



THE TROUBLE WITH POETRY

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There is a prevalent view in white culture of the poet as droopy decadent self-indulgent aesthete shrinking from political change and hiding from the real world to pen banal or unintelligible laments about eternal truths. Poetry is set up in opposition to politics; people working in politics think poetry has nothing to do with them.

The romantic image of the absinthe-swilling velvet-cloaked garret-dwelling outsider separates the poet as hero and prophet from ordinary people. It also conceals the fact that most poets are poor and enjoy their poverty no more than other deprived persons. And this romantic view, while to some extent feminising the poet (so that some skinhead poets I know need to reassure their audiences that you can remain a Real Man despite scribbling rhyming couplets), completely denies the existence of women poets, who may also be mothers hard at work in, and perhaps also outside, the home.

Poetry was once an oral art practised in public. Lullabies, ballads, riddles, curses and chants were shaped and passed on by ordinary women and men as well as by professionals. Though poetry has become, since the fourteenth century, increasingly associated with books written and read by the literate elite, the oral tradition has continued boldly on, in this country flowering anew since the war to produce a rich variety of poets.

Marxist theory speaks of man controlling nature, has no concepts to deal with gender and sexual difference, and tacitly accepts the idea of woman as part of nature to be controlled and exploited for man's ends: literally hundreds of women break into poetry to demonstrate that by accepting we have bodies and are part of nature, we create culture and press for change. Poets like Alison Fell, Judith Kazantzis, Micheline Wandor, Janet Dube, Stef Pixner, Gillian Allnutt and Berta Freistadt perform their work in pubs, clubs, cafes, meetings and bookshops across the country.

A similar upsurge of black poets has occurred. The experience of oppression in this country backed up by whites' attempts to deny it has led black poets to mine the riches of Caribbean culture and mix proud angry words with music to testify to their

need and determination to survive racism and celebrate a history whites would rather forget. Lynton Kwesi Johnson, now internationally known through his live appearances and his albums, recently completed a successful national tour with Manchester bard John Cooper Clarke, thus proving that black and white can cooperate. He is just one among many: John Agard, Grace Nichols, James Berry, Keith Jefferson, to name but a few.

Some white working-class poets go so far as to declare that poetry is dead and long live rant. The Ranters, drawn from north and south, include Attila the Stockbroker, Joolz, Seething Wells, Little Brother, Little Dave; they draw on the tradition of scurrilous ballads in rhyme and, like the other groups, produce their own fanzines and magazines.

I emphasise that the lists of names above are short owing to the constraints of space, and apologise to all the poets whose names I have omitted. The current poetry revival challenges elitism: any selection of poets is invidious, and in this case is based on my experience as a white feminist.

The public role of the new generation of radical poets is, oddly enough, aided by the current recession. As theatre companies close for lack of funds and grants, so the actors involved have re-formed into variety acts performing at the many cabarets which have sprung up across London and other large cities and which offer a cheap night out: beer and music, mime, comedy, poetry and backchat.

This is very different from the hushed churchly atmosphere associated with traditional poetry readings where the emphasis remains on the written text read from rather than performed in a mixed-media entertainment setting. Instead of welcoming the diversity of choice now available, which reflects our multi-cultural society, some establishment poets ignore it. The recently published Penguin anthology *Contemporary British Poetry*, for example, caused a furore by concentrating solely on the work of a small elite group of poets (all white and mostly male) and omitting all the poets discussed above. And there are still plenty of critics happy to disdain as tainted or corrupt poetry that is in any way connected to politics, to dismiss feminist



poets as shrill hysterics, and to patronise working-class and black poets as occasionally interesting minority inhabitants of a peripheral zoo.

These new poets are frightening, subversive and dangerous. Radical poetry heals the splits our culture inflicts as necessary (common-sense) wounds between intellect and body, man and woman, mother and revolutionary, conscious and unconscious, theory and ideology. Radical poetry tries to speak what has been unspeakable: working-class, black and female experience. The Left is not always comfortable with this. Nor am I: other poets give me disturbing, shifting images which don't correspond to my yearnings for simple socialist-feminist heroism. Radical poetry allows the unconscious back in. Labelling it as irrational, opposing it to scientific theory doesn't make it go away. Poetry makes us laugh or shudder or weep or desire when perhaps we'd rather fantasise controlling the world through a political language which is almost never playful and inventive. The Right understands the power of the unconscious and exploits it in rituals and ideology, utilises the energy of repressed yearnings and conflicts. If we on the Left want to unblock more of our creative energy for change, we need to let poetry (a way of thinking, of understanding, of being) back into our politics.