

Notes for Broadsheet Poets 9

It is heartwarming for budding and struggling young poets to note that quite a few **Broadsheet poets** go on to have noteworthy collections published. Examples of these have been Catriona O'Reilly, Steven O'Brien, Will Stone, Sasha Dugdale, P. Viktor, Kathryn Gray, and Leanne O'Sullivan. Now, hot off the press, are three more: **Zoe Brigley's** *The Secret*, a Poetry Book Society Recommendation (Bloodaxe, £8.95), **Tupa Snyder's** *No Man's Land* (Shearsman Books, £8.95) and **Adam O'Riordan's** pamphlet, *queen of the cotton cities* (tall-lighthouse pilot publications, £4).

All three are highly impressive, with assured voices that seem mature beyond their years, if years are relevant at all in terms of poetic talent.

Zoe Brigley, who is Welsh and only 26, covers not only a complex range of worlds in her collection but also plays with language excitingly and refreshingly. She says of her book that it 'emerges from silence and the secrets.' The first of the three sections cleverly reconciles Tarot symbols with modern life. The second section, 'The Greater Secrets', uses the structure of a twenty day cycle in the Aztec calendar, each day being characterised by a symbol, such as the lizard, snake or eagle. The final sequence, 'The Curse of the Long-tailed Bird', explores Mexican mythologies and Western fairytales. There are so many archetypes, so much cosmic myth, and such very clever play with knitting the Welsh language into English and vice versa that the reader is almost overwhelmed at such brilliance. Her collection leaves one breathless at her ingenuity, her music, her erudition, and originality. She is a very serious and daring poet with huge scope and someone definitely to watch.

Tupa Snyder has a very different voice and a very compelling one also. Her poems are perhaps more immediately accessible, and she, too, tackles different layers and levels of meaning with an acute intelligence, illuminating, like Zoe Brigley, a vast world. Tupa grew up in India, a child of the remnants of the Raj, and the British Empire. Here she shifts her inscapes, landscapes and musical lyrics between the decadent world of the Raj, the new U.S. world, the mid-world of England and the new India plagued by the persistence of the old. Her colourful, vibrant images bring India to life and her smooth, beautifully handled transitions from one place, topic or person to another, her use of repetition and interwoven images are reminiscent of Virginia Woolf in 'Mrs. Dalloway'. Her mesmeric, philosophical poems about fragmentation, identity, family, nation, the self, memory, place and language, reveal a unique vision of the Anglo-Indian heritage. Again, she is someone to take note of.

Adam O'Riordan's pamphlet *queen of the cotton cities* is equally awesome and shows an incisive active mind at work crafting language with music and concision. Like the two ladies above, he has a broad vision. In these beautifully honed poems, not a word seems out of place, and he demonstrates a broad grasp of history, philosophy, religions, myth, even cosmology and physics – while remaining a young poet very much of this time. On the last page of this

pamphlet, the reader is left looking for more. His next, full collection is surely worth waiting for.

This pilot series of pamphlets published in the tall-lighthouse pilot series marks an exciting and very worthwhile new initiative to introduce to a new audience some of the best young poets under 30 writing in Britain today, under the editorial guidance of Roddy Lumsden. 18 pamphlets over a period of three years are planned and the launch of Adam's pamphlet, along with another, Abi Curtis's humbug, marked the launch of the series in May of this year.

Another first collection by a young poet still in her twenties worthy of note is **Elizabeth Whyman's** *Touchpiece*, published by the poetry can, hot off the press at £8. Original, fresh, well-crafted, energetic and very much of our day, yet with a subtle intelligence pushing them forward into a lived-in wisdom, these poems are both pleasing in their aliveness, yet unsettling at the same time. U.A. Fanthorpe says, 'Psychiatrist, detective and photographer meet in this striking new collection.' Elizabeth has not yet submitted any of her work to the **Agenda Broadsheets** as yet, but it is hoped that she will submit some new poems soon.

