

Editorial

Are poets obliged to write in response to our awful world events? 'Poetry of "witness"' is neither easy for writers or readers, nor is it an easy concept. Do we witness our own feelings, beliefs or behaviour? Perhaps we write of outside or distant worlds as recorders, thinkers, influencers of opinion. And, perhaps (we may be thankful), few Western writers have become physically involved in the conflicts of Iraq, Afghanistan, the wider Middle East and the Far East. But if recent western poets write, not in the circumstances affecting Owen, Rosenberg and Douglas, how might present writers be embroiled in writing of war, regardless of where they sit while they write? It is a frightening question, and one which grows larger and more challenging as one thinks of Keith Douglas's prediction that the war poetry of the Second World War would be written after it was over. On the one hand, the implications of what happened from 1939 to 1945 are still being revealed. On the other hand, conflict – civil and international – continues and renews itself. There is no let up.

How do we know war and what do we know? Like many, I have been appalled at the search for 'evidence' of gas or biological warfare in Syria. Play and counter play from the USA, Russia, the UN and Syria itself and its rebels – evidence is handed round and displayed to reveal, they hope, responsibility and guilt. Brutality and death themselves need no proof. How might such evidence-seeking have figured in 1917 or 1936 or 1945? And how might it have registered as a defining component in poetry or fiction?

Douglas's discovery of 'extrospective' poetry, both to define the 'content', and explain the methodology, of his own poems, seems to me still to offer crucial and painful questions. And I find myself thinking about a recent re-discovery of Wittgenstein's query as to whether feeling something (pain?) or being aware of/reflecting on oneself/viewing one's experience (of pain?) were different? For Douglas, it was vitally important to differentiate himself from poets in 1940s England whose reactions to war seemed 'introspective'. The shocking absurdities of war in the Sahara meant that his war was in the visual or visible world. Hence 'extrospection' as the route to real poetry. But, does that concept explain where a writer thousands of miles from conflict might locate what her or his poem is 'about'? Where is physical witness? In what senses can witnessing oneself, one's own behaviour and thought, produce or offer, anything comparable to being present at some crucially horrifying event? And could there be a case that, even in such a poem as Douglas's 'Vergissmeinnicht', which seems founded on record of visual discovery, in practice the impact of what is seen is dependent on how it is organised in and for the poem? Indeed, the visual is not simply 'seeing' but 'seeing as', again as Wittgenstein might have characterised the process.

Judith Kazantzis is a poet with long associations with *Stand*. We welcome her poems in this issue. I have always found her negotiation of 'seeing' and 'seeing as' important and engaging. As someone with a long history of personal and political 'commitment', her involvement with difficult events, near or far, is often exemplary. Her poem, 'Anna Akhmatova' demonstrates

some vital tact whilst showing of very personal response. The last two stanzas are:

And incredible to me
the poet given and by herself
such valid graces, such statue

bronze-lidded by the Neva
where prison doves coo.
The prison voices, flying up, out,
always.

Here, Kazantzis is responding to something and someone far away. Partly it is 'thinking into'. But it is also a record of discovering what validity her response might have: 'And incredible to me / the poet given..' The 'voices' are, of course, unheard, at least by Kazantzis. But doves and their sounds might be a form of common currency, the 'coo' is audible to us all. And there is something frightening, but inclusive, in 'flying up, out, / always'.

Flying beings, birds of butterflies, make happy agents for a mixture of engagement and disengagement. Known and admirable, they always escape. In 'The Butterfly', from *Stand* Autumn 1997, Kazantzis touches a more visionary or surreal interaction with wings:

Running down that void avenue,
see how the trees wave,

the large-eyed shadow flicks, flicks,
zig-zags towards you,
scribbles written by angels across its wings.

I see that in my review of Kazantzis's *Selected Poems* in 1996 I recruited her as a poet whose work refused or refuted the then supremacy of literary theory: '...did we need Saussure to tell us that these [Kazantzis's] attractive poems have "no absolute point of origin"? (Easthope and Thompson again). The fluidity, the tangibility of fragile visions stand for themselves. And here in these most recent poems is that same fascination with air and its uncatchability:

Girl

Could she find what she swore
crying, never was:
the lightest air, an earlier air,
unexamined?

...
How can she not go,
race far away, with this wind
to the sail of her mind?

These poems are firm in their beliefs and in what poetry can do but often slippery. The celebration of poetry's power in doing what it can without justification or pleas is the subject of Jeffrey Wainwright's following article.

JEFFREY WAINWRIGHT

The Third Contemporary British and Irish Poetry Conference

Poets, and people interested in poetry, might often seem indistinguishable. Either way, neither group used to be much in evidence in university English, devoted as it has been in recent decades to the refinement of theoretical ‘approaches’ and their deployment upon the datum of ‘texts’ to reveal the true workings of ‘the culture’. Interest in the ‘material’ for itself has been seen as an old-fashioned irrelevance.

The Third Contemporary British and Irish Poetry Conference, held in September at the University of Manchester’s Centre for New Writing, showed how outdated this conception has become. Taking place in the shadow of the death of Seamus Heaney – who was due to partner Paul Muldoon at the conference’s final reading – the conference honoured his memory as a poet-critic in the best possible way by giving due place to poetry in its readings, and to the substantial criticism of poetry in some seventy academic papers, panel discussions and keynote lectures, two of which were given by poet-critics Don Paterson and Gwyneth Lewis. The familiar condescensions towards each other of poets and critics were quite absent.

Another obvious feature of the conference was the youthfulness of many of the participants from a very wide range of universities from the UK, Ireland and much further afield. A

panel at which Paul Muldoon listened quietly at the back to discussions of his work featuring one professor and two research students was only perhaps the most obvious example of this and of the democracy and fellow-feeling of the event. Furthermore the interest of virtually every paper was in the poetry itself, often demonstrated by attentive close reading of individual poems. Of course research students are going to make up the bulk of the participants of such conferences, chained as they are to the career treadmill. But that they have chosen to devote their labours to contemporary poetry evidenced a strong correlation between personal interest and career commitment.

It is likely that this new rapprochement between academic criticism and contemporary poetry is due to the prominence of creative writing in English courses. Many students will now experience the challenges of imaginative writing alongside those of systematic criticism and with few of the old inhibitions and separating barriers. These are feeding through into postgraduate work and teaching and refreshing both. Hopefully it is evidence that the poetry world’s longstanding suspicion and antagonism towards ‘criticism’, and the academics’ condescending indifference towards what is being written now, are finally dissolving.