

Anyone can do that: the common music of poetry

Andy Croft

I'm back inside. After four years in HMP Holme House, followed by shorter spells in Durham, Low Newton and Frankland prisons, I have just started a nine-month stretch at HMP Moorland, outside Doncaster. Fortunately this is one writing-residency where I will not be resident. But British prisons are full of writers.

Writing is important in prison. If you can express yourself on paper, you are likely to be in demand helping others write apps, statements, instructions to solicitors and letters home. Poetry has a special role in prison life. Men who would not often go near a library in their ordinary lives, in prison can find solace and encouragement in reading and writing poetry. Prison magazines always carry pages of poetry. The Koestler Awards are an important part of the prison calendar. No-one is embarrassed to say that they like poetry in prison. Among the 'window warriors' who stand at the windows at night shouting to themselves and to others, there are always some who rap for hours in long improvised monologues. There are certain poems—usually about love, heroin and regret—that prisoners take with them from one prison to another, copying them out and learning them by heart until the poems 'belong' to them. The poet Ken Smith once met a man in Wormwood Scrubs who genuinely believed that he had written Gerard Manley Hopkins' poem 'The Wind Hover'. This is what happens when poetry is taken seriously. In such an emotionally-strained environment, poetry can be a form of release, a means of clarification and self-justification and a kind of public confessional. It is even a form of currency (especially around Valentine's Day and Mother's Day). Poems are copied, passed around and sent out in letters to wives and girlfriends:

Induction, first thing Monday morning.
The library's full of spaced-out lads,
Hung-over, rattling, bruised and yawning,
Exploring life outside their pads.
Their first long Monday back in gaol,
Most look as if they haven't slept;
There's always one though, without fail,
Will ask me where the *poetry*'s kept.

He knows he has to write a letter
Explaining what went wrong this time,
And somehow thinks regret sounds better
Expressed in someone else's rhyme;
Though why should anyone suppose
That poetry makes the best excuses,
I can't imagine – still, it shows
That even poets have their uses.

He skips the modern stuff of course –
Too *personal*, hard work, unclear;
The awkward syntax of remorse
Needs more if it's to sound sincere –
A common music whose appeal
Is that it speaks for everyone,
The patterned language of the real
That's usually written by Anon.

This little poem is part of a sequence about working in prisons which appeared in my last full collection *Sticky*. The title of the poem, 'Form', alludes to the criminal past which shapes every prisoner's future, as well as to the 'old-fashioned' poetic tastes of most prisoners. Not many contemporary poems lend themselves to being copied and sent out in letters from prison. Their provenance is too specific, the 'voice' too highly individuated. Most prisoners don't know what to 'do' with most contemporary poetry. As one young man said to me once, 'I want to read poetry, *not poets*.'

It is fair to say that *Sticky* was not widely reviewed. The few notices that the book received were friendly enough, with the notable exception of an attack in *Tribune*, which compared it to 'third rate Victorian verse', 'pub rock and doggerel':

The problem with the full-on rhyme schemes he employs is, unless you're writing for children or to be funny it does make the poetry look dreadfully old fashioned. Not many people, post Eliot, write like this anymore.¹

In a sense, this was an accurate description of the book, which does occasionally try to be funny, and which contains several poems (including the title poem) written for children. The whole collection self-consciously celebrates the possibilities of a number of pre-Modern verse forms—various sonnets, including Pushkin sonnets, clerihews, *ottava rima*, heroic couplets, ballads, a villanelle and the six-line stanza borrowed from *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*. The book's title is supposed to be a play on the Russian word *stikhiy* (verses), which is derived from the Greek *stikhoi* (a line of words, or soldiers). It is a book about the limits and the freedoms set by different kinds of 'form'—poetic, linguistic and political.

