

EDITORIAL

“Trying to focus on poetry but my mind’s a bit all over the place – is it any wonder it wanders I wonder”, said Geraldine Monk in a recent posting to the British Poets Mailbase. Even I am distracted at the moment. With a war against Iraq being ruthlessly stage-managed by George W. Bush, one simply cannot talk about all those ambitious young poets out there hoping to have their first collections published in a dwindling poetry market. There is hardly an editor taking a stance on the issue, but I am afraid I cannot avoid doing so. Way back in the late 1960s (or early 1970s) Jeff Nuttall was arguing that art should be placed in the centre of society. While I have no intention of offering this magazine as a platform for agit-prop poetry, I do not see why our priorities should have changed since then.

To make you familiar with some impressions I collected recently: Some weeks ago Laura Bush sent out invitations to poets to participate in a White House Symposium on “Poetry and the American Voice”. Her projected patronage of the arts was hastily abandoned after some of the invitees had announced their intention of using the occasion to protest against a war in Iraq. A White House press release said the event was being postponed for fear of it being politicised. What is more, Sam Hamill, a poet and editor of Copper Canyon Press, who had declined the invitation and e-mailed friends asking for anti-war poems to be “compile[d in] an anthology of protest to be presented to the White House on that afternoon”, got more than 1,500 responses, including contributions from W. S. Merwin, Adrienne Rich and Lawrence Ferlinghetti.

In England Mr Blair banned an anti-war march, scheduled for 15 February, from converging on Hyde Park, because the February weather could be injurious to the health of the protesters besides leaving the Park looking ploughed up. One wonders what the weather in Iraq is going to be like.

Since 27 January a blue curtain covers the reproduction of Picasso’s *Guernica* in the foyer of the UN Security Council. “It is an inappropriate background for cameras”, said Fred Eckhard, press secretary of the UN. A less diplomatic diplomat remarked that it would not be an appropriate background if the US-ambassador at the UN, John Negroponte, or Colin Powell, started to talk about war against the background of a vivid depiction of the anguish war inflicts.

In an article entitled “No Beginning or End of War”, published in *The Guardian* on 29 January, Günter Grass asked the crucial question: Who is the target of this war? “A fearful dictator”, the 1999 Nobel Prize winner for Literature stressed, who “like other dictators, was once a brother-in-arms to the democratic world power and its allies [when] he waged war for eight years against his neighbour Iran”. Admittedly, Bush promises that after the dictator is defeated democracy will be installed in Iraq, although everyone knows that the issue is not democracy but oil. But if one considers that Iraq’s neighbours and western allies, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, are also dictatorships, one has to ask with Grass: “Are they the next targets for wars to bring democracy?” Pondering such questions I often return to the last lines of “Posthumous Rehabilitation”, a poem by Tadeusz Różewicz: “the dead are taking stock of the living / the dead will not rehabilitate us”. Over the past months we have received excellent translations of poems by poets, such as Guillaume Apollinaire, Hans Arp, Georg Trakl, August Stramm and Else Lasker-Schüler, all of whom experienced the atrocities of the First World War. Perhaps a sheer coincidence, but we have seized the opportunity and offer them as a special section. If you want to, you can read them with the current political situation in mind.

Turning to another matter in its own way just as sad: I would like to pay tribute to Peter Russell, who died in Italy – in the hospital at San Giovanni Valdarno – on 22 January. Dana Gioia has described him as “a poet of striking contradictions. He is an immensely learned writer with an anti-academic temperament, a Modernist bewitched by classicism, a polyglot rooted in demotic English, an experimentalist in love with strict traditional forms, a natural democrat suspicious of the Left, and a mystic committed to clarity.” Russell had a long association with the University of Salzburg Press and published a large number of his later volumes here. He was fittingly honoured by a 600-page festschrift edited by James Hogg on his seventy-fifth birthday.¹ One of the last poems that Michael Armstrong wrote in 2000, only months before he died, is entitled “Yellow Bird” and dedicated to Russell. The poem is published in this issue for the first time.

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¹ A list of Russell’s Salzburg publications can be found on our homepage at www.poetrysalzburg.com.