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# POETRY'S DISUNITED KINGDOM

Carol Rumens examines the state of contemporary poetry

British poetry is regularly reported to be flourishing. Quantity signals health: poets are many and various, and there are numerous public outlets for their poems, especially online. Innovative small presses like Tony Frazer's Shearsman may publish 50 or 60 books a year, via print-on-demand (POD), a process in which new copies of a book are digitally printed in response to orders. On the other hand, conventional publishers' poetry lists are slim. The book chains stock fewer collections than previously, and for shorter periods. Very modest print runs can still fail to sell out. Poetry has never been more popular, and yet it is (as always) in crisis.

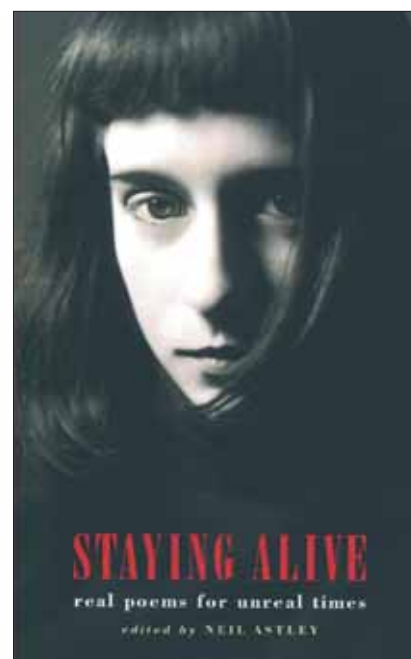
Amy Wack of the Wales-based press Seren Books (publishing around eight poetry titles a year) distinguishes two types of poetry reader. Reader A is the intelligent general reader, and Reader B, the specialist. 'As an editor I'm always after Reader A,' she says. 'As a publisher, it is much easier to reach Reader B.' This goes to the heart of the problem: poetry's split readership, and the difficulty of reaching that elusive target, Reader A.

Those general readers are desirable not only for commercial reasons. For the writers, they complete the web of connecting tissue that carries their nutrients. A receptive audience that is both pleasure-seeking and critically alert in its book-purchasing habits, is a force within the creative process; not a force urging the writer to 'sell out' but motivating his or her public conscience, energising the impulse to communicate

truthfully and profoundly. When poets write for other poets, they build their technique. But when they speak exclusively to other poets, there is a shrinkage of humanity and, ultimately, seriousness.

Many poets are conscious of a duty to win more readers for poetry – and not only their own. They visit schools, run workshops and give readings. The new Poet Laureate, Carol Ann Duffy, initially denied wanting to continue the ambassadorial task of her predecessor, Andrew Motion. But she has already presided over *Guardian* features devoted to new work by contemporary poets, male and female, and has donated her honorarium to fund the annual prize in a new poetry competition. It is indicative that today's poets laureate see the job requirement as that of promoting Cinderella, not the golden coach.

The mass media still largely ignore poetry. When they take an interest (one not based on a scandal or debacle) the simplistic 'isn't poetry wonderful?' picture they present seems doomed not to win over Reader A (who is intelligent, remember) while thoroughly annoying Reader B. Contemporary poetry creates panic about value. The BBC's recent TV poetry season, for example, favoured the historical; as Amy Wack points out: 'Living poets may appear, but only to comment upon the dead, acknowledged masters.' To be fair, Radio 4 has ventured into the scary new world of the Poetry Slam (though scheduling the first broadcast for 11 p.m., I noticed). And, of the BBC's candidates recently up for election as the Nation's Favourite Poet, at least



Bloodaxe Books' *Staying Alive: Real Poems for Unreal Times*, edited by Neil Astley (2002).

there were five living poets. But I wonder when programme makers will notice that there is a vibrant poetic culture beyond Big Safe Names and merry slams. The trouble is, most producers are Reader A types. They are the largely unreached, trying to reach out to the largely unreachable.

Of course, the territory is complicated. Poetry was once a nation-state, with a king, a judiciary, a church, a shared narrative. Today, it is more like a bunch of warring statelets, jostling for the prize of an enemy

# ‘Poetry was once a nation-state, with a king, a judiciary, a shared narrative. Today it is more like a bunch of warring statelets’

head and a brand name. UK poetry branding creates movements based on regionalist or ethnic identity, which may have originated from truly high-quality work with a distinctive identity, but which tend to atrophy into the fashionable and exclusive. Scottish poetry, for instance, has long been London-approved; Welsh, barely ever. Most countries and regions at least sometimes support their own poets. England, however, striving for internationalism, often appears vastly bored by its native product.

