

The Drum Beats Itself: Poetry in London

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The pub where I am drinking in Queen Square, just off Southampton Row, is populated mostly by Faber staff. They spill over the edges and into the street that fronts Queen Square, where Philip Larkin and Ted Hughes, both candidates for the laureateship in 1984, each have a quatrain celebrating Elizabeth's Silver Jubilee embossed in a plaque. Soccer-mad children demonstrate their skills, and the paler thinner children from the many surrounding hospitals are wheeled quietly by their parents. The drinkers brush up against the walls of the church of St George the Martyr, where Sylvia and Ted were married on June 16 1956. Bloomsbury is full of American tourists and students, but you can't shake the presence of Woolf and Plath, brightness shadowed by violence. In spring especially, the beauty of the parks has a sharp edge, and the neighbourhood's name reveals its split between bloom and burial, the dual association of blossom and death. The streets in London are dense with literary association and the intermittent blue plaques pointing out houses occupied by Orwell, Keats, Yeats, Dickens are only a visual reminder of the constant echoes. Even the act of listening is overlaid with association. C.K. Stead's poem 'Pictures in a Gallery Undersea' strains for true notes in a city submerged beneath literary allusion; impossible, they have 'vanished like bubbles up through the watery air / Of London.'

It feels necessary to get to know this city – and the poetry that stems from and flows through it – both forwards from the past and backwards from the present; so I am trying to read in both directions. Wordsworth, Blake, Keats, Eliot are currently lined up next to Simon Armitage, Roddy Lumsden, Peter Redgrove and Penelope Shuttle. Perhaps the weight of the past is why it was easy as a recent arrival to drift to South London, where history is only visible in pockets, most of the old buildings levelled during the Second World War. Here, London comes into its own as a multiethnic city – brightly mixed and often brittle. The bus driving up Walworth Road is a sampler of different languages and accents. Poles, Africans, French, Italian, Russian, Jamaican, Carribean, a few English. Overheard conversations offer a brief glimpse into the differences I am not attuned to.

- *Where are you from? Jamaica?*
- ...
- *Kenya?*
- *No.*
- *I know. You're from Nigeria.*
- *My mother is.*
- *I know because I always like Nigerian girls, my last girlfriend was Nigerian.*
- *Aren't you tired?*
- *No.*
- *I thought you must be tired of talking.*

Through the windows there is the street poetry of the newspaper headlines that shout out from their metal cages. Those of the *Evening Standard* (West-End Final) are a tonally perfect blend of apocalyptic gloom and middle-class anxiety: 'Commuters In Train Derailment Hell', 'Double Life Of Evil Architect', 'Transplant Patients Get Rabies'. The other important linguistic induction is the sheer joy of London names. There is the Monopoly-board familiarity of Pall Mall, Fleet Street and Leicester Square, which is nothing to the sustained delight of Lambs Conduit Passage, Mile End, Isle of Dogs, Elephant and Castle, Cleaver Square and Clink Street.

So, where is the poetry that reflects this contemporary diversity and robust pleasure in language? It certainly wasn't immediately obvious at the first London poetry event I attended in St Giles In The Fields, the church just off Tottenham Court Road where Andrew Marvell and George Chapman are buried, as well as Shelley's children and Byron's daughter. Here, perhaps unfairly, Wendy Cope bore the brunt of my initial distress at English poetry. This wasn't poetry, this was light verse: incidental and devoid of satirical bite. These poems made me recall the blows aimed at the 'domestic' poetry trend in New Zealand. But Jenny Bornholdt's lyrics that trace quiet rupturings over breakfast and Anna Jackson's spikey lacksadaisical tea parties are on a thoroughly different metaphysical faultline to Cope's stanzas on buying and returning a Marks and Spencer tee-shirt:

*Why did I buy this Mark and Spencer's T-shirt
And, having done so, fail to take it back?
An average English-frump-beside-the-sea-shirt –
Why did I buy this Marks and Spencer's T-shirt?*

