

Editorial

Movements, groups, locations: here are some common suppositions about recent poetry. Survivors of the Second World War (from active service or simply from 'that period') could hardly be assembled into active groups associated with particular locales. Auden? Dylan Thomas? So what actually happened after 1945? The Movement – surely only born to be deconstructed; though it was made up of University graduates, mainly from Oxbridge. *Poetry and Poverty* and the Mavericks – London, if anywhere. The Group – Cambridge and then London. And then poetry in Leeds in the 50s and 60s, and then on to Newcastle on Tyne. Then Manchester. And Ireland, of course. Glasgow, Edinburgh, Hull. Is there any method that can predict a new group or movement? Where might poetry start happening next? Is the next new movement simply the fancy of an academic thesis, the discovery or construction of a prominent critic or a media spotlight searching for news-worthy new talent, or courteously tracking (re-discovering) the old? Does the coincidence of three prominent writers in one town or region or country (Yorkshire, Wales, Northern Ireland, Scotland?) constitute 'something new'? Do publishers and journals identify a new generation as a shared, common experience ('New Gen', pace the Poetry Society), or do they single out, and keep in print, a small number of safe names?

I have always thought that Keith Douglas's prediction that the literature of the Second World War would not be written till after it was over was important. What would constitute that untimely 'canon'? What cultural, political, aesthetic or personality-led overlay would focus the 'real' literature of a period – especially if one of the greatest poet-participants in the War felt that the true written measure of the

time would come long after the key events, as in the case of Douglas? (What would happen if we were to accept Douglas's view literally and discount 'How to kill' and 'Vergissmainicht' because they were written too close to the scene?)

Anthony Rowland's notion of the poetic response to the Holocaust in some way waiting to happen is nice, though symptomatic of a difficulty for writers themselves and their critics. He writes, in *Tony Harrison and the Holocaust* (2001):

An adequate representation of the Holocaust remains a lacuna in post-war British culture, but this has not deterred a number of poets, including Sylvia Plath, Geoffrey Hill, Jon Silkin and [Tony] Harrison himself, from engaging with it.

There is a sense of moral duty here – a 'lacuna' that needs to be filled because, presumably, something 'adequate' needs to be said. Rowland himself realises the difficulty:

A mimetic relationship between art and the real is not predicated, since the inscription of an event is itself an act of interpretation.

So if everything is an 'interpretation' how can one determine whether there is a literary black hole waiting to suck in the light, and whether someone's attempts to fill it in are adequate or not?

The issues coincide neatly with some poetic history (recognising that this history is, of course, an interpretation). On the one hand three of Rowland's named writers wrote about the Second World War (amongst many other things). They, and others, coincided in Leeds in the late 50s and early 60s. How far could it be suggested that they were part of a cultural movement 'waiting to happen' – to fill some detectable moral imperative to respond to the Holocaust? How far was poetry in Leeds at that time an accident? Or a high minded academic plan that nevertheless relied on friends and acquaintances? Did it have a shared

political agenda or a communal sense of the nature of poetry? How far was there an awareness or encouragement from a wider community than Leeds University itself? How far was the movement, if such it was, something that could be handed on, or was it largely dependent on relatively short-term relationships between some key figures? As with recent views of the 'Movement', were the poets in Leeds in the 50s and 60s aware of a sense of something special that was more than the sum of its parts, or would they have been surprised, shocked or amused if they had been assembled in a room in, say 1965, and asked for their common views on the nature of poetry or their social manifesto? What happened to poetry in Leeds after that apparently crucial time in the 50s and 60s – in the 70s, 80s, 90s and the first years of the new century? Is there something new happening now?

I am interested in the relationship between a political and cultural awareness of any one time and the creative process, particularly as it affects poets, but also as it might affect fiction and drama. It is a really interesting challenge to look at how far poets – especially students and other new writers finding their way – actually respond at the time to what the critics seem to feel is expected 'then and there'. Also, to see how later critics write or re-write the 'then and there' so that what got written at the time was, or was not, 'adequate'. The politics, collaborations and finance of drama and film to some extent determine their cultural nexus in the business of the creative process. Fiction is more awkward because of the time involved to write a novel – and it is a solitary process. Poetry is odd. It costs little to write, and relatively few pounds spent, and copies sold, to establish a reputation. A poem may be written quickly, and even if it takes a year or two to revise, the social interactions involved in the process are likely to be highly restricted.

One of the fascinating factors in this period has been the extraordinary coincidence of some of the issues and trends identified above in a few people – usually energetic and visionary poet-editors. Brian Cox

from the Department of English at Manchester University, himself a poet and editor (*Critical Quarterly*), helped Michael Schmidt to move from Oxford to Manchester with *Carcanet* and then *PN Review*. When Bonamy Dobrée helped to set up the Gregory Fellowships in Leeds, and Jon Silkin moved from London, albeit with a financially challenged *Stand*, there was a similar sense of linking the critical / academic project with the practical worlds of writing, publication and social / political involvement. Interestingly, when Jon Silkin and *Stand* moved on further North to Newcastle it seems to have been less because of a link with academia than with an enlightened funding body. But again, the magazine was crucial, the sense that a writer could act as a catalyst for others through a collaborative involvement with publication and communication. The writer's job was not undertaken in isolation even if it was the work of 'the committed individual'. And the peculiar commitment to publish was also handed on to Neil Astley who founded *Bloodaxe* after his earlier work with *Stand*.

There remains a big question – what, if anything, gets 'handed on'? I am delighted that so many writers who have lived in Leeds, and participated in some measure in the process of writing poetry since the 50s, have been able to contribute to this edition of *Stand*: Elizabeth Cook, Sarah Corbett, Andrew McNeillie, Steven Matthews, Hugh Maxton, Jeffrey Wainwright, John Whale, Antony Rowland, John Goodby, Ian Duhig, Linda France. Others, are mentioned in a brief review of recent books from John Heath-Stubbs (Gregory Fellow 1955–57), Wole Soyinka (a student from 1955–58), Hugh Maxton (teaching 1974–82) to Ian Duhig (first as a student, and then a writing fellow from 1996). Ken Smith's most recent work, *Shed*, will be reviewed at length in a future issue devoted to re-assessing and celebrating his work. Ken Smith was a co-editor of *Stand* from 1964 to 1969, one of the magazine's most exciting periods. Many readers will know of his death in June of this year after a long illness following a visit to Cuba.