

Editorial

I have just finished reading, revising and correcting the proofs for the *Complete Poems* of Jon Silkin, the founder in 1952 of *Stand*. With some luck and good management the book, roughly 1,000 pages of it, will appear in February 2015. There is an advert on the back cover of this issue of *Stand*. I mention what might seem routine and trivial details because they reveal some interesting aspects of poetry – how it is written, how it is communicated to readers and listeners, and how the work of particular writers is perceived, valued and becomes part of poetry’s wider territory.

At least in 1950 when Silkin’s first very slim volume, *The Portrait*, appeared there were no obvious, accessible institutions, companies or ‘machinery’ in which the trades or skills of being a poet were learned and validated; no equivalents of theatres, concert halls, art galleries or Academies and Colleges for other art forms. There were some organisations such as the Poetry Society which promoted ‘verse speaking’,

usually in posh schools but no Grade Exams as run still by the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music in which children (or adults) could learn the technical skills of language on the page, or as speech, in the way that they could with music. There were many University courses which offered or required the study of poetry but, in 1950, none in the UK on writing it; or, at least, not producing it as an assessable product (outcome?) giving marks to achievement from work as part of the curriculum.

For Jon Silkin, sympathy with the language and functions of poetry were gained through reading – the Bible, Milton and whatever poets, past or present, he could lay his hands on as a child and teenager. He left school at 15 after studies interrupted by wartime evacuation and his own dislike of fitting in. Experience of producing poetry was learned by experiment, reading, writing on any bit of paper, and by meeting and listening to other poets. In his case, his ‘academy’ was developed through National Service and years of manual labour including grave-

digging, This 'academy' was virtual in that it was informal, had no rules and no buildings. A sort of 'interface' was, however, very formal in that there were organisations which approved or validated what writers did. These, in post 2nd World War England, included certain publishers and the BBC. These organisations were often controlled by graduates from Oxford and Cambridge; they employed poets who themselves had studied, usually Classics or English Literature, at those Universities. So if we now wished to theorise about cultural capital, class and tradition, or the power of elite education there would be lots to think about. For poets in the late 1940s and early 1950s there must have been lots of associated activities to test out the interfaces to the gates of power. By 1954, without University study and without a middle-class job (and little money), Silkin was reading his poems on the BBC, appearing in journals all over the UK and even in *Poetry* (Chicago). He read in London poetry societies and groups, including the ICA, and occasionally with Hobsbaum's 'The Group'. He knew the important poet and editor, C Day Lewis, who worked at Chatto and Windus, and other poetry journal editors including Dannie Abse

and Howard Sergeant. It is paradoxical, perhaps, that on the one hand Silkin was a 'drop out', an 'angry young man'. On the other hand, he knew, and could enjoy or manipulate, the poetry 'establishment'.

Of all the art forms, the English post war poetry world's 'self-consciousness' was familiar with, and dominated by, such paradoxes. There was what became famous as 'The Group', which met fairly regularly carrying with it experience from Cambridge and 'close reading with Leavis. Other enthusiasts got together to talk and read. But producing a poem was equally (famously) very individual and very cheap. Many of Silkin's poems, from the '50s till his death in 1997, were hand written on bits of scrap paper including the backs of letters and manuscripts sent in to Stand.

So where were, and where are, his poems? And what are they? Are these questions about the ontology of texts and meaning? Or about preservation? To answer that those poems not already in published and printed in books are on multiple fragments in Special Collections in the Brotherton Library of the

University of Leeds is true but only part of the truth. For Silkin, poems were always part of a dialogue, so the fragments were often the result of consultation and sharing. One could think that the complexity of drafting and storage revealed uncertainty or difficulty in 'letting go'. But I suspect that the archived drafts partly resulted from a religious, political and personal identity. Texts were part of human engagement and a disordered liaison with God. To make a text was a practical invitation to others to communicate in, and through, the mess of history and sexuality; any such communication stood to be argued and fought for with, and by, God. God was the god (Silkin's capitals are usually there for a reason) of parents, birth and death; the god of sex; and the god who stood by in the Holocaust. For Silkin felt profoundly that god 'stood by' as witness. God might have been a covert guilty cause or a potential saviour. Either way, consciousness of the Holocaust was mediated through friends and family – and god.

The text of a poem was always up for judgement by any of those 'others' or, indeed, all of them together. Those 'others', with whom he met and argued, were

his supreme editors. And, as though all of those with whom he shared his drafts were present with him, in what was a sort of religious-cum-editorial congregation, their discussions were necessary and ultimately loveable; they were not 'advice' to help prepare a more established-England-pleasing, prize-winning poem. In a way, his behaviour with others through sharing his poems sensed the practical, though intentionally intangible, 'field of force' as described in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (IIxi p 219e).

Silkin saved the drafts, both of both published and unpublished poems. He saved copies of his books along with contracts and correspondence with his editors. He saved copies of the journals in which his poems appeared. Again, he often saved correspondence with journal editors. Was this insecurity or egotism? Was this intended as a gift to future readers and editors? All of these may be relevant, and indeed, many writers may have similar fears and affections for the fate of their bits of paper. Jon Glove