

Poetry And Political Culture

JOHN WALSH

What do we mean by political culture? Can we name a time when art, especially poetry, played a significant role in political life? The early Celtic period, perhaps, when the royal poet was second only to the king, and warring tribes lived in terror of what his satirical verses might say about their personal shortcomings? Or the court of Elizabeth I, when poets and dramatists were intimates of the monarch, and politicians routinely tried their hand at sonnets? We can, I think, find such a culture slightly closer to the modern day.

Forty years on, we may look back at 1968, the year of riot and seeming revolution, of assassination and student unrest and the rise of the counter-culture, and be amazed to see what a presence, a vital, glowing importance, poetry had in those heady times. The great Brahmin of American poetry, Robert Lowell, went to anti-war rallies and campaigned alongside Eugene McCarthy the presidential candidate – who, incidentally, published two poems himself in *Life* magazine that year. Amazingly, given the prevailing mood of the time, the US government sent poets to give readings and hold discussions at state high schools all over the country. Allen Ginsberg, the hirsute king of the Beat poets, was a walking, shouting spirit of liberation, not just in America, but in Prague as its brief libertarian spring arrived. Just his presence there inspired young Czechs to take to the streets and declaim verses in cafés. When Dubček's reforms were closed down by the Politburo, and the tanks moved in, Ginsberg was thrown out as a dangerous radical. The mainstream poetic tradition was venerated by the radical new spokesmen of the rock 'n' roll generation. The Doors took their name from William Blake's maxim about the doors of perception. Bob Dylan changed his name from Zimmerman in homage to the Rimbaud of Cwmdonkin Drive. His apocalyptic song of cultural and political breakdown, 'Desolation Row', featured "Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot fighting in the captain's tower." Simon and Garfunkel casually name-checked Emily Dickinson and Robert Frost in 'The Dangling Conversation'.

In Britain, the *Penguin New Poets* volume showcasing the work of Adrian Henri, Roger McGough and Brian Patten was a runaway bestseller. Their work may now seem cute Liverpoolian surrealism, but its explicit referencing of Wilfred Owen, its poems about Flanders Fields, inspired my

generation of schoolboys to start writing poetry ourselves, seizing as subject matter the nearest war to hand, the conflict in Vietnam. When Michael Horowitz and his fiery protégés on *New Directions* magazine held a poetry extravaganza in 1966, it packed out the Albert Hall.

In 1967 Ginsberg visited Ezra Pound – who, as a fascist and anti-Semite, should have been his sworn enemy – in Venice, rolled a joint for them both and played Pound records by Dylan, The Beatles, even Donovan’s ‘Sunshine Superman’ while the ancient contrarian tapped his ivory-handled cane along to the music. Politically, the two men were worlds apart, but Ginsberg wanted to heal the breach between them with the lyrics of a new generation.

The rise of Yevgeny Yevtushenko to world fame began with the publication in 1962 of ‘Babi Yar’, about a Soviet massacre of Jews and its shameful cover-up. It caused an outcry across both East and West Europe, but in 1968 Yevtushenko was still allowed to travel, to meet fellow poets in England and America. The Babi Yar poems hovered like a dark cloud, while the Russian cultural commissars wondered what to do about him. Like that famous later image of the Chinese student with his shopping bag standing before the tanks in Tiananmen Square, it seemed, in the 1960s, that one poem by one Russian poet could undermine, or at least seriously embarrass, a whole monolithic political machine.

Now that’s what I call a political culture. That was a time when poetry genuinely mattered, when utterance, and rhythm and words seemed to hold a power to change, not just a romantic reader’s idea of what he or she was prepared to accept from their parents’ occluded mindset, but a whole body politic. When *Today* genuinely was the struggle, and poetry, *pace* W.H. Auden, genuinely could make something happen.

Could it all happen today? There’s an unpopular government at home, an unpopular war in the Middle East, a global telecommunications network that brings, as it brought for the first time in the Sixties, images of conflict and terror to our every waking hour. And how has British culture responded? Television keeps us listlessly up to speed with the facts, in its recital of dead soldiers’ names from Helmand province, Basra and Baghdad. Theatre has done its best, in, say, the work of David Hare and the new Black Watch, to dramatize the drift and conduct of war, through documentary realism rather than metaphor. Film has brought images of torture, extraordinary rendition, suicide bombing and disappeared Western journalists. Literature has striven to understand the internal, human workings of fundamentalism. Rock ‘n’ roll has taken on a new anti-war commitment in the hands of, say, Bruce Springsteen and the tinny protests

THE POETRY REVIEW DEBATE

of the Dixie Chicks. But what has poetry contributed to the political climate?

It's hard to see much evidence of direct passion and fire. Tony Harrison, in 'The Basra Road' ("I saw the charred Iraqi lean...") documented atrocities like a good war reporter. David Harsent's prize-winning *Legion* did the same, evoking the details of an unnamed war with beautiful images of desolation that hark back to James Fenton's 'The Memory of War'. But both Harrison and Harsent seem content to remain poetic particularists, describers and ironists, seemingly convinced that "the poetry," to recall Wilfred Owen's wrong-headed dictum, "is in the pity."

It isn't, of course. It's in the words. And in the passion of poetic spokesmen, of the kind who used to confront governments. British poetry needs its own stropmy militiamen, its Geldofs and Monbiots, to reassert the primacy of bold, non-aligned utterance that fired us in the Sixties, that unsettled governments – and inspired school-kids to write, however stumblingly at first, about stuff that really mattered.

John Walsh has been Literary Editor of the *Evening Standard*, *Sunday Times*, and *Independent*.