

POETRY, UNIVERSITIES AND POSEURS.

Taken from an interview with Peter Porter, Adelaide Festival of Arts, 14 March, 1974.

"Poetry ought to concern itself with the generalities, rather than the particularities of life... things like Shakespeare and Pope wrote about the assessment of the human condition and the human spirit — general statements which do not rely upon individual evidence. There is no such thing as a private truth, although evidence is always personal; for that reason I would say that Poetry cannot do anything. But it can be anything.

Universities, while in our present Philistine society are usually known as the cherishers of writing, are the greatest powers to destroy writing: they completely misunderstand the nature of the act of writing. They make the presumptuous mistake that writing is angled already to their questions as though the writer is no more than the provider of texts for analysis.... This is not so — the writer couldn't give a damn what the reception of his work is going to be. A writer is simply pleasing an instinct within himself so natural that the Universities have no access to it. Universities may understand the nature of how people receive writing but have no idea how to put it together, none at all.

The great thing in favour of Universities is that they do pay serious attention to writing, whereas the world outside Universities tends to read either for total relaxation, or for reasons of fashion or for no reason at all.... In any society, at any time and wherever you look at it, there is never more than a handful of people that read with the same degree of love and intensity as the people that wrote it in the first place.

In a sense, poetry has never been anything than a clandestine market because the big public journals are not interested in poetry anyway...poetry is not a selling line. I'm in favour of little magazines receiving subsidies from the State.... I've argued for support for little magazines particularly, secondly for publishing houses and thirdly, individually for writers themselves. The only way you can get sales is to fill your magazine full of crap and then it won't necessarily go because there are so many crappy magazines on the market.

Australia is perhaps dangerously self-regarding — it is isolated, sitting in the Southern ocean, its audience is its own people and its reputations are made within the arena of its own interests. It is a more incestuous world than the letters in the United States or the United Kingdom because there are simply more people there involved in more things and the countries tend to be less self-regarding. On the other hand, Australian poets particularly tend to be working in Universities and therefore have connecting lines directly with the academic establishments in England and the United States, but I wonder whether, when they write poetry, they separate themselves from what they do when they are maintaining their professional discipline. I never was interested in Australiana, even when I was in Brisbane, which isn't exactly the Athens of the North.

It strikes me you've got a more vehement, self-expressing, violent avant-garde than there is in England. Not necessarily avant-garde in their style of work, but a degree of willingness to fight and smash what they don't like. I was rather surprised. By English standards these younger writers go far beyond the point of decorum that would generally be permitted. A few more of those sort of things would clear an English audience. Australia seems to have developed a system whereby it pays for the poet to insult his expectant audience. In a sense it's subsidized insult as no-one's going to insult him back. I don't care for it much.

The word 'poet' has become in a modern, affluent, post-capitalist civilization a way of changing your status in society. Provided you call yourself a poet you can get out of all the tedious expectations of decency, propriety etc. which society would otherwise insist upon levying on all its people - provided you allow yourself to be agitated by a sort of Divine Discontent.

Half of the things which are the most moving experiences in a poet's life are utterly independent of what kind of government is in power, what kind of society he lives in, whether he's rich or poor, whether he's frustrated or unfrustrated in his sex-life, his ambition, all these. To try and refer everything to a situation of social expectation is to really make your task easier, to simplify life to a point which makes it convenient for you to become a liar. And one of the great difficulties in modern poetry is that there are more poseurs, more people proposing stances. more simple Untruth Tellers than there need be.

Poetry's suddenly become a growth area of the economy. I'd almost like to see it slip back into its old unfashionable desuetude - it might save us from the career men or the neurotics moving in on it, people who agitate for the Revolution in an area where the Revolution isn't going to come."

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