Regional branding is complicated by the generic subdivisions. A sketchy list would include performance poetry and the avant-garde. Then there is the majority, the so-called ‘mainstream’ where, to quote the raised-eyebrow comment an American poet-friend recently made to me, there are poets who ‘still write in iambic pentameter’. A world language produces what is sometimes called ‘world poetry’ – and perhaps some so-far unbranded English writers would willingly be called ‘world poets’. It is perfectly valid, and helpful, to acknowledge different styles and genres, as in music. But I suspect that underneath all the labelling, poetry is often less differentiated than identity politics demands. The labels and references to poetries, plural, exaggerate the differences, and may hide samey-ness. Sometimes, of course, they exert uncomfortable pressures on a poet’s development.

Tony Frazer says, ‘I really dislike the corralling of ethnic poets into something like reservations, where they are only given attention by the media if they exemplify their cultural heritages ... I suggest that a black, or other minority, poet should be respected if s/he wants to write like, say, Hill, or Prynne, or Fanthorpe. It should not be a precondition that s/he use patois, or ethnic

slang, or exotic backgrounds. No problem, of course, if the poet in question does want to use patois, etc.’ I couldn’t agree more.

The chaotic conditions that make poetry puzzling for new readers make it dizzying for new poets. A few landmarks of excellence remain, such as the Society of Authors’ Eric Gregory Awards for poets under 30 years old. But momentary competition-success does not guarantee future attention. Once, not so long ago, the novice poet kept to a well-marked footpath, beginning with submitting poems to little magazines, never self-publishing and finally, after multiple rejections, graduating to book publication. It was usually a tough slog, but there was a defined route and, once on it, the poet was reasonably sure of being taken seriously. Readers were aware of the route, and a culture of intelligent newspaper reviewing helped to track what was going on.

Poets benefit from stern critics. Where are today’s equivalents of Geoffrey Grigson, Donald Davie, Ian Hamilton? These poet-critics could be tigerish and newcomers may have felt like their scratching-posts, but poetic skills were honed by such criticism.

There is a rocky desert of ignorance out there, where Parnassus once stood. Many readers cannot tell a good poem from a bad one: most poets, if they were to be honest, would not be entirely sure if the poem they had just written was any good. The brilliant, the bad and the mediocre vie for attention in the land of infinite self-publishing opportunity. Few editors care to make the judgements from which young poets learn, and older poets improve, their trade.

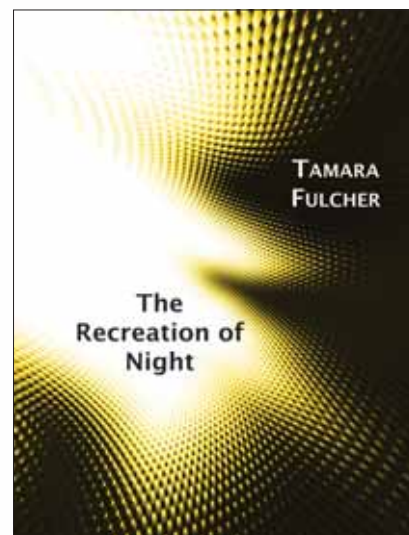
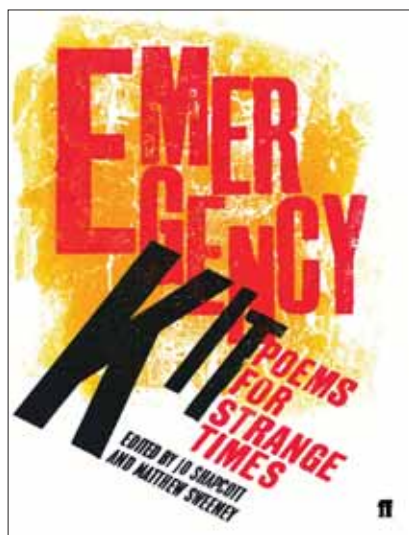
Reviews are generally blandly descriptive since they are written by poets, and poets need all the friends they can get. Poetry’s democratisation has crushed the sometimes damaging elitism of the past, but created a culture that cannot bear any kind of value-judgement.

The rise of Creative Writing as a university (in)discipline should have had a benign influence on the quality of new poetry, but has it? Tony Frazer finds the UK’s submissions disappointing compared with those from the States, veering between the excessively experimental and the ultra-conservative. Amy Wack remarks on the dearth of good formal work. She describes the poetry she receives as typically ‘filmic ... concerned with visual imagery and a swift emotional impact’. Her view of the effect of Creative Writing courses is more positive than Frazer’s, but she, too, comments on the lack of originality.

