or the politically motivated left-wing poetry of the 1930s are obvious examples of poetry being harnessed for a particular purpose. But this is poetry in the making as opposed to its appropriation by the various self-interested parties described above and it is the latter which are threatening the very identity of poetry.

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