

How Poetry Can Make Things Happen

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Those who think poetry can and should play no part in political culture are fond of quoting Auden in his elegy for Yeats: “Poetry makes nothing happen”. For them, the poem is valuable insofar as it doesn’t involve itself in the real world but resides in a protected area, a safe house, a green zone. Life goes on (and bombs go off) outside the window; world events unfold on the screen. But the poem stays aloof, making sweet music and paring its fingernails. This artistic autonomy – so the aesthetes argue – is poetry’s saving grace. Free from censorship or subtler kinds of pressure, it survives “in the valley of its making where executives / Would never want to tamper”. Its goal is beauty and timelessness, not the ugly ravages of time.

It’s perfectly reasonable to concede that poetry plays little or no part in the lives of the majority of the population. And it’s interesting to offer explanations for that (Adrian Mitchell: “Most people ignore most poetry because most poetry ignores most people”) and to suggest remedies. But it’s important not to concede too much. Poetry might be a minority interest but that doesn’t make it powerless. I’ve always resisted the Auden line for two

reasons. First, because my parents were useful citizens – doctors – and I hate to think what I do (write) is totally useless. Second, because I have seen poetry have a demonstrable impact on people: the man who came to a workshop with a poem which he claimed had saved his life (he had the razor by the side of the bath but sat down and wrote the poem instead); the couple who got back together (and later married) after he came across a poem which perfectly articulated their dilemma and sent it to her; the dementia patients whose restlessness disappears, and whose minds momentarily clear, as poems with strong rhythms are recited to them. I suspect not even Auden believed his own adage. The elegy for Yeats still sees a vital role for poetry, as “A way of happening, a mouth”. The last three stanzas are a series of injunctions to the poet to put poetry to humanising ends – to make things happen with it:

Follow poet, follow right
 To the bottom of the night,
 With your unconstraining voice
 Still persuade us to rejoice;

With the farming of a verse
 Make a vineyard of the curse,
 Sing of human unsuccess,
 In a rapture of distress;

In the deserts of the heart
 Let the healing fountain start,
 In the prison of his days
 Teach the free man how to praise.

Auden detested poetry as propaganda. So did Keats (“We hate poetry that has a palpable design upon us”). So do most of us. But Auden also recognised poetry’s therapeutic potential – art as a “healing fountain”. And in *The Poet’s Tongue* he acknowledges its role in influencing political and ethical choices: while “poetry is not concerned with telling people what to do”, it can, he argues, be a way of “extending our knowledge of good and evil, perhaps making the necessity for action more urgent and its nature more clear”. Poetry must never bully but it can make people think again.

Far from being an eternal verity, the idea that poetry and politics don’t mix seems to me peculiar to the immediate post-war period. After the Second World War, there was an understandable suspicion of rhetoric (associated with Mussolini and Hitler) and commitment. “There aren’t any good brave causes left,” Jimmy Porter wailed in *Look Back in Anger*, and

Thom Gunn echoed the sentiment: “The agony of the time is that there is no agony”. Here was the smug Fifties consensus: “A neutral tone is nowadays preferred,” wrote Donald Davie, to whom sitting on the fence seemed the only option – “How dare we now be anything but numb?” But there were causes even in that quietist decade. The Suez crisis; the proliferation of nuclear weapons; the Soviet invasion of Hungary – all invited a response. By the end of the 1960s, with war raging in Vietnam, poets were no longer afraid of speaking out. The worst of them merely played to the gallery (*look how right-minded I am!*). But the best were impassioned, scabrous and funny.

Poetry has always taken up causes. Milton’s ‘Paradise Lost’, Marvell’s ‘An Horatian Ode upon Cromwell’s Return to Ireland’ and Blake’s ‘London’ are intensely political poems. Wordsworth, Shelley and Byron all responded to revolutions abroad and upheavals at home, with Shelley laying into the powers-that-be in ‘England in 1819’ (“Rulers who neither see, nor feel, nor know, / But leech-like to their fainting country cling”). Owen and Sassoon were similarly scornful of generals ninety-nine years later, and their accounts of conditions in the First World War trenches have permanently changed attitudes to war in western culture (which isn’t to say that war has stopped). In Eastern Europe and South America, poetry has been synonymous with resistance to state or military oppression. It’s no surprise that Tom Paulin’s *Faber Book of Political Verse* runs to several hundred pages.

In our own time, close to home, poets have raised their voices to protest against injustice, or lowered them to tell terrible secrets. The personal and the political are not in opposition. Tony Harrison’s ‘Marked with D’ is both a moving elegy for his father and an angry denunciation of the class system that “kept him down”:

The baker’s man that no one will see rise
and England made to feel like some dull oaf
is smoke, enough to sting one person’s eyes
and ash (not unlike flour) for one small loaf.

British poetry might not be declamatory but many of the poems I’ve admired over the past twenty-five years (Harrison’s ‘Book Ends’, James Fenton’s ‘Dead Soldier’s and Derek Mahon’s ‘In a Disused Shed’ among them) are, in one way or another, political poems, shedding light on war, colonialism, injustice and social division.

Like Harrison, Seamus Heaney has also kept faith with his family and his art while writing poems that respond to contemporary history, notably the Troubles of Northern Ireland. Several poems dramatise his struggle as he balances fidelity to his tribe with fidelity to poetry, or contends with men like

the one who intercepts him on a train in 'The Flight Path':

So he enters and sits down
 Opposite and goes for me head on.
 'When, for fuck's sake, are you going to write
 Something for us?' 'If I do write something,
 Whatever it is, I'll be writing for myself.'

Writing for oneself doesn't mean being narcissistic. Time and again Heaney records the tug of conflicting sympathies, his sense of obligation to others weighed against his need for privacy and independence. When he finally resolves this conflict, the exhilaration is immense: the lightness and freedom at the end of 'Casualty' and throughout his collection *Seeing Things* are exultant. As he shows, you can be your own man (or woman) and still be a voice for others. Indeed the virtues you enshrine in your poetry – not least concision and compassion – can be a model for those in public life.

In 'Crediting Poetry', the lecture Heaney gave on receiving the Nobel Prize in 1995, he looked forward to the hard-line divisions in Northern Ireland becoming "a bit more like the net on a tennis court, a demarcation allowing for agile give-and-take, for encounter and contending, [for] a less binary and altogether less binding vocabulary". He wasn't to know how quickly peace would follow, with the Good Friday agreement of 1999, yet in a sense his poetry not only prefigured that moment but prepared the way for it through its celebration of buoyancy and flexibility. His whole posture, in the 1990s, was of a man who had woken up to 'miracles': overcoming intransigence in himself, he invited others to do likewise. For this, he says in his Nobel lecture, is "what the necessary poetry always does, which is to touch the base of our sympathetic nature while taking in at the same time the unsympathetic reality of the world to which that nature is constantly exposed." The clarity of Heaney's self-analysis, the historical perspective he brought to bear on contemporary events, and, above all, his gift of empathy helped articulate an impulse towards reconciliation which others were feeling too. In other words, his poetry didn't just bear witness to war but quietly contributed to the peace process.

Most poets I know feel themselves to be living on the margins, helpless to stop the forces that sweep us towards global conflict and environmental disaster. But to be marginal is not to be negligible. The margin is sometimes a good place to be. In the space at the edge of the received text, one can annotate, correct, improve, reflect, mock, exclaim and protest. And perhaps, in a modest way, help make things happen.

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