Nevertheless, there really is some wonderful poetry around. The list of writers whose new collections I consider to be ‘required reading’ would run to several paragraphs: they range from senior figures

Right Faber’s *Emergency Kit: Poems for Strange Times*, edited by Jo Shapcott and Matthew Sweeney (2004).

Far right Tamara Fulcher’s *The Recreation of Night* (2008).



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# ‘We need to read a poem not as we read a newspaper article, demanding a clear strand of argument, but sensuously and even a little lazily’

like Geoffrey Hill, Ruth Padel and Derek Mahon, to a plethora of younger, or more recent, arrivals: David Wheatley, Leontia Flynn, Zoë Skoulding, Richard Price and Martha Kapos. I asked Amy Wack and Tony Frazer to suggest collections by their own authors that readers might enjoy. Tony Frazer chose Peter Cole's *What is Doubled* (2005) and Tamara Fulcher's *The Recreation of Night* (2008), and Amy Wack chose Sheenagh Pugh's *Selected Poems* (1990) and also recommended poets Meirion Jordan, Tim Liardet, Pascale Petit, John Haynes and Graham Mort.

The saddest thing is that Reader A has often given up altogether, and quite bitterly denounces contemporary writing. The schism is in part the old 'modernist' one. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Ezra Pound set out to sweep away all 'Victorianness' of diction. No inessential word was to be used, rhythm was to be fluid rather than metronomic, abstraction avoided. Few of Pound's poet-heirs objected to the radical and timely overhaul. Many non-writers, however, continue to this day to yearn for a little Victorianness. They may seek in poetry familiar rhymes and themes, and the experience of comfort and 'uplift'.

Anthologies such as Faber's *Emergency Kit* (2004) and Bloodaxe's *Staying Alive* (2002) and *Being Alive* (2004) try to mediate, offering the mostly contemporary poetry they contain as a kind of psychotherapy or vitamin supplement for the stressed and anxious twenty-first-century reader. The poetry is there already, of course, not created by the anthologies (or not so far). As poetry it is often perfectly good. And it reaches Reader A. The branding induces a certain queasiness, however, because poets believe in writing for writing's sake. We forget that the roles of poet and priest were once associated. While no one wants poetry

to deliver the mental equivalent of cups of weak sugary tea, or to be marketed as something it is not, there is surely no reason for poets to feel appalled that a poem can bring comfort or a sharper, brighter vision of the world.

A recent argument, partly related to the rise of the populist anthology, has revolved around 'difficulty' versus 'accessibility'. Should poetry appeal only to Ph.D. graduates? Alternatively, should it appeal only to Pam Ayres fans? Poets delighting in linguistic complexity have several arguments in their favour. The strongest is that poetry is made of language, and, because language is everyone's, stained and battered by heavy use, poets have to refresh and refine it and, by making it new, make it seemingly more difficult. Difficulty, in any case, is not a solid concept. The poem that seems inaccessible today may be interesting tomorrow, and the Nation's Favourite by 2050.

I tend to the view that poetry is by nature a little difficult; it's not a birthday card. But even reading a difficult poem is not as difficult as cooking dinner for ten, or finding out why your computer won't start. Human brains are good at difficulty. Panic, impatience and the addictive culture of the instant solution are the real problem. I recently heard a comment by the wonderfully poetic children's novelist, Philip Pullman, to the effect that it was often believed, by teachers and others, that poetry was really a fancy way of saying something simple, and that all their efforts had to be employed in deciphering the message. This goes to the core of the antagonism. We need to read a poem not as we read a newspaper article, demanding a clear strand of argument, but sensuously and even a little lazily, allowing the poem to draw us in with its mysterious and non-logical qualities before we worry about

interpretations. The Keatsian art of 'negative capability', of relishing doubts and uncertainties and not letting our mental critics dictate the rules too early, is as important for poetry's auditors as its writers.

When reading a poem, I try to forget I'm a Reader B. I'm willing to trust my inner Reader A, and I fully sympathise with people who expect poetry to move and entertain them. They're right: art is for pleasure as well as profundity and shock. Poetry should charm and interest us if we're to care about searching its depths. There should be an element of love-at-first-sight with the poems we read.

Some readers still complain that modern poetry's problem is that it doesn't rhyme. The fact is that a lot of it does – and a lot doesn't. Diversity in this case is surely healthy. Rhyme is a resource, not a definition, of poetry. But poetry is still the stuff that remembers its origins in song and ceremonial. A poem is founded on the line, and the line forms an arc of rhythmic melody. Winding over it, the sentence sets up a counterpoint. This is what catches the reader first, and subliminally excites or moves us.