I want to try to unpick the accusation of being 'dreadfully old-fashioned' and its relationship to 'writing for children', trying to be 'funny' and the use of traditional poetic form. It seems to me that the set of assumptions on which this review was based are wholly representative of a critical narrative, which—for all its talk of Modernity—still regards Eliot's assault on traditional form as something new (hence the use of the term 'Victorian' to signify naivety and sentimentality). According to this narrative, metre, stanza-form and 'full-on rhyme schemes' were abandoned a long time ago to hymnal, birthday-cards, 'humorous' light-verse ('doggerel'), popular song ('pub rock'), advertising and tabloid headlines. Of course, there have been exceptions to this—notably Sassoon, Auden, MacNeice, Barker, Betjeman and Mitchell, and among contemporary poets, Dunn, Harrison, Herbert, Szirtes and Duffy. Although the exceptions may, in fact, be so many and so glaring that it makes no sense to describe them as exceptions, the assumption persists that poetry may be divided between the 'Modern' (a Good Thing) and the 'dreadfully old-fashioned' (a Very Bad Thing). But form is not necessarily conservative, any more than formlessness is automatically progressive. It depends what you do with it. Writers like Eliot, Celine, Marinetti and Pound employed the new techniques and the technologies of Modernism in order to defend the past. Modernity may also be defined

¹ *Tribune*, 8 May 2009.

by inclusivity, participation and democracy. The ‘new’ is an uncontested but heavily-loaded category.

Generational anthologies have always defined themselves as the bearers of the ‘new’, challenging existing tastes by claiming to represent the future. The editors of *New Signatures*, *New Country*, *The New Apocalypse*, *New Lines*, *The New Poetry* each represented themselves as the next wave of a Modernism line of advance defined by the rejection of the past (usually the most recent version of the ‘future’). The latest example of this is James Byrne and Clare Pollard (eds) *Voice Recognition: 21 Poets for the 21st Century*, which bravely declares war on the ‘uncool’ poetry of ‘warm white wine in a pokey bookshop or plodding recitals in a half empty village hall.’ The book brings together twenty-one ‘of the best young poets who have yet to publish a full collection’ from Britain and Ireland, who are apparently ‘extending and remaking the tradition of poetry in a fast-changing new millennium’, and whose work is ‘sexy’, ‘dark’, ‘daring’ and ‘brimming with vitality’. As usual, the editors claim that ‘the future of poetry begins here’.

In many ways it is a fascinating selection, a good sample of some of the poets who have emerged out of the performance-publishing nexus of Generational Txt, Spread the Word, Apples and Snakes, the Foyles Young Poetry of the Year Award, the tall-lighthouse pilot project and the world of Creative Writing MAs. But it is a pretty depressing read too, a curiously *familiar* collection of confessional poetry, filmic sensibilities and ‘a multiplicity of styles’, a kind of poetry for the Face-Book generation. These poets are said to share ‘a deep fascination with the world as it is today’, but you would not know it from a book which barely mentions the world’s social inequalities, the destruction of the environment or the globalised economics of poverty and war—never mind those popular movements trying to make another world possible. There are lots of ampersands, lower-case titles, vocative cases and references to high art and trash-culture. *But there is not a single rhyme in the whole book, not enough anger and not one joke.*

It does look as though there is a consistent set of connections here, suggesting that ‘the future of poetry’ is defined by humorlessness, political indifference, a serious underestimation of the potential music of patterned language (those ‘plodding recitals’) and a hostility to all the ‘uncool’ organisers, readers, book-buyers and would-be writers who do

not know that white wine is supposed to be served chilled. If this is the 'new', it smells uncommonly like old-fashioned snobbery.

The sound of 'professional' poets pulling the ladders up behind them is part of the background noise of contemporary British poetry. According to Jane Holland, there are now 'too many people out there writing poetry.' For Hugo Williams, these days the Forward Prize receives too many entries—'I think it's something to do with the democratisation of everything—that everyone's got a right to get a book out...' The use of the word 'amateur' as a term of abuse is of course a particularly British way of avoiding the word 'class'—consider for example, Carol Ann Duffy's 'Dear Writer-in-Residence', Sean O'Brien's 'In Residence: A Worst Case View' and 'Never Can Say Goodbye' or Peter Reading's *Stet*.

