

Armitage, Simon: Why poetry is important

Simon Armitage considers the importance of poetry.

One of the discussion themes at this year's Edinburgh International Book Festival was, 'Does poetry matter?' Even if it doesn't, the topic seems to set people jawing on a regular basis; in August of this year, 'Is Poetry Pointless?' was the discussion theme for Radio 5's morning phone-in programme.

Lurking behind the issue are two, often quoted opinions, wheeled out and bandied about quite freely whenever the subject comes up. Shelley's statement, from his *A Defence of Poetry*, describing poets as "the unacknowledged legislators of the world," and W.H.Auden's observation that "poetry makes nothing happen." Of course, the world has changed a great deal since 1821. Even since 1939 it is an unrecognisable place, and unless we subscribe to the fanciful notion that poets speak with universal and everlasting accuracy (in which case, how come Shelley and Auden disagree) there's no reason on earth why those two statements should still be true or even relevant. But poets do still make big claims on behalf of their art. Seamus Heaney said recently that poetry was nothing less than an "anthropological necessity."

Poetry certainly does have a gloomy fascination with its own well-being, one in keeping with its image, perhaps, as a pensive, introspective art form. It's something that sets it aside from other fields of creative expression, even those which are capable of tackling the same morbid subjects. For example, it's hard to picture a bunch of violinists sitting around discussing whether or not classical music mattered, or to imagine a gathering of portrait artists coming to the conclusion that paint makes nothing happen. Maybe it's complimentary. It seems to imply that poetry might be capable of making a difference, and not just to everyday concerns such as the wobbly wheels of Tesco's shopping trolleys, the price of replica football shirts or the radiation levels of mobile phones, but the big issues. A free Ireland. Global warming. Clause 28. Equal opportunities. If poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world, then presumably political consciousness and cultural determinism of all types are well within its brief.

On the other hand, the implied criticism is that poetry is of no value whatsoever in the face of such pressing issues. The Tate Modern attracted hundreds of thousands of visitors after its grand opening. Newly-released films are seen by millions the world over. In comparison, poetry can only be measured as ineffective, small-time, and incapable of addressing all but a small number of people. Subtract from that audience the already-converted, and poetry's power to bring about change or affect attitudes would seem - well, limited.

My first reaction to such an issue is to make a personal and I suppose selfish statement. Poetry matters, because it matters to me. In saying that, I'm not trying to promote myself as the unacknowledged legislator of good taste - I'm just being honest. Firstly, poetry provides the majority of my income. Secondly, in psychological terms it has become a 'core construct' - the way I experience the world and the way in which the majority of my world experiences me. In that sense, poetry has become a way of life. In fact it's a kind of independence, a sort of freedom, and freedom is

that ideal state of existence that many people in this world are said to be in pursuit of - very often with guns and bombs.

In those terms, poetry matters because I can recommend it to others as a system of belief, though it's important to remember that poetry is not a religion. Poetry has no divine right to go on existing forever simply because it's existed for a long time already. Neither is poetry a science or a fact. It is not a naturally occurring elemental substance that exists within the universe and therefore cannot be denied. Poetry is a synthetic material. Like nylon, like quorn, like golf, like justice, like time. It's man-made, and would not have come into being without our presence.

Politics, though, is the framework within which these matters tend to be judged and the yardstick by which they are measured. And in straightforward political terms, I suspect that poetry is a better form of defence than attack, something that holds the line rather than joins up and goes to fight at the front. Poets make better goalkeepers than centre-forwards. Good poetry is a sort of code, a kind of resistance. Under oppressive regimes, it's often the form by which subversive ideas are kept alive and transmitted between people, especially when freedom of speech is restricted or outlawed. In the old Soviet Union, poets, we were told, would fill football stadia when they gave readings of their work, such was their status and the importance of their message. Interestingly, a news item last week reported that in present day Yugoslavia, football matches are the only occasions when crowds can legally gather. Supporters of Red Star Belgrade now put their lives at risk by singing chants - a kind of poetry - encouraging President Milosevic to hang himself (although the phenomenon I'm describing may well have more to do with soccer than with verse.)

Here in the West, poetry that crusades and campaigns often fails, in my view, because of its crudity, having what Keats described as "palpable designs" on the reader. It's an insult to the intelligence of most poetry readers to be told what to think. Neither do we simply want to agree with the poem because it has agreeable subject matter. We want to be persuaded or moved. We want to be swayed - sometimes literally. The reason why so much political poetry is so bad, or so difficult to write, is because many poets tend to be of the same political outlook, and their poems are little more than rehearsal of already established ideas, no matter how radical they might appear to readers of The Sun. Being boring is the greatest sin in writing.

Poetry carries the flag, bears the standard. The honest complexity of a poem like Auden's *The Fall of Rome* still has me pondering about the nature of huge political change set against the everyday details of ordinary life. And I've never really figured out what Dylan Thomas meant by the line, "After the first death there is no other." But it's a phrase that comes back to me again and again whenever I see news items jostling with each other over competing levels of tragedy, usually based on loss of life.

So I think poetry does matter, politically, even though it moves in mysterious ways. The reason I feel strongly about conservation and ecology isn't because I've been aroused by poems attacking capitalist society, written with passionate intensity by hunt saboteurs or anarcho-terrorists, but because I've read poems that speak to me about the nature and value of the world. Wordsworth's *To a Snowdrop*, Hopkins' *The Windhover*, Hardy's *Snow in the Suburbs*, Hughes' *The Bull Moses*, the dead deer in William Stafford's *Travelling Through the Dark*, Elizabeth Bishop's larger-than-life moose lumbering out of the woods to come face to face with civilisation in the headlights of a bus.

Poetry is a kind of truth. Not a factual truth, but a moment-to-moment truth in terms of how we perceive and scrutinise the world, and how we operate within it. Ideas and experiences don't come to us as prose sentences - they come as images and connections, which good poetry reproduces and

communicates, often without being able to say why. Poetry comes closer to signalling the experience of being alive and comprehending the world than any other written form. Prose, for the main part, tends to be reasoned, logical, literal, linear, progressional, rational, and so on. Prose often makes 'sense', which is ironic, because the senses it hopes to replicate are the particular territory of poetry. What Anne Stevenson has called "electrical comprehension." The thing Peter Redgrove might be talking about when he refers to what it is to "sail close to the symphonic brink of the known world."

When we think about poetry we tend to think about a sub-division of literature, particularly associated with books and criticism. But poetry is everywhere, being utilised by many people - advertising agencies, songwriters, slogan makers, priests, stand up comedians, television presenters - the list is endless. Ask the News of the World if poetry matters, with their 'name and shame' campaign. It might have been a cheap way of upping circulation figures, with dubious moral value, but the title is pure poetry - rhyme, rhythm, memorable utterance, encapsulation of ideas - the lot. Poetry is intense, packed with information, a kind of bar-coding of the language, and language is still the greatest form of power on the planet. The history of civilisation is the history of the intelligent but puny being able to talk their way out of being beaten up by the strong but stupid. And using a great deal of fancy language - poetry - along the way.

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