
Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Hearing Voices

Robert Wood · Thursday, September 10th, 2015

The poetry I like is not always the poetry I read, or rather, the poetry I read is not always the poetry I like. I read mainly contemporary Anglophonic poetry, with an inclination to poetry written in Australia and America, where I was educated and mainly live. I do this to get a sense of the field, my field. That I review a relatively large number of new poetry (one book every two weeks or thereabouts) that I do not really choose allows me to stand on the sidelines and in the play. I have a position and preferences but that does not mean I either have a ready-made audience or an opposition in my sights.

I do though have a form of critical self-talk, an internal other, who chirps away and nags and shouts and who matters a great deal for my aesthetic practice. Every poet hears these voices and through them comes to develop an ear. I am not though prescriptive. I might not like a work, but that does not mean it does not have something interesting to say, does not mean we cannot have a dialogue about what happens in it. Trying to maintain that openness, to be empathetic and engaged, is, I think, one of the main keys to avoiding the petty conflicts that are so rife in poetry and reviewing with a sense of generosity. I can respect Whitman, or my reading of him allows respect, but that does not mean I want to be Whitmanian. Or, if someone shows a turn of phrase that is apt and rounded and pleasant I might acknowledge as much. Always reading blind is important in this regard.

People who are yet to be published often attach an almost mystical importance to publication. And yet, once you have been published, the goalposts shift. It becomes about the book. Once the book is out it becomes about the award the book can win, and so on and so forth. What that inhibits is sitting with a work and letting it come to you, and also taking satisfaction in each stage of the process. It is a joyful thing to have your first poem, or any subsequent poem, published and can give you sustenance to know your work is out there; to have your first book published is a joyful thing too.

And yet, one can't help but ask in these moments of joy – is that all there is? Is this what it feels like to be published? I do not mean that as a greedy person, as someone who is not satisfied with his life. My life is full and complete in its own beautiful way. But one desires more, almost always. Part of that more is having people to talk with about one's own work. This is what one discovers upon publication – that there are never enough readers, that the thankless task of the critic is upon left alone and so one never quite knows if one is making a difference. My internal critics are usually hard ones, but at least they are always there and have something to say.

The aim though might be to cultivate the conditions in which criticism is regarded seriously; that being published means being part of a conversation one is more aware of. That Marjorie Perloff stands so alone is indicative. That Martin Duwell in Australia is the only critic of note, whereas the rest are practitioners of poetry as well, highlights where the eco-system sees merit. People want the spotlight, but that only obscures the view of an audience who might have already gone home.

The work that is to be done then is to contribute to the community as a reader, audience member and critic – through reviews, through attending readings, through workshopping – as well as to expand the audience for poetry. That means outreach, that means adapting one's work for an audience without a blithe dismissal of what constitutes importance and bafflement and obscurity. The divide that asserts poetry is dead and one that attests to its rude good health suggests to me that poetry is like a human – we are always dying, always living until that day we stop hearing voices and we cease to be human at all but simply a corpse.

For me I can only see in this the resilience, the fragility, the possibility, the history, that makes attending to Poetry important, that makes it worthwhile getting up in the morning and writing a sonnet, reading a debut collection, writing an essay, going to a reading. That one can so completely enter a world of poetry, or worlds of poetry, is enlivening. That there is work to do in them yet is positively thrilling.

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