The most consistent advocate of this kind of flaky elitism was of course TS Eliot, a believer in the Divine Right of kings and an opponent of the 1944 Education Act on the grounds that it would encourage cultural 'barbarism'. Giving the 2004 TS Eliot lecture at the Royal Festival Hall, Don Paterson called for poetry to reclaim its status as 'a Dark Art'. Poetic technique, he declared, is 'the poet's arcana', 'something that must be kept secret from the reader'. Only by joining together in a kind of medieval 'guild', can professional poets 'restore our sense of power'. Furthermore, Paterson called for the 'total eradication of amateur poets', whom he accuses of 'infantilising poetry'. Armed only with 'a beermat, a pencil, and a recently mildly traumatic experience' they bombard Don Paterson, who is poetry editor at Picador, with their 'handwritten drivel'.

Does Paterson mean he wants to eradicate all unpublished poets? Or just those who have ambitions to be published by Picador? How many poetry-prizes do you have to win before you become 'professional' poet? Or is there a hereditary principle involved? Professional poets do not spring fully armed from the soil. You have to be unpublished before you can be published. It may be hard to imagine, but even Don Paterson was once an unpublished poet. Not many poets make a living solely by selling books. Don Paterson certainly doesn't. Before he became a 'professional' poet, he used to be a professional musician. He still is. He also teaches at the University of St Andrews. Not much time for writing poetry there.

According to Paterson ‘only plumbers can plumb, roofers can roof and drummers drum; only poets can write poetry.’ Has Paterson never changed a tap, or tapped a drum? Poets are not genetically different from plumbers. Most roofers are probably better at writing poetry than poets are at replacing missing roof-tiles. It is not as if there are only so many as-yet-unwritten poems to go round. Anyway, ‘amateur’ poets in schools, colleges, prisons, libraries, reading-groups, book-shops and poetry-readings constitute the bulk of the audience for the ‘professionals’. Do professional musicians feel threatened by people who sing in the bath? Do professional footballers burn with resentment at those who play in Sunday leagues? Do professional chefs object to the thought that most people cook their own meals? Presumably Paterson’s students at St Andrews are ‘amateurs’. Has he told them they require ‘eradicating’?

Patterson’s comments, in the same lecture, on Harold Pinter were especially instructive. Referring to Pinter’s anti-war poetry, he argued that ‘*anyone* can do that’. Of course a great many poets—‘professional’ and ‘amateur’—have written powerfully against the war in Iraq (although few have employed iambic pentameter to such passionate effect as Pinter did in *War*). The fact that ‘anyone’ can write poetry about such a necessary subject is precisely its enduring significance. As the US poet Jim Scully argues:

The poetic field is no less a political construct than an aesthetic one. When we speak of mainstream poetry we’re talking basically about academic poetry, poetry in its institutional aspect, which is the basis for jobs, careers, publications and poetic norms. It’s where the continuity of money and recognition is maintained. There’s a lot of cute, too-clever-by-half poetry without an ounce of gravity, and of course no resonance. It seems we lack even the language with which to speak social or civic reality. The ancient Greeks called “apolitical” citizens, who care only for their own personal interests, *idiotai*. This is the opposite of *politai*, citizens in the true sense. For the Greek tragedians, the primary point of collective reference was society, not the individual. They took everything on, and in front of everyone. Full-bodied, adult stuff. Not crimped by the servility that comes of habitual evasiveness.

(quoted in Croft 2011)

Until very recently in human history, poets were popularly understood to speak for and to the societies to which they belonged. The development of printing and publishing and the emergence of a reading-public have helped to elevate poets into a separate and professional caste. The Romantic idea of the rootless individual alienated from ordinary society

(by education, sensibility and mobility) has become in our time the cult of the international poet as exile, crossing cultural, intellectual and linguistic borders. This cult reached its logical conclusion a few years ago with the Martian poets, who wrote about life on earth as if they really were aliens.

Of course poetry has to contend these days with other voices, more clamorous and more powerful. How can poetry compete with so many sound-bites, slogans, bill-boards, trailers, jingles and headlines? The cult of 'difficulty' is one way in which poets feel they can be heard against the deafening white-noise of contemporary culture. In a complex and difficult world no-one wants to be accused of simplification. As a result, many people find contemporary poetry difficult. This is not usually the fault of the reader, but of the weakening of poetry's function as a shared, social activity. As Adrian Mitchell famously put it, 'most people ignore most poetry because most poetry ignores most people'.

