

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

On Radicalism and Form

Robert Wood · Wednesday, May 27th, 2015

Perhaps more insidious than official verse culture are poets that claim to be radical. If official verse culture is paradoxically uncreative, then much of what counts as radical is paradoxically conservative. The diatribes and manifestoes of those mislabelled as Left are often such obvious criticisms that they do not address fundamental issues of equality, autonomy, liberty. They are written in utopian form with none of the spirit of utopianism. They regurgitate congealed cliché, hackneyed phrases that claim to be ‘real’ when in fact they are mimetic repetitions that search for a naïve universalism through a thoroughly liberal conception of the voice. They are conservative sheep in radical wolf clothing. One aspect of this is anti-intellectualism that shies away from sustained and sustainable forms of critique. This is not to say that everyone need be versed in Badiou, Deleuze, Lacan, but that thorough thinking through, common sense analysis, close reading, THINKING are necessary parts of praxis.

This misguided approach was made abundantly clear when Koralý Dimitriadis wrote the following in her blog post, [Why I couldn't give stuff \[sic\] that Poetica](#) has been scrapped:

The truth is there is so much more powerful, innovative poetry being performed and created in Australia that is just not getting the attention it deserves. It is not abstract and pretentious poetry. It is not trying to be clever and university educated. It is raw, confronting and honest. It is heartfelt.

There are too many binaries here by half. Can't abstraction be confronting? Perhaps that is why conservatives find abstraction disagreeable. Can't university educated people be honest? Surely, the reverse is not true – you don't go to university to learn how to be a real estate agent, insurance broker or used car dealer. Can't poetry that is against being heartfelt be innovative? Perhaps that is what concrete or conceptual poetry was on about.

Dimitriadis' anti-elitism is actually a misguided attack on many of the fundamental enablers of 'powerful, innovative poetry'. You certainly don't need a degree to write 'good' poetry, see Alan Loney for one, but I would defend university, particularly public, fee free university, as the best mechanism for socio-economic advancement and one way to create a new poetry audience able to think critically as well as help create a more 'poetic' society. I do not want to, Dimitriadis-like, play a sort of lame identity politics either by invoking my ethnicity (Half Malayalee–Half Scottish person of colour) or reveal a story of my parents' class journey via education (country, working class baker's son now solidly upper middle class thanks to postgraduate degrees in economic

history). What I would caution against is assuming that there is both no space outside an articulation of these supposed oppositions – conservative establishment written verse by pale, stale males against radical new spoken word performance by the United Colours of Bennetton – as well as the position that criticism of official verse culture means criticism of *Poetica*, *The Poetry Foundation* and *Australian Poetry*.

The point is conservative poetry is varied and that the response must come at the level of form. If you write a poem about how bad the banks are that is ‘raw’, ‘confronting’, ‘honest’ and above all ‘heartfelt’ in say, the form of a sincere and sentimental sonnet, you might not be pushing the boundaries of anything, least of all a radical agenda (especially not without an awareness, ironic or otherwise, of the history of the form). That is why you won’t get the attention you think you deserve. One history of poetry is a history of innovations in form. To refuse this is to reify, like a good conservative, your individual voice assuming along the way that it is so unique and precious that you deserve praise regardless of thought and execution. This is why the Mongrel Coalition’s recent demands seem to only be half the thought – what is the poetry that is to come in place of Place? What is the work that one must attend to after Goldsmith? We need then not only the negation of white supremacy but also the utopian construction of a society after it. Marx was never short on what comes after capitalism – we needn’t be either.

In addition, labouring without attention is its own kind of reward. If enough emotional energy and material sustenance comes in to continue practices that allow a good life, then who cares if people are not more widely read by others? One of the beauties of poetry is that it operates in a very different economy and can be left alone to grow. What is a shame is that the research and development in language of an experimental tradition is not thought through enough to change material realities. There is no reason that a reading of any number of works cannot help inform us of what to do regarding natural gas in the West Kimberley, arable farming land in Brazil, free trade agreements in America in general. But that is precisely because conversation matters at the level of form and that is where poetry can make a difference.

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