

Selling Poetry

Poetry sales are booming. According to The Bookseller, sales at the end of 2017 totalled more than eleven million, an increase of thirteen per cent on the previous year. But are sales figures a true indicator as to the state of poetry? If so, poetry is at risk of being judged on the same level as any manufactured article, whose success is measured in terms of sales and where production figures are closely monitored. Sadly, it seems that this is already the case and that writing poetry has become like a manufacturing process, turning out poets like merchandise.

This production starts early at primary school level where the writing of poetry has been hijacked by educationalists as a teaching resource to aid literacy. Surprisingly, this approach is endorsed by the Poetry Society's 'Teaching Resources' programme in which poetry is seen as an aid for pupils in learning to express themselves. 'Poetry is a powerful tool for raising standards of literacy and developing language skills.' A favourite method recommended for use by teachers is the compilation of lists, such as inviting the class to make a list of animals and then adding an adjective to go with each one. Proficiency in these exercises is then equated with writing poetry and thus the whole production process of turning out poets is started.

The next stage in this process is to encourage participation in the crowded calendar of poetry competitions organized throughout the country. The monthly list of events as published by the Poetry Library shows an average of four competitions every week for 2017 with most of them promising some financial reward, leading up to the top prizes in the T.S.Eliot Award (now £25,000) and Forward prizes (£15,000). Recognition in a competition might lead to a publishing contract, although the small publishers who specialize in these sort of publications have a very limited share of the market with small print runs. In keeping with modern manufacturing practices, there seems to be a certain planned obsolescence about the poetry market and its practitioners as the whole tenor of the contemporary poetry scene is geared to constant experimentation and novelty. One does not have to look very far for evidence of this characteristic. A recent judge of the Forward prizes commended the shortlist for displaying 'a breaking down of barriers within and around poetry.' A winner of the T.S.Eliot Award was congratulated by the chair of the judges for 'playing wildly with form', while comments like 'boundary-bending' and 'genre-defying' all contribute to this state of constant flux.

A recent anthology, Fiona Sampson's 'Beyond the Lyric' with its subtitle 'A Map of Contemporary British Poetry' is an unwitting witness to this feature of planned obsolescence as it traces the thirteen short-lived movements and factions that have characterized the last fifty years. Of course, movements and counter-movements have always been a feature of poetry's history. But never have they followed on with such rapidity – a fact, which in itself, casts doubt on the importance of all these mini-movements in the first place.

Publicity for this production line of poets and their poetry is mainly undertaken by the Poetry Society. Numbering more than four thousand members, the Poetry Society claims to 'create a central position for poetry in the arts and continue to build new avenues to promote poets and poetry in Britain today.' To this end, it is happy to indulge in public relations stunts like its 2015 National Poetry Day campaign which featured the catchy slogan: 'Love like a Poet, Speak like a Poet, Act like a Poet, Dream like a Poet, Live like a Poet, Think like a Poet.' In America, the Academy of American Poets runs the Poem-a-Day series which is distributed via email, web and social media to over three hundred and fifty thousand readers. Poem-a-Day features new and previously unpublished poems by contemporary poets who benefit from the sort of publicity machine that is normally associated with more material products.

If poetry is not to become a production driven commodity, then more attention should be paid to projects like the Poetry Archive's 'Poetry by Heart' contests, in which pupils take part in a series of recitation competitions, which encourage a love of poetry without trying to make everyone a poet. In prescribing memorization of one poem pre-1914 and one post-1914, the project encourages a respect for five hundred years of poetic tradition as well as an appreciation of modern poetry. This is a more balanced approach to the promotion of poetry and does not equate it with the teaching of literacy or the here today, gone tomorrow nature of production line poetry which seems to have forgotten the old adage that 'Poets are born not made.'

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