The US poet Tom McGrath once said there were three kinds of poet—Cattlemen, Sheepmen and Outlaws. The first were those like Eliot and Yeats, 'aristos' who articulated a vision of the past with which to criticise the present; the second, like Whitman, Crane and Ginsberg, represented the literary equivalent of the rising bourgeoisie, open to all kinds of language and forms, old and new; the third were those like Neruda, Rimbaud, Brecht, Joe Hill, Emily Dickinson (and McGrath himself), who desired to confront the future 'on all fours' by listening to the music that were already there. 'The language is there,' McGrath argued, 'all you've got to do is to—like the snake, get out of your skin (which is all the cliché and shit language that you've had) and be a born-again snake, or poet, or snake-poet, or whatever... When Sitting Bull needed to write his death song, he just *said* it. Didn't write it, it was *there*' (quoted in Gibbons and Des Pres, 1987: 39).

All poetry inhabits the common language of everyday living. A poem can be unique without being original; it can be 'new' at the same time that it is already known. The greatness of writers like Bunyan, Clare, Hernandez, Grassic Gibbon, Aragon, Gurney, Hikmet, Burns, Lawrence, Brecht, Vaptsarov, Ritsos—'Outlaws' in more than one sense, often working in political or linguistic exile—was to have inhabited this argument and sustained it a long way from the centres of cultural power and authority. The French poet Francis Combes makes a similar argument:

Poetry belongs to everyone. Poetry does not belong to a small group of specialists. It arises from the everyday use of language. Like language, poetry only exists because we share it. Writing, singing, painting, cooking—these are ways of sharing pleasure. For me poetry is like an electrical transformer which converts our feelings and our ideas into energy. It is a way of keeping your feet on the ground without losing sight of the stars. It is at the same time both the world's conscience and its best dreams; it's an intimate language and a public necessity. The issues at stake French poetry today are profoundly political. It is often said that modern French poetry began with Rimbaud's "Je est un autre." Today we need to reverse this phrase and say, "L'Autre est aussi Je" or even "Je suis tous les autres". (quoted in Croft, 2010)

Over the last five hundred years, poetry has lost many of its historic functions. Character has fled to the novel, dialogue to the stage, persuasion to advertising and public relations, action to cinema, comedy to television. This always seems to me to be an unnecessarily heavy price to pay for the development of the individual 'voice' of the poet. The shared, public music of common language and common experience remains its greatest asset—the power to communicate, universalise and shape a common human identity (what Tom McGrath called the way in which 'language socialises the unknown'). Poetry is essentially a means of communication, not a form of self-expression. Difficulty is only a virtue if the poem justifies the effort to understand it. Why write at all, if no-one is listening? If they think no-one is listening, poets end up talking only to each other, or to themselves. Language belongs to everyone. This is Mitchell again:

In the days when everyone lived in tribes, poetry was always something which was sung and danced, sometimes by one person, sometimes by the whole tribe. Song always had a purpose—a courting song, a song to make the crops grow, a song to help or instruct the hunter of seals, a song to thank the sun. Later on, when poetry began to be printed, it took on airs. When the universities started studying verse instead of alchemy, poetry began to strut around like a duchess full of snuff. By the middle of the twentieth century very few British poets would dare to sing.

(2011: 140)

Much of the potential power of poetry still lies in its popular, traditional forms. The historical music of poetry can help to naturalise arguments which may seem outside the current narrow expectations of poetry. It can assert the longevity of these arguments, by placing them within older, popular literary traditions. The element of anticipation and memory implicates reader and listener in the making of a line or a phrase and

therefore in the making of the argument. This establishes a potentially inclusive community of interest between the writer/speaker and the reader/audience—through shared laughter, anger or understanding. In other words, poetry is a form of magic, through which we strive to impose our will on the world by mimicking the natural processes we wish to bring about. As speech is metaphorical, poetry is doubly so, the gift of Prometheus *and* Orpheus. When poets stand up to read in public they have to address the readers beyond the page, the listeners across the room and beyond. Inspiration, improvisation, prophecy and possession—these are the elements of what Ernst Fisher called ‘the *necessity* of art’:

The magic at the very root of human existence, creating a sense of powerlessness and at the same time a consciousness of power, a fear of nature together with the ability to control nature, is the very essence of all art. The first toolmaker, when he gave new form to a stone so that it might serve man, was the first artist. The first name-giver was also a great artist when he singled out an object from the vastness of nature, tamed it by means of a sign and handed over this creature of language as an instrument of power to other men. The first organiser who synchronised the working process by means of a rhythmic chant and so increased the collective strength of man was a prophet in art. The first hunter who disguised himself as an animal and by means of this identification with his prey increased the yield of the hunt... all these were the fore-fathers of art. (1963: 33)

The Pre-historian Steve Mithen has recently argued that language and music evolved 50,000 years ago out of ‘holistic, multi-modal, manipulative, musical and mimetic gestures’ (or ‘hmmmm’) (2006: 221). Although language and music now have separate functions, their common evolution can still be heard in religious ritual, in dance, song—and in poetry. According to the classicist George Thompson,

the language of poetry is essentially more primitive than common speech, because it preserves in a higher degree the qualities of rhythm, melody, fantasy, inherent in speech as such... And its function is magical. It is designed to effect some change in the external world by mimesis—to impose illusion on reality. (1945: 9)

Although anatomically modern *homo sapiens* emerged 200,000 years ago, the earliest known written scripts were only developed in the Jiroft and Sumer civilisations during the early Bronze Age (3,000 BCE). *Gilgamesh*, the earliest known written literary text, was not written down until sometime during the Third Dynasty of Ur, that is, approximately 2,000 years BCE. In other words, we have only recently taught ourselves

to ‘write’—but is hard to believe that humans were not telling each other important stories in memorable and musical language for a long time before then. For most of human history poetry was anonymous, public and shared, passed on and learned and changed and passed on again. Rhythm, repetition, metre and rhyme were mnemonics which enabled listeners to be simultaneously the creators of poetry’s common music.

The Iliad was ‘written’ around 750 BCE—a *hundred years before the earliest known Greek poetry was written down*. It records events which took place 400 years earlier. The oldest surviving written version of the poem, known as ‘Venetus A’, was not made until sometime during the tenth century CE. The first printed version did not appear until 1488. Which means that for most of its life, this 16,000 line epic poem only existed in people’s heads. And this was only possible because of the poem’s music—the rhythmical reiteration of phrases, tropes, motifs and ready-made epithets (‘cunning Odysseus’, ‘swift-footed Achilles’, ‘Agamemnon lord of men’ etc) within the six-beat hexameter line. The poem survived because it was both memorable and memorisable. Try learning *The Wasteland* off by heart.

The power of all art is still located in society—in the audience and not in the artist. Writing—in the sense of the composition of memorable language to record events that need remembering—is essentially a shared, collective, public activity. It is only in mass-literate societies that poetry becomes privatised, a personalised form of individual expression rather a means of public communication. And of course, mass-literacy requires policing by the game-keepers on the wooded slopes of Mount Parnassus, armed with ideas of copyright, grammatical rules, unified spelling, critical standards and a canonical tradition against the possibility of a Mass Trespass.

The UK was the world’s first mass-literate society. And yet most of us on this island were not even functionally literate before the 1870 education reforms. That’s only 140 years ago—around the time that my great-grandmother was born. Most of our neighbours on this planet are still not able to read or write. The globalised economy does not require the world’s poor to read. Meanwhile, dependence on communications-technology in post-industrial societies is rapidly reducing the economic importance of literacy (consider how e-mails texting and other social media are already corrupting punctuation, capitalisation and grammar). The dream of mass literacy was a twentieth-century aspiration, connected

with ideas of social justice, economic progress and scientific control over nature. But if literacy suddenly does not seem so important, the need to express ourselves in the best words we can think of is a constant common human need. You don't need to be able to write in order to 'write'. Not many people are wholly excluded from language. Most of us are fluent speakers in several registers, and functional in more than one language.

The idea that poetry is a publicly-owned, shared and common language persists at a subterranean level within British culture, a long way from the centres of cultural authority and the cult of the 'new'. Not surprisingly, it is still felt most vividly among those who were historically excluded longest from education and literacy by the forces of caste and class, empire and slavery. Poets like Linton Kewsi Johnson, Kokumo, Moqapi Selassie and Jean Binta Breeze do not read their poems in public—they *sing* them.