Of course, it must be remembered that not all young poets will get their work published when they are young. There is a right time for everything, and for some people, a lifetime's wait might be required – or even a wait until after death! Poets must not be deflated regarding the publishing market. In every age there are some good poets who do not get published, and, perhaps in our age, too many who do. After all, what matters is the quality of the poetry that is being written. No matter what, poets should keep on writing, persevering, learning the craft, listening to the muse, scribbling down the poems that are pressed out of them, even if these only come in snatches. The main focus should not be on becoming a commercial salesperson for a sheaf of poems, but on achieving the poem that is envisaged in the head and heart. As **Seamus Heaney** said in a letter to *Agenda*, 'Hush. No fuss. And proceed'.

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The following extract from a longer interview between the well-known poet and essayist, **Peter Robinson**, a regular contributor to *Agenda*, and **Belinda Cooke** whose fine translations have appeared in *Agenda* and feature in this issue serves to inspire as **Notes for Broadsheet Poets 9**. The full interview is available online www.agendapoetry.co.uk

from **Peter Robinson in conversation with Belinda Cooke**

So if you do get asked, how do you see yourself fitting into the contemporary poetry scene? And what is your take on what's currently happening in poetry?

A friend of mine once said that poets' positions in the scene (if there is one) are created by a kind of vacuum forming. You're sucked into the only space that is

available for you – if at all. If that is the case, then there are reasons for fearing the shape that you'll end up being deformed into, and of keeping on doing whatever you do in despite it all. It's rather that writing for me is an activity fed by going about in ordinary life and feeding my obsessions with poetry, past and present, alongside related matters. The scene, then, is the situation in which you find your work read or ignored, appreciated or criticized, whether you like it or not. A lot of activity recently has been about trying to persuade people to buy poetry books in numbers but the signs are they won't. If you pay much attention to the book-sales' agenda you won't be concentrating on the likely sources of your art. Communicating with actual or imagined readers in the form of interlocutors for the poetry you write is a significantly different matter: poems can be successful, communicative works of art in that sense without adding to sales at all. You ask what's going on at the moment. The poets of the fifties are thinning out to extinction; the sixties' vanguard and others are now the grand old figures. Then there are the lost generations and the few 'representative' types picked out to stand for what is supposed to be happening now – some of them getting pretty long in the tooth and weighed down with awards. At least two new generations of writers have come up in the almost two decades that I've been away in Japan. My hunch would be that representative factionalizing by which poets are recruited for sales identity purposes to represent national, ethnic, gender, sexual orientation, or generational sub groups has not yet run its course, tired though it may be looking. There's nothing convincing in the way of new movements. Some from the later generations of the sixties vanguards are still claiming special status. It's business as usual, I suppose.

You've put it in a nutshell there. One thinks of Pasternak's 'It's not good to be famous': 'The goal of art – is to give yourself, /not to create a stir, or be an overnight success. /It's a disgrace knowing nothing, /to be a name on everyone's lips.' What convinces you that a poem of yours has become 'successful'? Are you your own critic or do you have close poet friends you depend on (à la Robert Lowell and Elizabeth Bishop for example)?

Well, I didn't mean to make unqualified claims for anything I've written. People, not usually poets, do sometimes tell you, though. Miki Iwata, who wrote one of the essays in *The Salt Companion* on my work, and has translated some of the poems into Japanese (well, I'm told, she has said she likes 'Pasta-Making', a poem whose interlocutor helped to translate it into Italian. Someone else tells me their favourite is 'The Coat Hanger', and that one prompted some eloquent words from Roy Fisher in the Preface to the *Companion*. You can experience instances where a poem seems to have succeeded for you, and others tell you they like it, so you feel a more or less unalloyed satisfaction – without that impacting on royalty statements.

Well, maybe, but having benefited from the explosion in creative writing courses

of the past 20 years with your new post, I'd like to hear your thoughts on creative writing courses. Do you think anyone can become a poet?

