

The first of many poems by Michael Hamburger to appear in *Stand*, 'From the Notebook of a European Tramp', was published in the second issue, in 1952. *Stand* was then edited in London. The last, a group of four poems including a wry and moving 'review', in six parts, of his life in Saxmundham, 'Domestic', appeared in issue 181 in 2006. Strangely and wonderfully, the same two issues also included poems by James Kirkup. Over fifty five years they have been part of a community of writers and readers associated with *Stand*.

By 1952 Hamburger had seen the effects of war on London, had met poets in Oxford and Soho and had done National Service. By then, as a poet and translator himself, one can only assume that the notion of being a 'European Tramp' would have had all sorts of resonances. The wartime experience, the awful lives and deaths of displaced persons and refugees, and the uncertain world of British poetry in the immediate post-war years seem there in the poem in the contrast between theology and church on the one hand and Providence, earth and sky on the other:

Wiser than theologians know  
Is Providence; for when good people go  
To church on Sunday mornings, I  
Am left inheritor of earth and sky;

It may be fanciful to try to cash in the symbolic rich pickings of

Providence that follow: 'Apples and pears unguarded ... I bless his charity and milk his cows.' But one might think that the concluding line:

And use the highway's hospitality,

could stand for the words that had become so important. He was journeying with and through words.

Hamburger has in some ways lived out the life of the 'word' from his early childhood. He moved with his family from Berlin to Edinburgh in November 1933. He and his brother, speaking no English, had to find their own way to new classrooms at George Watson's College: 'Since English words were indispensable not only for school work but for what I needed most, the reassurance of being accepted as a member of the community, the words came with extraordinary speed'. Soon he could respond to the opportunities offered by actions to communicate; actions rather than words: 'Words, in any case, carried less weight than action among those nine-year-old boys, and it was by an action that I won total acceptance with a suddenness I felt to be quite undeserved. It was as easy as walking off a plank – the plank being the highest of the diving-boards in the swimming pool'. Maybe this account, published in 1973, has the advantage of a poet's and a translator's hindsight, but it seems plausible enough now for us to accept the boy's conscious awareness of dealing with the world. The nine-year-old is left (encouraged? trusted?) to get on with fending for himself and he is immediately conscious of the differences between what words and actions can do, that words relate in different ways to realities and

that the realities of his immediate present (as much as the past nine years in Germany in the German language) could be mediated and used through his own decisions. And those decisions were part of his identity and the links between his identity and 'the community'. Words were part of a defined and defining real world 'out there'; they were also in his power.

The process of using words to build the world, describe the world or retreat from the world into a private life became part of a continuous argument. 'Palinode' appeared in *Stand* issue 5, 1953 and was written after spending time on Majorca with Robert Graves (and witnessing a bullfight):

Kill every creature, beast and bird,  
Flower and ourselves, to feed the Word,  
Our last Chimera never found  
Till we have covered desert ground  
With serpents, goats and ions killed  
For the one site on which to build  
An egocentric heap of stones  
Inscribed: Bellerophon – his bones.  
Yet not for so much gain:  
Vanished summits we attain.

By *Stand* 11, Winter-Spring 1956, he was in some ways continuing the same debate. But how strange it is that in a magazine already noted for its apparently anti-Movement, pro-Maverick literary politics, in the year of Suez and Hungary, 'Early Love' should be like this:

Nothing is single there, and nothing pure:  
Mind mixed with flesh, as animal with flower,  
As flower with rock; and all dissimilar.

Nymph to his satyr, Psyche to his ghost  
She lures him to division, at her cost.

An emerging poetry of commitment in *Stand* was neither simple nor 'single'. Words were going to remain, for Hamburger, part of an age-old and continuing philosophical problem; a problem of the creation of reality that became fundamental to the processes that led to and conducted the War and the Holocaust; a problem which was integral to all 'life in language' – not unique to Hitler and Eichmann.