While poetry can never compete with popular song for mnemonic presence, plenty of older people remember rhymed and/ or metrical poems in the way we (and they) remember pop songs: they can recite Thomas Moore or Robert Burns, a bit of Alfred, Lord Tennyson or snatches of John Masefield. The people who have this kind of poetic knowledge are a vanishing breed: they are living on the capital of an educational system that died with the grammar schools. The poetry they love has something to teach us, still, although we have to make our poetry new, and show the way to the pleasure of the new. Good modern poetry has not abandoned

*East Ending*

(For Becky and Roly, and for Wilton's Music Hall)

Cable Street, Royal Mint Street, Tower Hill,  
 East Smithfield: history swims  
 Through names too big for it, old working names  
 Blitzed by re-development, black and still  
 As stone that holds small life-forms in suspension.  
 We hate and love this torpor of museums.

Hate it, mostly. There are stones less rare,  
 Readable narratives  
 Threading, sprawling like a London bus queue –  
 That crush of cultural idioms in one stare.  
 The scag-mag little factories, done up new,  
 Shift post-code in a street, get real, get lives.

Yes, *real lives*. Lilacs out of dead money –  
 The terrace's mild *amour*  
*Propre* of vases, lamps, wives who salaam  
 On steps to shine that cockney dream of Sunny-  
 Side-of-the-Street, sure as the Sally Army  
 Bawled in the gin-shop, 'Don't have any more!'

History? It's the writing on the walls  
 Of pubs, a fish-bar called The Godfather;  
 The inn we don't go in, The Artful Dodger;  
 The DLR train tracks it, and it falls  
 With shit and feathers from the clattering bridge;  
 It's seven white skull-caps crossing at the zebra

Towards (we notice now) a mosque's small tower,  
 So easy in its nook,  
 It might have jostled longer than St Paul's  
 Among the old brass necks of palaces, power-  
 Mills and ships. Will someone list our malls  
 One day, finding some pleasure in a look

That thinks itself sheer function, – and improve  
 The grade 2 concrete with new polymers?  
 What's the true art of architects? To make it  
 New, to stitch the shoe we ought to fit?  
 Let them re-invent the shadow-book –  
 Not Stilnovisti but New Formalists!

We turn the corner into Ensign Street  
 Where the best brothels were, and the best turns,  
 And, prettily distressed as Daisy Bell,  
 She begs our custom – Wilton's Music Hall.  
 Her fragile balcony's a work-in-progress.  
 Be careful! She's fresh-bathed and tremulous,

Her tits like pearly scandals and her ankles  
 Barley-sugar. To restore the old,  
 Make old just new enough not to disturb  
 The ghost of Champagne Charley and his girls  
 Back-stage. It's kitsch. So what? So's Shakespeare's Globe.  
 An audience works the glitz until it's gold.

Word-perfect, we belt out those choruses  
*Oh, don't have any more, Mrs Moore!*  
 And fill the wormy hollows with our noise  
*Or you won't find your front door, Mrs Moore!*  
 Our mobiles wink from gallery to pit,  
 To catch the past, show us ourselves in it.

Carol Rumens, June 2009

melody and rhythm, assonance and harmony. Readers simply need to retune their inner audio-sets. And that means listening to new poetry and, ideally, starting young.

Despite the fact that the Poetry Society and the various regional arts organisations work tirelessly at education, running excellent Poets in Schools schemes, for instance, this is where my pessimism rears its dinosaur head. Most school pupils miss such initiatives. They read little and recite less: some leave school barely literate. Unless this radical problem of the state-school curriculum be addressed, poetry need not even dream of a discerning audience.

One lesson taught by the poetry of the past is the importance of teaching. I wish the classical education, the education in intensive reading and translation that once helped form great poets, and which is still there, but restricted to the moneyed few, could have been mine and my children's: I wish it could be everyone's. While this is utopian, our state schools could still become hives of linguistic activity. We need to own our native languages deeply and fully, not as consumers but as users. We need to master, or at least dabble in, other languages while we're young, and to translate, translate, translate. Mandarin and Turkish are more 'relevant' than classical Greek and Latin? Fine! Put them

on the curriculum. All languages are invaluable, including, of course, those of Geoffrey Chaucer, William Shakespeare, Emily Dickinson, W.B. Yeats, John Ashbery – marvellously rich ideolects that, even as native English speakers, we must learn how to read.

No one wants to return to the closed canon of Eng. Lit. But we can cherish diversity while recognising value, and distinguish the fashionable from the timeless while enjoying both. Too few poets write criticism. Too few venture beyond their tribal affiliations. As for readers, they should do what the job title says: read. And Readers B and Readers A could, at least, shake hands.