

Our first acquaintance with poets and, more particularly, our first acquaintance with poems, can often be influential and inspirational. Good reason, then, to commend Josephine Hart's ambition to 'take spoken poetry into every classroom'. Over the last two years or so, her Gallery Poets project, in collaboration with the British Library, has engaged some of our best actors – including Sinead Cusack, Simon Callow, Ralph Fiennes, Edward Fox, Robert Hardy, Jeremy Irons, Charlotte Rampling, Juliet Stevenson, and Harriet Walter – in the service of providing a corpus of readings from the work of English, Irish, and American poets, including Auden, Dickinson, Eliot, Keats, Kipling, Larkin, McDiarmid, Marianne Moore, Plath, Shelley, Wilde, and Yeats. She has now published an anthology as part of the project and has generously promised to offer it to every secondary school which wants a copy. It contains an introduction by Hart herself along with a selection of eight of the poets in eighty minutes of recording. Entitled *Catching Life by the Throat*, it takes its inspiration from Frost's strong belief in the voicing of poems. As well as supplying the title to the anthology, his idea of 'the sound of sense' offers support to the whole project. One of the main ideas underwriting her idea of 'spoken poetry' is intelligibility. To hear a poem read out loud in this way is to hear it make sense – sometimes for the first time. She finds another helpful example in Heaney's famous recollection of being an undergraduate at Queen's Belfast and hearing a recording of

Robert Speaight reading Eliot's *Four Quartets*. 'What I heard made sense', he recalls with characteristically barbed simplicity.

An equally convincing argument runs in the opposite direction. The case could be made for poetry's auditory power without any requirement for immediate intelligibility. 'Genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood', Eliot proclaims in his essay on Dante, one statement among many in which he conjures poetry's mystery and offers a characteristic awareness of its mixed affinities: to the primitive as well as to the civilized. Attending to the 'tom-tom' beat of verse, to the beat of a 'drum in a jungle', as he puts it in *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, can be a way into a poem prior to any more cerebral and secondary act of comprehension. Leaving aside Eliot's loaded adjective 'genuine' here, perhaps even more of a case could be made out for the power of sound by way of poetry's basis in the auditory imagination, something which informs Basil Bunting's injunction to young poets: 'compose aloud; poetry is a sound'.

In this regard, Hart's appropriate targeting of the twelve to eighteen age group with a sound anthology probably needs to be supported by interventions at a primary level where, in England and Wales at least, the introduction of the National Curriculum (within the state sector) has led to a serious reduction in the time that can be devoted to music and communal singing. The good news is that Music Manifesto has very recently persuaded the government to invest £10 million in music provision with Howard Goodall acting as the project's Singing Ambassador. The reduction over recent years in singing must have been particularly damaging to the potential reception of poetry. For most of us in

the post-War baby-boom, I suspect that the gap between nursery rhyme and the poetry offered to us in the form of *Palgrave's Golden Treasury* was filled with a strong sense of lyric derived from singing in Infants and Juniors. Those singing schools of the fifties, sixties, and seventies developed a pleasure in the way words could be both fitted and moulded by sound; not poetry exactly but close to it. Poetry's establishment of its own music from the words alone might come more easily, be more immediately appreciated, as a result of this familiarity with the combined working of music and words in lyrics. Along with Blake's ubiquitous (and baffling) 'Jerusalem' my class-mates and I sang a calculated medley of religious and national sentiments which included such songs as 'British Grenadiers', 'Men of Harlech', 'The Harp that Once in Tara's Halls', and 'Trelawney'. In the last of these, I imagined a good sword in my trusty hand and only guessed at the meaning of the line: 'King James's men will understand what Cornish men can do'. The ideological dangers of not understanding are only too evident in these examples from the post-War canon, but on a more instinctive level of the joining of words and music, the basis of a reception to the power of poetry was, I suspect, firmly laid in these experiences of singing.

Hart's project to engage our current generation of British teenagers so far includes (almost exclusively) nineteenth and twentieth-century poets. None of our contemporary poets have yet made it into her archive. It would be good if they did so. If she really wants to make an impact on what she has referred to as 'the ASBO generation', particularly the group of disaffected young men whom she, perhaps idealistically, thinks she can convert using the

same cultural feast as she offered her own sons, perhaps she would do well to consider Coleridge's claim in the first chapter of *Biographia Literaria* that 'no models of past times, however perfect, can have the same vivid effect on the youthful mind as the productions of contemporary genius'. To hear the voice of the contemporary poet can often carry a peculiar force.

Leaving aside the hazards of invidious selection and the vexed question of copyright, one might also legitimately worry about poets reading their own work. While it has been assumed for a long time now that poets will – as a matter of course – read from their own work, the experience can sometimes be distinctly underwhelming. Instead of an awareness of the subtleties of rhythm and the tension between prose rhythm and the sound patterning of the poem, a good number of poets seem to choose between a monotonous chiming and a denial of the difference between a poem and a muttered conversation. Too many of them (for this auditor at least) refuse to leave any pause between the last line of their poem and the next instalment of their commentary. Tony Harrison's profound awareness of the ceremonial language of poetry is not only the subject of the poems, but a hallmark of his performance of them at readings. Though not suitable for every contemporary style, it nevertheless ensures that each poem is given its due by being properly defined by 'the silence which surrounds all poetry'.

In 'My First Acquaintance with Poets' (1823) William Hazlitt records his meetings with his idols Coleridge and Wordsworth. As one might expect of its author, the text is a complicated mixture of hero-worship and critique. The ambivalence of Hazlitt's essay stands as testimony to the undoubtedly powerful, but invariably

mixed nature of all such first encounters, encounters which, if meaningful, are always subject to significant revisions and reassessments. When he met Coleridge in 1798 at the age of nineteen Hazlitt was, despite his pretensions to be a metaphysician and a painter, still suffering his own late eighteenth-century form of adolescent disaffection. He describes himself as 'dumb, inarticulate, [and] helpless'. The essay makes it clear that he owes to Coleridge his ability to articulate himself or, as he puts it, his soul's ever having found 'a language to express itself'. When he enters upon a description of their respective modes of composition he offers veiled critique alongside apparent recollection: 'Coleridge has told me that he himself liked to compose in walking over uneven ground, or breaking through the straggling branches of a copse-wood; whereas Wordsworth always wrote (if he could) walking up and down a straight gravel-walk, or in some spot where the continuity of his verse met with no collateral interruption.' When he recounts his impressions of the two poets reading from their own work, he more critically and ambivalently describes 'a *chaunt* in the recitation of Wordsworth and Coleridge which acts as a spell upon the hearer, and disarms the judgement'. Assuming that he means something less musical than a song, something more like a measured monotony of sound, Hazlitt's use of the word 'chaunt' points to the dangers of poets reading from their own work. Spell-binding it can be, but for the radical essayist any disarming of the judgement carries with it more than a whiff of suspicion.

Josephine Hart's use of distinguished actors for the purpose of winning converts to poetry avoids the danger of such an idoliza-

tion of poets, though my guess would be that having contemporary poets speak in their own voices would produce a greater variety of English accents. Wordsworth's northern 'burr' was immediately apparently to the literary celebrities of Regency London; and, as Harrison reminded us in the seventies, he was a poet who, in 'Resolution and Independence', chose to rhyme 'waters' with 'chatters'. *Catching Life by the Throat* and the wider project of engaging the next generation of poetry readers and poets through the power of spoken verse is timely and welcome – all the more so, if it can stretch to accommodate the rich variety of our contemporary poems and voices.

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