**A fine place to be**

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 **Martin Stannard**: So in your editorial a while back you highlighted the abundance of poems full of self-expression and the idea of *saying something*, of *truth* and empathetic reader responses, and I'd go along with that completely – but it also seems to me that so much of what claims to be innovative or experimental is very often the same kind of thing in different clothes. There's often an insistence upon *saying something* – but the difference is that too often it's a something that's tired, and has been said before – and that, of course, is assuming you can figure out what's being said. And let's face it, fucking around with typography and white space and fractured language is not, by itself, anything like enough. What I find lacking so often is any kind of individuality, any kind of wit, and kind of imagination where someone takes me (and I have to say *me*, because this is completely subjective) to some other place. I read *The Guardian*. I know this world sucks a lot of the time. I don't need a poet to tell me what I already know. Show me somewhere and/or something else, and if you can't do that for Christ's sake entertain me, make me smile. Is that too much to ask?

**Rupert Loydell**: Not at all, entertainment seems good to me. I've said before and I will say again, I'd rather go to a Roger McGough reading than most poets': he's funny, can read well, and knows how to perform to an audience. But that's not what I want on the page, I want work I can go back to, that intrigues and puzzles me, but in an interesting way. I'd agree that fragmentation or white space or typography are just things that poets can use. My trouble is that a lot of poets don't have much of a clue about how poetry can or might work, they are still too interested in being true and honest – and most of the time we have heard it all before. One of the funniest responses to my editorial was someone saying that I should look at the small presses then, as though that was an automatic place for experimental genius. She didn't seem to have a clue (why should she?) about *Stride* or Stride Books and over 30 years of small press activity.

I think there's no reason that experiment and entertainment can't go hand in hand, nor do I want to be seen dissing everyone. My first draft of that editorial read as though I was getting at young poets, so I changed it. I mean we've been saying this kind of thing since we met at the bar of a small press poetry book fair, driven there by the announcement of six hours of readings, which negated the whole idea of having stalls around the edge of the hall! So, am I just getting older and grumpier and set in my modernist ways, is there a dearth of interesting poetry at the moment, or am I looking in the wrong places? I tried to give examples of how fiction publishing did seem to be opening up to new, interesting fiction writers at the moment – *and* selling their books!

**MS**: Well, we might both be getting older and grumpier, because that small press poetry fair was back in the days of the duplicated magazine and Tippex™. For a long time I’ve been banging on here and there about the pleasures of reading, about how if to read something is not a pleasure in some way then why bother? I had lunch with the late and great Tom Raworth a few years ago, and he was of the same mind, that so much of what is around may well be worthy but it’s not a pleasure to read. Now, 'pleasure' is of course another of those subjective measures, but how often do you read a poem and think Hey, I reckon I wouldn’t mind having a drink or too with this poet, they seem like they might be fun and interesting to chew the fat with. Instead, loads of the time I find myself missing the days when I worked in a call centre surrounded by people who had nothing to do with poetry at all. I think I might be talking about how I like to have a sense of an amenable personality in a poem, which for me is synonymous with a sense of an imagination that is unique to that person, with some wit and élan thrown in. And I think that connects with your mention of how poetry can or might work: you can do almost anything in a poem, you can say what the hell you like any way you like. But – and this is something I learned decades ago – if what you have to say isn’t interesting then the poem isn’t going to be interesting.

**RL**: Yes, duplicators, inky fingers and blistered fingers from the long arm staplers. Proper small press. But, joking aside, isn't thinking you want a drink with a poet buying into that whole personality thing I was moaning about? Poetry isn't about the poet, it's about the poems. Language on the page, making something new, exciting, interesting, confusing, informative. I mean you've (or I've) always had to rummage around to find poetry I want to read, but I am genuinely struggling to be interested at the moment. There seems a resurgence of 'TRUE POEMS ABOUT THE AUTHOR' on the back of gender, mental health and other current issues, a move back to non-ironic confession. I dislike being expected to respond empathetically to poetry. The challenge is to make the subject, if that's the author's obsession, new and interesting. I guess I'm agreeing. How would you apply that to Tom's poetry though, which many found impenetrable? Or someone like Bob Cobbing, whose work has taken me years to start to grapple with? Would you agree that infuriating or confusing can go hand in hand with interesting, and that that is better than just being dull?

**MS**: I don’t think it’s buying into the personality thing – except to say that after 40 years in Poetry World it just happens to have turned out, in my experience anyway, that poets whose work I like and who I have met have also been good company. Mind you, it occurs to me I also know some poets who are good company but rubbish poets, so I think this is a blind alley I’m going down. Of course, poetry is about the poem, and all that, and I’m sure there are some really boring toads somewhere who have written poems I love or would love if I knew them, but so it goes. And of course it’s the language on the page that matters, because that’s what a poem is. And I’d agree with you that there’s a lot of ‘issue’ poetry around at the moment, which just bores me to tears – not because the issues are boring, but because the issues seem to be more important than the poem, and to criticize them as poetry is seen, too often, to be criticizing the issue, which it isn’t. But I think one of the major problems with trying to identify whatever it is we (I think I speak for ‘we’ – even though exactly what we want won’t always be exactly the same thing, or the same poem) want in a poem is that it’s the mysterious quality that we don’t know until we encounter it. So, for me, when I read Raworth, loads of the time I would be bemused and confused but there’s something about the writing that is beguiling and ‘interesting’. It has a flair which, I’m inclined to say, has its roots not only in the way the language is used but in the quality of the imagination it comes from. I set a lot of store on the imagination, which is not always what people think it is.

