

## Editorial

One likes to think that *Stand* is always moving on. When there is a serious examination of the past (of the work of a great and influential poet, for example) there is a new place to mark out, a step to take, a new landscape, and a new vision of the world to be had. Ken Smith was one of the most influential and important editors of *Stand*. This issue pays tribute to his importance through new critical views on his writing and through the publication of poems which have as their starting-point both Ken's loss and his permanence.

It might seem odd to be startled into looking at the impact of Ken Smith's life and work through 'Tradition and the Individual Talent'. I expect I was not the only one who felt that somehow the world lurched with news of his illness with Legionnaire's Disease and that something awful rumbled on for months until his death. The tradition of how we read poetry is changed because of what he wrote; the future of what we might write is different also. Although Eliot's conservatism was utterly alien to Ken Smith there is a sense in which he and his work functioned like Eliot's exemplary catalyst. Ken Smith was enormously complex and private whilst living out then, and until his death, the dictum from the 1960s that the private is political.

That said, the image of Eliot's catalyst will only go so far; his version of the poet and poem as catalyst is supposed to leave the poet's inner, functioning 'substance' unaffected by the surround-

ings. Whilst Smith registered, filtered and reflected the changes of the outside world he was also prepared to accept the way that these changes made him change. And through sharing his overt pain and anger, he hoped others would change too.

According to Ken Smith's own account, his time in Leeds was important for the example of Jon Silkin and Geoffrey Hill; and, despite the evidence of his early collection *The Pity*, not only for the quality and emotional territory of their poetry, but for the example of their commitment to a life of poetry. They provided him, it seems, with his new-found realisation that being a poet was a way of life to which one had to be singularly committed. As he put it, they demonstrated 'that being a poet is a matter of growth, a way of living, integral'. And this was, perhaps, a key turning-point for his future career as he left Britain both geographically and artistically. His removal in the late sixties as a consequence of taking up a writing fellowship in Pennsylvania coincided with his decision to leave the lyric form behind. 'England and ways English ceased to be for me', he said later. What he saw as the lyric's limitations – its connection with a dominant English pastoral, its 'framed observations' – now appeared to be a 'hump' which 'must be got over'. He was now ready to take on the challenge of the different traditions available to him in the US. As it turned out, he opened himself up not just to English-speaking America, but to poets from a wide range of cultures, including Native Americans. This may have been the change in a career marked by migration which confirmed Ken's sense of himself as a poet of movement, exile, and wandering: in short, that which defined him as a poet of process. His sense of the poem itself changed in line with this.

It was now something in process with life rather than definitive, framed, and sealed off from the usual business of living. For some significant time after *The Pity* there was an uncharacteristic silence. The titles of his collections in the eighties which did so much to confirm his reputation – *The Poet Reclining* and *Fox Running* – bear clear testimony to the nature of his aesthetic in their use of the present participle. Here was a poet who embraced change, who opened himself up to the world and its many cultures, whose poetry was produced out of a principled and considered uncertainty. Very often this poetry embraces anger and rage, but there is always a profound humility as well. Change is its subject and its condition. All the more poignant, then, now that the life which underpins the experiment is no longer with us.

To return to his time as editor of *Stand* back in the sixties is to witness the special quality of change associated with the magazine back then. A seminal early issue (Vol. 6 No.4, 1964) opened with Smith's 'The Pity' and 'Family Group'. Both poems have chilling last lines: 'instead of blood I watched and saw the pity run out of me.' ('The Pity') and 'They will not feel the winter when it comes.' ('Family Group'). This sense of urgent transition and transformation was echoed in Geoffrey Hill's review of Ted Hughes's new edition of Keith Douglas's *Selected Poems*. "I in Another Place": Homage to Keith Douglas', the title of the review, somehow embodied the urgency and inner depth of the imagined, shared movement as it crossed from person to person something like the action of a catalyst. After quoting Douglas at length on 'the unique and alien existence of a man destined for, or engaged in battle', Hill explains that 'each of these phrases, far from asserting a

"unifying generalisation" about experience, conveys a sense of alienation, exclusion, of a world with its own tragi-comic laws, like *Alice* with all the sinister suggestions exaggerated. And much of the acuteness of the perception is in the recognition that not everyone has to go through with this'. Hill's review of Douglas immediately followed Smith's poems. The reader in 1964 might have been forgiven for feeling the connection between personal experience and battle as something intimately and inevitably connected with the process of perception. As a poet, the process of perception was inevitably and intimately explored and registered through the refractions of language. Somehow, *Stand* offered us real experiences that we hoped we might never have to live through. But as we shared Douglas's essentially alienated personal perceptions that were imposed by war we felt that the poets of today *must mean what they say*. The journey through the looking glass was not into childish fantasy but into a serious, often pitiless, world. Given that Silkin explored relentlessly the meaning of Wilfred Owen's 'The poetry is in the pity', Ken Smith's 'The Pity' offered a poetry of demanding emotional intelligence. We hope that this issue of *Stand* will again explore that emotional intelligence as the catalyst works on.

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