This excerpt is perhaps an unfair representation of Wendy Cope, who has written verses that I like a lot more than this one, but it does seem symptom of a general trend in English poetry. The weight of tradition ensures an inarguable public place and public office for poetry, but that this might be a mixed blessing is evident when you see what the country's laureates have been pushed to – think of Andrew Motion's ode to Jonny Wilkinson, Hughes's *Rain-Charm for the Duchy*. A poetry that can speak to the masses is not the same as a poetry bowed by a lower common denominator. The crowds that packed Philip Larkin's funeral are testament to that. But it can limit the possibility for poetry to challenge, and to push language to its limits. A great deal of contemporary poetry is shaped by the urge to commune and to entertain, relying on a mode of anecdotalism and deflationary humour. Rhyme is used, often without any sense of historical awareness, as an easy way to make poetry, and to make poetry accessible. Though this mode also informs considered, dark and complex work from writers as diverse as Simon Armitage and John Burnside, essentially the poetry world here seems quite different from, for example, America, where for all the glamour of awards and the heated conspiracies of foetry.com, poetry still seems a lonely, individualist pursuit.

The positive side of this is that people expect and want to listen to poetry. Regular readings proliferate. The Poetry Café in Covent Garden ('physical homepage' of the Poetry Society) holds weekly Poetry Unplugged open mic nights; other regular events include 'Loose Muse' – a reading session for women poets, Exiled writers INK, Young Blood – a reading slot for new poets, and the bi-monthly African Writers' Meeting. Oxfam Books in Marylebone holds regular seasonal readings and in the year since I've been here have had some excellent poets, including James Byrne, Michael Schmidt, Patrick McGuinness, Elaine Feinstein, John Redmond. The audience numbers are incredible, and there are usually people sitting on the floor or standing at the back craning necks. The audience is eager for connection and frequently stop the poets afterwards to comment or question; most are also writers.

As the Poetry in the Underground scheme showed, London displays a real enthusiasm for bringing poetry to new audiences. The modus operandi of the relatively young charity Poet in the City that I have intermittently been involved with is one of poetic evangelism: they organise readings that combine poetry with football, poetry with climate change, poetry with science¹. They also host 'drop-in' events in the offices of major City lawfirms, in which attendees form a circle to read favourite poems, including ones they have written, according to a chosen theme. Here the edges are bemusingly ragged, suited to the emergency-room associations of the drop-in medical clinic. These are two groups who don't always naturally

¹ www.poetinthecity.co.uk/

fit together – as exemplified in the moment when the charity’s poet-in-residence, clad in an impressively crumpled seersucker suit, begins reading mellifluously from a series of his own poems inspired by *Alice in Wonderland*, and overtips his glass of sponsor-provided red onto the boardroom floor. The host of the event, a member of the lawfirm, deferentially but with an urgency born of fear, rushes to the rescue with papertowels and soda water.

It is also possible to see that the hunger for poetry and for a poetry that speaks directly to an audience is responding to diversity of voice. Slam poetry and spoken word are incredibly popular in London. Two organisations dedicated to performance poetry or ‘live literature’ are Apples and Snakes and Penned in the Margins². Both hold spoken word events around London and actively support the use of performance poetry in education. Somewhat surprisingly, given the ostensible vitality of these forms, Cornelia Gräbner in a recent issue of *Poetry Review* discusses a debate between poets Lemn Sissay and Luke Wright over whether performance poetry is dead. The original debate took place in the South Bank centre during *Poetry International 2006*, and Gräbner comes down firmly on Sissay’s side³. For performance poetry to have any meaning, she argues, verbal techniques must not occur as a stance or show for their own sake, but must embody a political message. Thus, in Gräbner’s eyes, Luke Wright’s recent performance of a poem which borrows from Linton Kwesi Johnson’s ‘Five Nights of Bleeding’ in order to address the shoppers rioting at the 1995 opening of Ikea in Edmonton, is evidence for the terminal state of this poetry – a parasitic attachment to political roots is not enough to sustain its middle-class tendencies. Similarly Sissay argues that slam poetry is an enemy because it pits the technical prowess of poet against poet, making impossible the self-competition which is in his view a necessity for true art. Although these arguments admirably seek to protect visions of a pure performance poetry and a pure poetry, I think that both are beside the fact.