It's true I've been asked to launch a module and head creative writing at Reading; but mine's a chair in English and American literature – and creative writing is not why they employed me, I don't think (it's because there are books of criticism and translation with academic presses in the UK and the States). Doubtless being fairly *persona grata* here after all these years has been helped by the fact that poets are no longer so anathematized in the groves of British academe. What do I think about creative writing? In the scale of man's inhumanity to man it's fairly harmless! It probably comes in there with homeopathic medicine: not likely to do much damage, it may even do some good. Can anyone become a poet? Certainly they can. No one is *born* a poet. Art is a way of life. It's an interwoven set of cultural practices that have to be entered and learned in order for someone to contribute usefully to advancing them. What it involves is commitment and study, plus the good fortune to have a developed aptitude for words and a linguistic background that appreciates inventive usage. A reasonably cultivated taste for the other arts helps too, especially music and painting. I don't think it's useful to think of poetry as produced by those who were destined from birth to be poets; rather, it is made by people who have found they need to devote themselves obsessively to this activity – and in a culture where there are creative writing courses, well, they might help such souls find their way. One of the best must be Bill Manhire's at the University of Victoria in Wellington. A great many of the contemporary writers in New Zealand have gone through there.

I've never quite got out of my system Osip Mandelstam's belief that one is only a poet if acknowledged to be so by another poet: what he termed 'recognition'. He limited his own inner circle to about four other poets.

Me too, I internalized that in the 70s. The word 'poet' is an honorific: other people have to attribute you with the condition of being one. What we do is try to write the best poetry that we're able and hope that others find it so.

But I do think there are too many poems produced as a result of writing exercises picked up from self-help books or one-day courses. My pet hate is the obsessive use of dramatic monologues: "Today let's pretend to be Eva Braun. Now what was she thinking in that bunker?"

Oh I don't know ... Perhaps I should encourage students to write dramatic monologues pretending to be themselves; but, seriously, the dramatic monologue problem comes from the widespread view, heard from the amateur poet guidebook to the avant-garde manifesto, that we should avoid the first-person singular. My view is that we should use that pronoun as a way of accessing significant experience. It's the one way I know to escape from the twin imperatives that will

reduce subject-matter to zero at a stroke: namely, you mustn't write about other people's experience because it's appropriative and presumptuous (unfair to Eva Braun), and, equally, you mustn't write about your own experience because it's vain, selfish, egocentric, not to say, solipsistic – a word I've had hurled at my head in the past. Others embrace loss of subject matter and write about language itself; but, frankly, that's been done to death in the last century, and, anyway, all good poems are simultaneously about both their own and the language.

Speaking as one who has sweated eight and half years completing a PhD part-time while holding down a full time teaching post I recall it as an experience of permanent insecurity as to whether it's achievable, years before the writing is even nearing the right quality and above all reading lots of books – a labour of love, of course, but it leaves me wondering what are these creative writing PhDs?

I don't yet know anything about them. My module is for second-years, and we also offer the possibility of students offering a finals dissertation in creative writing. There is nothing available yet beyond that at Reading, as far as I know. However, even with these two options, we require students to submit essays on the relationship between their creative writing and inspirational or sponsoring works from the body of the literature we study and teach in the department. I'm in favour of this because the sense of art as a form of life sketched above also means that you like reading very large amounts of work by your elders, contemporaries, or juniors. So the study and enjoyment of literature and the making of it are all part of the same commitment.

Ezra Pound suggested a twenty-year tutelage, which seems only fair since you'd need the same for music or painting – which leads nicely into the place of translation as part of that study. You'd surely agree about that?

It's invaluable if you're drawn to it. A student at Notre Dame asked me after a reading from the Sereni book that came out in 2006 what gains I had from translating poetry for my own writing. What I didn't think of in time, and regret not being quick enough to say, was this: translation, done properly, teaches you to be respectful of your own material. There's a connection, that's to say, between being 'reckless with literal meaning' as Lowell admits in his Introduction to *Imitations* and the recklessness with his own meanings that cruelly mars the later volumes. I've mentioned somewhere in *Talk about Poetry* a feeling of nausea that would come while belabouring a piece of my own, desperately trying to 'make it work as a poem.' Translating is a way of learning techniques and, simultaneously, respect for others' techniques for meaning. If the translation doesn't come off, you haven't squandered an irreplaceable occasion of your own. You can either revise or abandon without intimate loss. If you spoil a poem of your own there can be inner recriminations and despair. So the lesson is: you learn respect for yourself, your own life and work, by practising it in the translation of others' works.