Editorial

The silence round poems

At two recent poetry readings here in Leeds – each in themselves worthwhile and enjoyable events – one of them barefoot and *al fresco* in the local municipal park adjacent to the University – I encountered what, for me at least, was a new phenomenon: a poet reading from a mobile phone. My surprise probably reflects my age and the fact that I need to attend a greater variety of readings, or simply that, in the current parlance, 'I need to get out more', but my astonishment was reserved not for the mere fact of reading with the aid of the latest technology, but for the way in which this technology, as it inevitably does, altered the very nature of the event. In both instances, more importantly, it changed the way in which we might conceive of a poem; and, even more particularly, it made me reflect on how the conception of the poem is in part determined by the space or silence which surrounds it.

For some time now I've felt disappointed, even aggrieved, on behalf of poets who've read their poems with an insufficient pause at the end. In some instances it's probably truer to say that I've been aggrieved on behalf of the poems rather than the actual poets, though I have to reveal that some of the poets I know best and whose work I most admire can fall into this category. Mostly, my concern derives from my sense that the poems haven't had justice done to them. At the very point of closure – whether heavy or subtle or understated – the ordinary voice of the poet resumes. No sooner has the poem finished than it is rubbed up against the infill patter of the performer, almost as if, in half-embarrassed fashion, the poem has to be apologized for or its ending mediated and softened by effacing its separation from the usual goings-on of language. Having tried my hand at reading relatively recently I recognize the difficulty of holding out for the space of two or three seconds. Nerves are sometimes against it. There's the danger of being accused of provoking the audience into applause. There's the chance of losing them altogether. And there are numerous anxieties about endings.

Different kinds of poetry, of course, have different relationships to the culture and, even more particularly, the speech of the culture in which they're situated. As with music, forms of closure or the sense of an ending can create and define a relationship with the prevailing social hierarchy or establishment. The poet with whom I most strongly associate a clearly defined and constructed silence round his poems as he performs them is Tony Harrison. This is partly because I had the privilege of hearing him here in Leeds on a number of occasions in quick succession in the late seventies and early eighties; and the way he read then had a huge impact not just on my sense of how poets might read and read well, but also how this reading both reflected and defined the poems. Part of his act of reading aloud has always been to confirm the difference between speech and a more ceremonial act of 'eloquence'. In Harrison's work more generally the difference between these two is, of course, rigorously examined and highly politicised: the power of eloquence can be assumed as part of a historically formed privilege, but it can also be seen as enabling, even as a

subversive act of entry into the realm of high art. Eloquence in this sense can be seen as an act of redemption, a way of overcoming oppression defined very often as a form of inherited bodily disability. In this sense, the key figure for Harrison is Demosthenes, the Athenian orator *par excellence* who overcame a stutter by practising with a gob full of pebbles. He stands side by side with Harrison's uncles referred to in 'Heredity', 'one a stammerer, the other dumb'. One of the underlying and prevailing paradoxes of Harrison's sense of eloquence, itself often depicted as a speaking in tongues, is, then, that it depends upon the silences and silencings which surround it and which have gone to compose it. That space left round the edge of his poems carries the full force of historical self-consciousness and pays homage to the history of class oppression. As he puts it in his sonnet 'On Not Being Milton', '[a]rticulation is the tongue-tied's fighting.' And, in a poem which carries a dedication to the Frelimo guerrilla fighters Sergio Vieira and Armando Guebuza, he ends by quoting 'Tidd the Cato Street conspirator', but not before he has defined the context for this act of restorative ventriloquising as 'the silence round all poetry'. The further twist to Harrison's sense of poetry is that it is itself heading inexorably towards a greater silence. It is as he puts it with punning irony, in 'Art and Extinction', one of the 'numbered creatures'. This makes the silence round Harrison's poem more than merely ceremonial; it becomes multiply elegiac.

If I end this editorial with a recommendation to listen to Anne Stevenson's reading of 'Making Poetry' on YouTube, it's because she exhibits there her own inimitable, reflective style in which a keen mind moves between finely inflected pauses; and because I'm also interested in what effect the unstopped address I will provide in a few words time will have in lessening the silence round this sentence:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jO4OYCdNiG8&NR=1

Friends of *Stand*

Our Friends and our Supporters

We are very pleased that the magazine has Friends and Supporters who are helping to secure our future. We want to thank them and all of those who help by making donations, subscribing and joining the Friends and Supporters.

Those who have joined us in 2011:

Friends: Ian Gregson; Vivien Jones; Jon Glover; John Whale; Elaine Glover

Supporters: Helen Dunmore; Steven Matthews; Brian Swann

Others who have offered generous help this year include: Angela Leighton; N.S. Thompson; Lotte Kramer; Anonymous (2)