A sense of poetry as social ritual and magic may still be felt at UK *musha'ara*, marathon poetry-readings in Urdu, Punjabi and English. They are unlike most poetry-readings in that they last several hours and attract several hundred people of all ages. The most distinctive feature of the *musha'ara*, however, is the level of audience participation. Poets do not always read their 'own' work. They often sing. And they are frequently interrupted by applause, by requests for a line to be read again, by the audience guessing the rhyme at the end of a couplet or by joining in the reading of well-known poems. This is a collective, shared poetry, the expression of a literary, linguistic and religious identity among a community whose first language is English, but whose first *literary* language is Urdu. From its beginnings Urdu was a language of exile, the *lingua franca* of the nomadic camp:

Verse forms and metres, besides diction, have helped to preserve continuity; and, still more strikingly, a common stock of imagery, which can be varied and recomposed inexhaustibly in much the same way that Indian (and Pakistani) classical music is founded on a set of standard note-combinations (*ragas*) on which the performer improvises variations. (Kiernan 1971: 32)

The enviable traditions of Urdu poetry illustrate Christopher Caudwell's argument that poetry can be a means of asserting our original, common humanity:

poetry is characteristically song, and song is characteristically something which, because of its rhythm, is sung in unison, is capable of being the expression of a collective emotion. This is one of the secrets of "heightened language"... Unlike the life of beasts, the life of the simplest tribe requires a series of efforts which are not instinctive, but which are demanded by the necessities of a non-biological economic aim—for example a harvest. Hence the instincts must be harnessed to the needs of the group festival, the matrix of poetry, which frees the stores of emotion and canalises them in a collective channel... Thus poetry, combined with dance, ritual, and music, becomes the great switchboard of the instinctive energy of the tribe.

(1937: 33)

Writing is ordinary. Poetry is especially ordinary. It arises out of the contradictions and consolations of a whole life and a whole society. It requires the proper humility necessary for any art. Poetry is indivisible. If it doesn't belong to everybody, it is something else—show business, big business, self-promotion, attention-seeking. Poetry is not a Meritocracy of the educated, the privileged or the lucky. It is a Republic. As the poet Randall Swingler once put it, 'The artist is not a special sort of being, inhabiting a rarefied atmosphere beyond the exigencies of common life. Rather it lies in his essence to have more than usual in common with the generality of men'.²

Poetry can clarify, focus, channel and release emotional and imaginative energy. It can connect poets to readers, and readers to poetry; it can help us feel a little more connected to each other than usual. Despite the commercial, cultural and political pressures to emphasise our uniqueness and our separateness, the differences between us are not very great. When I sneeze, the sensations of tension and release in my face and chest are exactly the same as when you sneeze. Chocolate tastes the same in my mouth as it does in yours. My feelings for my children are no greater and no more significant than the feelings that all humans bear for their children. When I tell my wife that I love her, I can only say what every man has ever said to the woman he loves. 'I love you' is a quotation. We share the same small planet, we breathe the same air and we share the same fate. In case we forget this, poetry is one of the ways in which we demonstrate our common natures, inside and out. Anyone can do it.

² *Left Review*, October 1934.

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Because the need for love's a truth
More desperate in the Slammer,
All those who have been starved so long
Of tenderness and glamour,
Create a common art that speaks
In love's peculiar grammar.

I love you babe, *ich liebe dich*,
Sound weak and lachrymose,
Je t'aime's been said so many times
In poetry and prose.
But *odi et amo*'s still true,
And a rose is still a rose.

In all the clichéd, second-hand
And sentimental tropes,
Each unconvincing chat-up line
Once heard on TV soaps,
You hear the brittle sound of little,
Fragile human hopes.

Though Valentine's the patron saint
Of young hearts everywhere,
This festival contains a truth
In which all mortals share:
That someone loves us still's the hope
That keeps us from despair.

And here, where every letter home
And billet-doux's policed,
The poetry of every man
This Valentine's Day feast,
Asserts that art, like hope and love
Cannot stay unreleased.
(Croft, 2009)

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