**RL**: I can't argue with that, and I agree that – with a few exceptions, whose names I am not going to mention – the poets I have met have been interesting and good company. One of the delights of the poetry world, if such a thing exists, is that most people are fairly affable and pleasant to one another, after an initial bitch. We seem to be agreed on a lot of things here, but are you happy to agree that one's work becomes interesting through being inquisitive and paying attention to things? And by things I guess I'm really saying to other writing, the arts, and the world around us. I sometimes use a written piece by John Hall with my students which talks about 'being a poet' as a state of mind just as much as a constant scribbler of poems (though I err towards the latter myself). And he doesn't mean wearing a beret and strutting around in an affected manner, he means when you are not physically writing you are still engaged with language and words. Does that make sense to you? Thinking as a poet, rather than thinking about what to say.

**MS**: (Removing beret . . .) If ‘the artist’ is not inquisitive or doesn’t pay attention to things then surely they are no artist . . . ? And I agree that as a poet there must surely be a continual fascination with words and language, a fascination that goes on whether you are reading Pound or the TV Guide or listening to politicians saying nothing at very great length. But, to quote Father Dougal McGuire in an episode of *Father Ted:* ‘As you know, Ted, I’m very cynical.’ And a fascination with words and language on its own doth not maketh a poet. So where does that leave us? I find myself today with a PDF of a book from a self-styled experimental and innovative independent publisher which is not much more than a bunch of typographical tosh, and a book I just started to review that looks like it might turn out to cure my insomnia, but it’s from Picador, so it must be good. I mean – Picador . . .

**RL**: So the intelligent sophisticated adult in me goes back to what you said earlier, that it's taste. But it's also to do with money and fashion. We all know that bigger poetry publishers like Picador don't sell that many more copies of poetry books than the small presses (with a few exceptions like Armitage, Duffy and McGough), and they are subsidised by their fiction lists or arts council grants. What continues to disappoint me is the insistence on selling tosh – I mean if marketing works so well (as people like Simon Thirsk at Bloodaxe, and – depending which year it is – the arts council, insist it does) then you ought to be able to sell anything. Some of the big publishers really do embrace the neoliberal idea of trickle down: popular sales somehow converting their readers to the experimental. And yet, brilliant poets like Karen Solie have been re-presented by first Bloodaxe and now Picador, in the most boring fashion imaginable, leaving out most of the exciting work she has written. I mean, maybe she has embraced the mainstream, and that's her decision, but the Bloodaxe Selected, *The Living Option*, chose the easiest and most dull of her work; homogenized it all.

I guess you are talking about the PDF review copy of U.G. Vilågos' *Demonic Parade: 1993-1996* which Broken Sleep are producing? Broken Sleep are one of the new presses that show you can use print-on-demand technology and social media to confidently and successfully market and sell their books. Guillemot also do the same, with an artier production approach. I'm all for them, but it doesn't mean authors or editors know about stuff, just as I didn't back in the 1980s when I started Stride. I'm suspicious of U.G. Világos because they have come out of nowhere and, as you say, it's a half-arsed collection of typographical tosh. Perhaps it's a pseudonymical joke from the editors, designed to wind people like me up, or a joke actually designed to point out how dull experiment can be? Or maybe I'm trying to make excuses because I like Aaron and Charlie?

I remember when Andy Brown put together the *Binary Myths* volumes talking to poets and editors, I was genuinely appalled about the – to me, imaginary – divide between the 'linguistically innovative' and the 'mainstream'. I mean, it isn't real, except there is a real sense of interesting writing happening 'elsewhere' these days, and yet when people suggest names or direct me to websites, I often find the same stuff. I mean a confessional transgender poem is still a confessional poem, and I find the whole idea of the confessional and epiphanic problematic. I mean, I invented the idea of the post-confessional to allow my poems to have a narrator, or several narrators, and to encourage people to read them, but to try and separate them from me. I mean it's not my voice, except as the author, it's the voices of work and people around me, overheard conversations, song titles, phrases from books, etc, etc. Is Martin Stannard the narrator of his poems?

**MS**: No. At least, for the most part I’m the author, the bloke who’s made stuff up. I don’t use as much overheard or found things or whatever as you, but anything approaching the personal that sneaks in is, I would like to think, kept at arm’s length and most of the time much further than that. In a word, I don’t write about my life, I write *from* it, which I think is different. Yes, I was referring to that Broken Sleep book, and since the alleged author appears nowhere else in the world or on the internet except on their website and on Charlie Baylis’ blog I’m sure it’s not a real person, the point of which I fail to see, to be honest. Perhaps they have time on their hands. There’s certainly a lot of social media going on – I had a peek at a Twitter (what’s it called?) account (?) and it was by and large marketing masquerading as chit-chat, which probably says something about where poetry is at the moment, and why I use neither Twitter nor Facebook. I also agree that ‘mainstream’ and that other thing are fairly meaningless terms, insofar as – as I’m sure you have too – seen or heard so called ‘experimental’ or non-mainstream poetry go down well with audiences or readers who should, if the labels mean anything at all, have no truck with it. And I speak as one who for years has been described as someone who falls somewhere between those two labels which, by the way, is a place called ‘obscurity’. So, to sum up, we’re a couple of old men bored by most of the new poetry we see, with not much to suggest as a remedy except a few airy-fairy notions of taste, imagination, and the post-confessional. Or did I miss something?

**RL**: Well, that's sorted then. Obscurity seems a fine place to be though, most of the time, and to not spend precious time on social media when I can be having email conversations with fellow cynics. One of the things that marketeers and readers don't like, of course, is publishers, work or authors who can't be easily pigeonholed. I think I tick or have ticked all those boxes in my time. I might go and listen to some Eno now, or have a lie down. It's hard work trying to be calm and sensible about all this stuff rather than throw things across the room...

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