

WHAT THE POET SAID ABOUT IT

for & from Martin Stannard

'As you know, Ted, I'm very cynical.'

– Father Dougal McGuire, *Father Ted*

Poetry has always been for me a process either of finding out what I think, or asking myself questions about what I think, and often learning more about what I think. I don't know if that's the right way to explain it, but it's possible to be the right person or the wrong person sometimes, discovering that what I thought I thought is not what I thought it was. In some cases, I'm astonished by myself. I didn't know I was that smart, and I'm still in agreement with what I said back then.

I don't really like stacks of poems that, let's be honest, have someone's death to thank for being there. People might think me almost totally deficient when it comes to appreciating other people's emotions, and caring about how they feel, and all that business. I could be seen as a cold robot with no heart or, as some people might have it, plain stupid. Whichever it is, I think it's interesting, which is better than boring, right? I set a lot of store on the imagination, which is not always what people think it is.

The poetry world is quite small and (I can't help but smile as I say this) honesty is not always welcomed. I suspect that demons are at work and I still feel a little fragile. One is asked to suffer heavy-handed metaphor and a one-legged dwarf with a Kylie Minogue fixation since you can do almost anything in a poem. He falls out of love with his wife; a house tumbles over a cliff because of erosion and a well is discovered; Gerard Manley Hopkins haunts virtually every page. And now I have written that, I know I'm faced with the challenge of explaining what I mean.

Perhaps one cause of my disquiet is the premise that poetry is good for you. 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 entertain me, make me smile. Is that too much to ask? Any idea of a long and considered essay about all of this is something I simply can't be bothered with. If I stay mildly bothered and troubled, the logical conclusion is a more than slightly confused mix of intelligent sophisticated adult, pent-up emotion and sentiment.

It's hard work trying to be calm and sensible about all this stuff rather than throw things across the room. I met Martin Stannard propping up the bar, but isn't a drink with a poet buying into that whole personality thing I was moaning about? Kind of fun but missing the point... I've banged on his door and peered through his window to see him stretched out on a sofa, and didn't know if he was alive or dead. He isn't the enemy but is he the narrator of his poems?

Poets must surely have a continual fascination with words and language? Most poems are well-written and educated, are awfully polite, never shock. They threaten to say the unspeakable, but don't. Many of the poetic theories and apparent beliefs behind them sound really good, loitering in cyberspace, untouched by historical,

geographical and social conflicts. There's no reason that experiment and entertainment can't go hand in hand, but for the most part I'm the author, the bloke who's made stuff up. It's the language on the page that matters, because that's what a poem is: having words next to each other which are supposed to be there.

I speak as one who for years has been described as someone who falls somewhere between. Maybe I should just ignore all those questions and get on with whatever it is I get on with. I know writing this is a waste of time. To sum up, we're 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? Maybe I'm trying to make excuses but obscurity seems a fine place to be.

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