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A Vision for Australian Poetry

Robert Wood · Wednesday, October 7th, 2015

At the level of cohesive vision and organisational strategy, poetry in Australia is struggling. This is unsurprising, given the protean and multiple quality of poetry. Yet, if we cannot agree on what makes a good sonnet, we might be able to more readily agree that a discussion of sonnets, or any other such form, deserves a more important and visible place at the cultural table – festivals, radio, newspapers all ignore the art. This may also be the case in the United States, but given the relative size of the population there one can easily engage with the core, the die-hards, the true believers and be sustained.

Australian poetry is similarly marginalised and it struggles to maintain its junkyard dog ability to make itself matter to the public at large. Of course some very dedicated people labour against this, most notably Kent McCarter at *Cordite*, which is the most important organ for poetry and poetics in Australia at present. To state as much is not to take sides but to comment on the volume and quality of production.

What though might advocacy rather than the art look like? This must come in the form of partnerships and lobbying as part and parcel of changing the culture.

The partnerships that will promote poetry in Australia include those with the private sector, universities, professional literary organisations and other cultural bodies. In the past, Australian Poetry (the putative 'national' organisation) has responded to the two ends of the poetry culture. Between 2012 and 2014, they encouraged the touring of Ireland by two elite poets and they promoted a vast number of amateur poets in cafes across the country. These two programs are laudable.

However, to date they have failed to create opportunities for many people who operate in the middle of the poetry ecosystem bell-curve. Where are residencies at universities, for example? Where too are opportunities for visiting poets to stay in Australia? University residential colleges have infrastructural capabilities; English departments create a ready audience and there is a certain amount of quality control in advocating through this system. Without an adequate knowledge of the higher educational sector there is no way that poetry can be advocated for in a series of mutually beneficial partnerships. Similar sentiments could be applied to collaborations with major arts organisations, museums, galleries or various important and visible public and private organisations including the Australian Society of Authors, the Australian Booksellers Association and the Australian Publishers Association.

In terms of advocacy, poetry is beset by a general fear that if one speaks out against the literary

bureaucratic establishment one will be denied opportunities. (NB: The literary bureaucratic establishment is the base corollary to the superstructural ‘official verse culture’). And that denial may very well be the case. But in the long term all we have is an evasive, polite culture that does a disservice to the art itself. In this way, people are reluctant to highlight how poetry is silenced at festivals, in school and university curricula and in bookshops. Poetry should have parity with novels and non-fiction at all festivals. To advocate for anything less is to suggest that poetry is not as important, but the only justification for that is through a market imperative, not an aesthetic one.

For the most part, festival directors are not poetry’s friends. That they prevaricate on this suggests as much. Why the evasiveness? Why the faux concern about poetry? And yet, where is the advocacy strategy that would campaign to see poetry afforded its rightful and deserved place in festivals, in bookshops, in curriculum? Poetry workers are yet to see how we can fight for it.

To organise all this would take funding, vision and planning. There is money out there in corporate coffers, government departments as well as fundraising drives of local kinds – silent auctions, pub raffles, crowd-funding and donations. It is not beyond poetry to unionise and create the possibilities that would see the art become a more enduring and important part of Australia.

Some of poetry’s most endearing qualities are that it is shifting, various, dynamic. That the perspective in this essay can be offered is about strengthening poetry’s place in the culture rather than criticising anything that has or has not yet been done by anyone in particular. That it may be read in the latter vein surely attests to the commonplace sensitivities of those for whom practical outcomes are not a priority and who escape monitoring and evaluation other than in the form of personal attacks made through private gossip rather than in the public written form, the latter of which may lead to lasting change.

That Australia lacks an organising and practical imperative in the area of poetry is not only antithetical to some of the best qualities of the nation as a whole, but also indicates that poets often have nothing to hope for other than personal gain. With this acceptance we continue to do a disservice to the aesthetic contribution we can make to the world as a whole. And that, surely, needs to change.

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