

Editorial

Stubbornness and Serendipity

The University of Leeds student magazine *Poetry & Audience* celebrated its sixtieth anniversary last year and the occasion was marked by a week of activities (from the 15th to the 19th October 2013) which included a poetry slam, traditional readings, and two round-table discussions: one on editing *P&A* which involved editors from six of its seven decades of existence; and one on the current state of poetry publishing. What is probably the longest-running student-managed poetry magazine in the country was started by an enterprising undergraduate at Leeds, Ralph Maud, who now lives, Professor Emeritus, in British Columbia in his native Canada. The history of *P&A* is, of course, closely intertwined with that of *Stand*. Jon and Elaine Glover first met Jon Silkin as undergraduates at Leeds in the 1964-65 session when they were part of the *P&A* production team under the editorship of Jeffrey Wainwright. In 2012 we celebrated *Stand's* sixtieth. *P&A's* history might be said to mirror *Stand's* as part of the continuing poetry culture at the University of Leeds, but they might also be said to represent diametrically opposed histories of the 'little magazine': one driven by the energy and taste of a single-minded individual, the other passed on from one set of student editors to another and, over the years, often needing support from academics to kindle it back into life. Both might be said to represent in their different ways the combination of 'stubbornness and serendipity' which Evan Jones, as a

contributor to the aforementioned round-table on poetry publishing, claimed was the hallmark of such precarious enterprises.

The round-table was chaired by Fiona Becket, Co-Director of the Leeds University Poetry Centre, and her panel with a wide range of poetic and editorial expertise across a variety of titles and forms of publication consisted of Carole Bromley, Paul Maddern, Evan Jones, Elaine Glover, Adam Piette, Michael Blackburn, and John Goodby.

On the more pragmatic and material level of print, the panel reflected humorously and realistically on the current commercial market for poetry as opposed to its free online availability. Carole Bromley spoke with genuine enthusiasm for the new-found opportunity she has in regularly engaging and interacting with an audience of 5,000 on her YorkMix poetry blog. In a field where a thousand sales might be construed as a best seller and where the figure of 400 was conjured as the average for most collections, the mutually reinforcing or supportive relationship between internet and print was reflected on at some length. Online presence was now considered to be a necessity for survival, but the internet might also serve as an adjunct to the established, but challenged print culture in which single author collections and pamphlets might still have a defined role to play. In this respect, print on demand was thought to be the necessary blessing for a market defined by a very limited, but committed audience, a market in which if it's not possible to make money from poetry it might be possible, as Michael Blackburn suggested, to make money from the things connected with it; or, as he expressed it on another occasion: there isn't a general

public for poetry only a very specific target audience. As Paul Maddern reflected from his editing *Poetry Proper* and from his experience of creating the digital resources at the Seamus Heaney Centre in Queen's Belfast, online sites can potentially take us to another level by acting – unlike many free online sites – as guaranteed repositories for poems: a new kind of ready-made and permanent archive.

The panel also considered how questions of taste, identity, and aesthetics had been altered by this new form of publication. Adam Piette's contribution to the forum as one of the co-editors of the online *Blackbox Manifold* (the other is Alex Moen) was to draw attention to the creative possibilities of virtual publishing, not just in terms of its obvious capability of making 'rapid connection' between continents and thereby forming 'a real sense of community right across the globe' – something which *Jacket Magazine* has done very successfully – but also of the way in which it provides an opportunity to reflect and change our assumptions about taste and identity. Adam and Alex have used *Blackbox Manifold* to challenge each other's taste in a journal whose very title is an amalgam of the mixed identity of its two editors. Adam described their exchanges as 'talking it through ... to sharpen your taste off.' This reassertion of taste and identity in a profoundly democratized context featured strongly in the discussion as did the need to establish thresholds of quality. What emerged was a description of the proliferation of gatekeepers rather than their disappearance. The opportunity, as Fiona Becket put it, was one of 'self-fashioning in the democratized world'.

This dynamic between the need to establish identity at the same time as engaging in a technology which is inevitably democratizing was at the heart of John Goodby's contribution to the round-table in which he also celebrated the way in which the web has 'made more artificial the divide between different kinds of poetry'. He relished the current prospect of a poetry scene in which leading publishers – Faber and Chatto – now find it impossible to dictate taste. The variety and mixture of work which is out there can't be unlearned, can't be marshalled, so that one is encouraged to make one's own explorations and thereby expand the definition of poetry.

One area in which the online mode could clearly offer a new form of creativity was in animating the poem – whether visually or aurally. As the various editors reflected on the beauty of this new sense-perceptual possibility for poems on the screen, they also returned to consider the pamphlet as an object which, albeit, in small subscription or website-funded short runs might still offer a beauty of its own.

Even if all editors were left to consider the guilt of no longer paying poets for their poems – and all the editors were or are poets – they were agreed that they were all operating in a changed landscape with as many possibilities as challenges and one in which some fruitful symbiosis between online and print modes could still take place. It is, they agreed, a very mixed picture; or, as one person put it – an 'amphibious moment': one in which the combination of stubbornness and serendipity would still play a major part.

Web links for these publications can be found on page 104.

John Whale