

## Editorial

It is a strange time for the arts in Britain. There are demands for writers to respond to present suffering and to possible grim futures. The problem is not just in writing 'about' the Middle East or Japan. Something unexpected seems to be affecting standpoints from home. A daily list of changes proposed for social organisation in the UK calls into question basic assumptions about how we have 'willed' or 'assimilated' structures of human relationships, 'rights' and publicly owned institutions: our sort of consciousness. The National Health Service and public libraries, school and university education, publicly owned sources of information and the arts: in effect, the context, so long taken for granted, from which 'the self' might address natural disasters and wars starting from unprecedented challenges.

We hear there has been some Coalition Government thinking about causing apparent 'chaos' or 'Big Bang localism' (*Guardian* 10 Dec. 2010). They want to make big structural changes without thinking through the implications needed to implement them – the details will follow from the 'chaos'. A parody revolution? Coalition thought attempts to reverse the relationship between 'grass-roots' and 'bottom-up' thinking and top-down, centralised policy-making. And where do the the arts figure in this burlesque?

There are enormous cuts in Arts Council England funding and for projects both instrumental and aesthetic. Local councils may sell paintings; theatres will close. The National Association for

Writers in Education, a vital resource for many people who write for, and read, *Stand*, is losing its income from ACE as are publishers and the Poetry Book Society.

'Strange and widely dissimilar creatures who have never come near each other before suddenly find themselves together. In their flight, all the distances between them disappear, though the differences of course do not. The flight crowd is the most comprehensive of all crowds' (*Crowds and Power*, 1960 tr. 1962 p. 53). These are the words of Elias Canetti. I use them to bridge our domestic chaos and the different forms of chaos to which we are intimately linked.

In Japan the probable number of dead following the tsunami continues to rise as the threat from radioactive leaks also increases. This coincidence linking natural and man-made disaster invokes the vision in Canetti's *Crowds and Power*. The invading sea was all-powerful, but at least it subsided. Radioactivity leaks into the sea but no one knows how to stop it. Flight or escape become essential concepts as they become real activities. What started as defence of civilians and the creation of a 'no-fly zone' has become open bombing of Gaddafi's weapons – so much for 'no fly'. Perhaps the aim was always to metamorphose defence into war: 'But the war is not a true war unless its first aim is a heap of enemy dead' (*Crowds and Power* p. 68). The bigger the total dead, the more civilization becomes transformed. Is this editorial a lament or a provocation? We wait with fear and hope for what poetry and fiction will make of these events.

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