

Editorial

IN AN AGE THAT INSISTS on transparency in judgement and selection, the back-room of poetry has become a dark place. Accountability is called for, but often the accountants are hidden from sight. Their effects are not recognised as effects, the marks and bruises they leave are powdered and rouged over.

Looking back even twenty years, the culture of reception for poetry was critical. Publishers promoted their writers as best they could, if anything was newsworthy in the work or the life it was magnified and made into a story. But what mattered was the reviewer making the case for or against a new book, engaging with it, arguing, exemplifying. Enough evidence was in a good review for attentive readers to judge for themselves – to judge the judges, as it were. Letters to the editor often contested a disagreeable review (as in the letter that follows this editorial). Dialogue was never far away. Critics might argue with one another, and their arguments engage wider concerns: formal, thematic, political.

Nowadays the political may be at work out of sight, the reader unaware of it. Editors engage with the language of writers, suggesting, retracting, worrying at a work until it is as good as they and the author collaboratively can make. This collaboration is creative. Some editors listen to new writing with a different kind of hearing. One contributor to these pages told us that the editor of a major poetry journal required him to change the word ‘deafness’ to ‘silence’ in a poem. The editor was concerned that the use of the word ‘deafness’ might be considered ‘Ablist’ by their readers, as though the editor’s task was to police the poem on behalf of a sensitised and delicate readership. ‘The word “deafness” has great power,’ wrote the edited poet, ‘there is such a difference between the deaf and the un-listening.’ The reader of the published poem will be unaware of the unattested unravelling of

texture that has occurred. At least in a palimpsest one can see where erasures have been made.

Another crucial change is that a sometimes accountable, more or less open critical review culture has given way to the prize culture which provides crucial rhetoric for the marketing of books. If an author is shortlisted it becomes part of a permanent record. An author who receives an award can ever after be described as ‘award-winning’, a title almost as valuable as a knighthood.

Twenty years ago, when critics liked or disliked a book of poems, they had to provide reasons, and they had to reason both with the author and the reader. A review talked over both shoulders, as it were. The complex ‘award’ process, however, is anything but transparent. I write as someone who has judged national, regional and local competitions. Participation does not lessen the dark room’s darkness. First, who chooses the judges, and why are the judges chosen? Can they be chosen in such a way as to affect the likely outcomes of the award-giving process? (They can be, and we must trust that they won’t.) And when they make their shortlist, what is their rationale? The process is not asked at that stage to be answerable, the judges’ connections within the poetry world are not generally interrogated.

Crucially, the dialogue between judges called upon to consider large swathes of work are not conducted in the open, their arguments are not recorded, and the spin they put on the announcement of their final selections does not include any of what one imagines might, or ought, to be the heat and friction of critical engagement. The final announcement is neutralised, as though a boxing match had occurred offstage and a victor was paraded around the ring wearing a belt no one could quite account for.

Letter to the Editor

ROBYN MARSACK writes · Dear Editors, I am writing in belated response to the editorial in *PNR* 243 (Sept–Oct 2018) as an occasional translator and an admirer of Kate Briggs’s *This Little Art*. I would not want *PNR* readers to dismiss the book after reading comments that seemed to be based more on Benjamin Moser’s review of it in the *NYTBR*, rather than a direct encounter with *This Little Art* itself. It is a pity that this editorial, which obviously wishes to take issue with ‘some of the easier rhetorical gestures of contemporary essay-writing’ – and may be right to do so – has chosen the responses to *This Little Art* as the vehicle.

First of all, Briggs does not behave like ‘a primary artist’. Indeed, her whole ‘meditation’ – a term to which I’ll return – considers the translator’s relationship to the original text; it is the crux of the matter. The translator,

she suggests, is a ‘producer of relations’. (Even the blurb calls translation, as described in the book, ‘an intensely relational activity’.) As a translator, her relationship has been principally with Barthes, but also more recently with Zola, and in her book she describes the Dutch translation group she belongs to; there is a faint implication in the criticism that two volumes of Barthes scarcely qualify as a basis for her exploration.

On the very next page from what Moser calls her ‘assertion’ (not an ‘argument’, you see) that we are in need of translations, Briggs offers a reason for this need: ‘the translations we do read are their own necessary reminder [...] of everything we are not reading, and yet has been written and is being read by so many others’ (as she had clearly defined the ‘we’ as ‘the English-speaking world’ – why did Moser feel that he had to reduce that to ‘middle-