

EDITORIAL

Following the death of the Australian art critic Robert Hughes in August of this year, the BBC recently re-screened his groundbreaking 1980 documentary series on the development of art since the Impressionists, *The Shock of the New*. The re-screening is, arguably, timely. Over thirty years ago Hughes spoke of the visual artists and writers of the 1920s and 1930s with admiration and regretful nostalgia: “their hope, of having a political effect through painting or sculpture, is ended” and “as far as today’s politics is concerned, art aspires to the condition of muzak. It provides the background hum for power.” The visual arts have never effected any serious political change, argued Hughes, although with his guarded “books, perhaps”, he granted a sliver of optimism in this regard to the literary arts. The years since 1980 have hardly seen an advance in the cause of artistic and literary *engagement*, indeed observers of what is, poetically speaking, ‘trending’ (an epithet defined by the Urban Dictionary as “a mutilation of the English language that means ‘currently popular’” but which seems peculiarly appropriate here) would likely be hard-pressed to detect many significant affiliations or passionate manifestos. The stunts of the Futurists or the Dadaists seen from this historical juncture seem naive; their faith in the power of art and literature to bring about change or at least to hold a stake in emergent society, hopelessly misplaced. Hughes acknowledged this but remarked, poignantly, “perhaps it was their naïveté that they could think so. But it’s our loss that we can’t.”

In an age where a monumental corporatism has effectively insinuated itself into every chink of our lives and continues to do so unchecked and unchallenged, despite the financial meltdown of 2008 and its ramifications, it may be instructive to consider whether poetry can still have any ‘value’ (the term admittedly a charged one, but to be understood here at least non-monetarily) in the sense identified by Hughes, and which used to be an unspoken assumption among many writers and artists of the pre-Thatcher-Reagan era: the right to tell the truth to power; to bear witness to truths no longer self-evident or obscured by propaganda of one kind or another; to puncture what Wilfred Owen called “the old lie” in its various manifestations; to call out; to excoriate; to dignify; to elegize. That word ‘value’ is a very dirty one indeed. To use it is to risk sounding unfashionably earnest, po-faced and, worst of all, naive. But surely, for all its precipitate and undeniable decline as an art-form, its retreat to the well-beaten tenure-tracks of the academy and its jaded, self-regarding ironies, has poetry still something to offer in this regard? Or, as Marianne Moore put it with mincing distaste: “Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one discovers in / it after all, a place for the genuine.”

In the above regard, reading *PSR 22* is an encouraging experience. *Poetry Salzburg Review*'s long-established commitment to a poetic internationalism allows us to observe the many points of convergence, the many powerful shared concerns among English language poets. There may be few economic 'green shoots' in evidence around us, but in these poems there is plenty of evidence of poetry's continuing importance in registering the cross-currents of its times. In Adam Aitken's "Hong Kong Aubade" (pp. 31-32) there is all the exhilaration and exhaustion of globalized mass transit: "I want more pirated software, I want / better airline food. / I want morning to end, and exit to the glare / and workaday wisdom of midday. / Meanwhile sleep off the hangover / in an airport with a laptop for a pillow –" (p. 32). The voice is knowing, playfully bewildered: "can you smell it, 'global' readership?"

Rita Ann Higgins in "The New Initiative" (pp. 40-41) acidly satirizes contemporary Ireland's undimmed obsession with profit in the face of a failed economic model: "We were seasonally adjusted then, / now we are globally adjusted twice over, / still waiting for crumbs at the crossroads." (p. 40) In Alan Baker's "All This Air and Matter" (p. 142-145) the habitual delicacy of the lyric and its pastoral concerns are interrupted by (or establish a temporary *cordon sanitaire* around, depending on your viewpoint) the impotent frustrations of contemporary reality for the 99%:

everyone wants
"the biggest transfer of wealth from the poor
to the rich in human history"
to be forgotten for a while
as we walk by the banks of the Derwent

coltsfoot, cowslip, brown butterfly,
sand martins and hayfever
(birch pollen, maybe) (p. 144)

Marianne Burton's "The Extinction of Mary Smith Jones" (pp. 72-73) elegizes the passing of the last speaker of a language and considers what the extinction of a culture means, and with what alarming ease it happens: "Grieve for Mary, Udach' Kuqax'a'a'ch', / as the past strangles in the present's grip, / as the stories die and the songs cease singing." (p. 73) Burton's poem "Lachrimae Rerum" (pp. 73-74) also speaks, as so many of the poems here do, of the ability of lyric poetry to express the poignancy of the human artefact, and its emotional significance beyond mere utility, to speak to us of the "tears of things". The Virgilian reference points to a shared past, reminding us again that poetry does this strange, important thing better than almost any of the arts.

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