

'Let Poetry into Your Life' (BBC)

At the time of writing, poetry is enjoying unprecedented media coverage. Following the excellent news of Carol Ann Duffy's appointment to the Laureateship and the demeaning media scandal surrounding the election for the Oxford Professorship, the BBC has embarked – in conjunction with the Poetry Society, the Poetry Archive and National Poetry Day – on a very welcome and extensive Poetry Season with the beguiling slogan 'Let Poetry into Your Life'. So, we've had a great range of celebrities, historians and poets providing insight into individual poems and poets (Simon Schama on Donne; Armando Iannucci on Milton; Simon Armitage on *Gawain*; Michael Wood on *Beowulf*); or revealing how poetry has played a significant part in their lives, in *My Life in Verse* (actors Sheila Hancock and Robert Webb); in-depth documentaries on Owen and Eliot; and at once the most moving and disturbing, a recitation competition involving children, entitled *Off By Heart*. All this is most welcome and exciting.

The Poetry Season's trailers depict celebrities going about the ordinary, routine business of life – in shopping malls and multi-storey car parks – when they suddenly break into the recitation of famous, historical verse. The effect is powerful – almost surreal – partly because of the incongruity of a familiar television personality speaking the intense poetic diction of a different

historical period, partly because these recognizable words are being broadcast at all on BBC 1 during the mid-evening peak viewing time. And in these trailers is the prevailing incongruity of poetry having to compete – as it must – with the visual primacy of our contemporary culture and even more with its busy, peculiarly multi-media nature. The invitation or lenient injunction to 'let poetry into' our lives – rather than more declarative statements like 'the force of poetry' or 'poetry matters' or the brilliant idea of placing poems within the London Underground system – politely suggests that this might be something of an enriching 'lifestyle' decision. All we might have to do is find the time to tune into poetry's different wave-length.

In the rich variety of the programmes themselves, however, a dominant impression has been the difficulty of hearing the voice of poetry amidst the hubbub of the televisual medium; or, more particularly, the distraction of competing images and sounds. Somewhat predictably, television producers seem to have found it difficult to allow the poetry to speak for itself, to give the viewer nothing but the stuff of language. None of them so far seems to have had the courage to risk presenting only the poem. Owen Sheers's *A Poet's Guide to Britain*, as the title suggests, features photogenic landscape as much as the poems themselves, though, to be fair, each programme also allows us to focus intently on just one poem. Typically, this provides an enriched contextual understanding even if, as was the case with Wordsworth's sonnet 'Composed Upon Westminster Bridge 3 Sept. 1802' and Arnold's 'Dover Beach', one was struck throughout by the huge difference between the contemporary view of the scene dominating our vision and that which would have been available to the poet. By

common consent, one of the successes of the series has been Iannucci's programme on Milton and this because it did have the courage – as Simon Armitage put it on the BBC's own *Late Review* – to 'get down among the words'.

While there is a challenge for television in 'get[ing] down among the words', the season of programmes also worthily assumes that poetry deserves to be – or should be – more popular, even though, as it makes abundantly clear, poetry occupies some very different places in our contemporary culture and, very often, at its most popular plays a sacramental or ritualistic role with no necessary connection to literary value. It's very likely that the leniency of 'Let Poetry into Your Life' will soon turn into a media debate about whether poetry is promoting itself in the right way. This was exactly what happened on *Late Review*'s assessment of the BBC season of poetry. After looking at a range of practitioners and events, including poetry slams, rappers, festivals and reading groups, the programme's host, Martha Kearney, suddenly turned to her guests with the seemingly

unselfconscious and un-ironical question: 'Does poetry have an image problem?' Simon Armitage replied:

'Of course it does. That's what it's for. Poetry is obstinately not trying to appeal to everybody. It's disobedient, it's contrary. It doesn't reach the right-hand margin most of the time.'

Faced with such a difficult media-centred question, Armitage cannily chose to celebrate poetry's dogged capacity to stay alive by providing an invaluable resistant space within our culture. Recognizing its capacity to range between the needlessly obscure and the dangerously facile, 'poetry,' he said, presumably not just with an eye to the Poetry Season, but with its more generally precarious relationship to popularity in mind, 'remains unkillable'.

John Whale