Hamburger explored the uses and power of words through a meditation on Eichmann in 'In a Cold Season', published in *Weather and Season* in 1963:

Words cannot reach him in his prison of words  
Whose words killed men because those men were words...

It is a remarkable poem which concludes with a plea that Eichmann should not have to die: 'Caged in his words their words – one deadly word / Setting the seal on unreality'. For Hamburger to refuse the circle of punishment in its prison of words and actions, to 'show him pity for pity's sake', would be a gesture in favour of reality; the words of death were the words of unreality: 'Dare break one word and words may yet be whole'.

*Editorial*

The combination of social, philosophical, and intimate personal tensions here is deeply moving and one wonders if anyone else in our period has so closely placed his personal and poetic identities in a position so vulnerable yet so necessary. He became aware, early on in his career, of his sense of individuality, his dislike of groups and group psychology. He had every possibility to make literary friends and he seems to have moved easily in Oxford, London (including literary Soho) and Europe. Returning from his stay with Graves in Majorca he was aware of a 'growing need to be independent' and a desire to avoid 'membership of any group or movement in poetry':

When the so-called Movement was launched in the 'fifties I agreed to contribute to an anthology of work by non-Movement poets – only to find myself branded a 'Maverick', the member of an anti-Movement group. (*A Mug's Game* 279)

If the 'Mavericks' (Dannie Abse, who was joint editor with Howard Sergeant, of *Mavericks* claims that he was responsible for bringing the word to UK English; they included Jon Silkin, David Wright, J C Hall, Vernon Scannell, W Price Turner and Anthony Cronin) now seem as diverse as the Movement poets whom they opposed; some, at least, had a recognisably outsider's viewpoint. That said, Hamburger's awkward mixture of affection, loyalty and scepticism needs to be recognised as an intellectually justified thread that was admired by many and ran throughout this period.

It was a thread that he continued to develop in *The Truth of Poetry* (1969 and 1982). The title chapter provides surely one of the

most lucid and widely-based examinations of the poet's task: "The purpose of poets, then, is "to tell truths," but in ways necessarily complicated by the "paradox of the human word." This paradox was something he continued to live through and it is surely heartening to see him arriving at these conclusions from working on his own poetry, translating the poetry of others, and as a result of his familiarity with poetic practise in several languages. It seems to me to be so much more credible to read of such a network of self, reality, and poetry from Hamburger than it might be from some critical theorists:

The right word in poetry drops like a stone into water, making the sense spread out in a widening circle. That is one reason why the poet's person or 'I' matters so little. He may use the first person and mean anyone. He may use the impersonal 'we' and mean himself, failing to make the circle widen. Outside his poems a poet may be – and usually is – an egotist; inside them he feels his ego dissolve, intermingle with all that names or invokes. (*Art and Second Nature* 1975, 52-53)

'Domestic' looks at this intermingling in the house and grounds in Suffolk where Hamburger lived for so long. It is a moving poem which takes up his recurring image of the seed and husk where the words either do or do not offer something perpetual, transferable. What may we, his readers, find in his 'wry narration' within the 'real estate' that might 'let a poor nucleus live'? As he concluded at the end of his sequence, 'Travelling', we may join and rejoice with him, to 'Stop here, and move on'. As we move on, *Stand* and

its readers are very grateful for the opportunity to be nourished by the living nucleus.

We were pleased to see so many poets recently published in *Stand* shortlisted for Forward Poetry Prizes for new volumes or Highly Commended for individual poems: Melanie Challenger, Eleanor Rees, Ian Duhig, John Goodby, Geoffrey Hill, Tim Liardet, David Morley, Graham Mort, Marita Over, Mario Petrucci, Susanna Roxman, Matthew Sweeney, Jeffrey Wainwright, Susan Wicks, Tamar Yoseloff. Jeffrey Wainwright's 'call death an observation' was nominated by *Stand*. *The Forward Book of Poetry 2008* was published 4 October 2007 and includes poems by these writers.