In a recent event hosted by Apples and Snakes and held at the *Guardian* Newsroom, four very different poets – Polarbear, David J, Suzanne Andrade and Patience Agbabi - performed four very different types of performance poetry. Polarbear, a young Brummie poet spins off personal monologues which engage with memory, school, family, sex. His verbal dexterity is great, and some of the poems truly moving and honest. He is obviously competitive, a prominent figure on the slam circuit, but his performance also shows the unmistakable awareness of a poetic isolation, the lonely project of honing expression, the material

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Both have excellent websites detailing their event lineups: www.pennedinthemargins.co.uk/, www.applesandsnakes.org/

³ Cornelia Gräbner. ‘Is Performance Poetry Dead?’, *Poetry Review*, 97:2 (2007), 78-82

opportunities that foreclose as a result of this exclusive pursuit, and the mix of frustration and delight in the phrases that catch and insist on life and inclusion. Suzanne Andrade is impeccably face-powdered, clad in staid stockings and a black crepe tea dress with white lace collar. There are plummy-voiced renditions of poems that sound like Edith Sitwell on acid. Patience Agbabi, who has been on the performance scene since 1995 is almost an establishment figure in this lineup, and her set is the quietest, the least consciously 'performative' in context.

David J, who in his snap-brimmed fedora and hunting jacket looks uncannily like Mos Def, of Blackstar fame, both contradicts and affirms the arguments of Sissay and Gräbner. His first poem addresses the 7/7 bombings. It follows the perspective of the bomb victims in their last moments and attacks the subsequent police shooting in Stockwell of innocent Brazilian man Jean Charles de Menezes, who was suspected of involvement. Whereas Polarbear's dexterity is mostly spoken – a stream of fluid articulations and inventive rhyme, David J uses his whole body as well as non-verbal effects in his performance. Lip pops and eerie in-suckings of air are the last heartbeats and reversed last breaths of victims, who move backwards into an underworld in which memories and last thoughts intersect *sotto voce*. This is unmistakably political poetry, and David J draws on predecessors like Amira Baraka and Linton Kwesi Johnson. But when he launches into his second poem, you can begin to see how the verbal techniques that were crucial to the first poem's impact and meaning might lose strength, begin to be detached from message and impetus. Here we begin to get a clearer idea of Gräbner's perspective, that 'when political causes are presented by means of show, the words used turn into an instrument of persuasion and entertainment, not of empowerment.' However, I still believe this hardline attitude towards performance limits the possibilities of poetry's oral capabilities, as well as political art. Would we argue that Jonathan Swift's or William Godwin's political satire is any less important because it is entertaining? Why should the oral possibilities of language be solely for political use when performance poetry also has such a brilliant potential to mock, entertain, confront, and foster a general excitement?

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Did you make me for the gap in the market

Did I make me for the gap in the market

[. . .]

Can I cream off awards from your melting-pot phase

Do you medal yourselves when you meddle with my type

-- Booking Khan Singh Kumar

In the publishing houses of the London literary establishment, the doors are still fairly rigid. Recently, Faber published Daljit Nagra's first collection of poetry *Look We Have Coming to Dover*, to huge acclaim⁴. The poetry world likes to make superstars, and Nagra definitely enjoyed the poetry world's equivalent of celebrity. He won the 2007 Forward Prize for the title poem and the collection has itself been met with adulation and enthusiasm, justly, as the poems are engaging, acute and often challenging. But I also wonder about whether such an admission to the high-culture literary establishment of Faber is another kind of colonialism? In October, a few months before *LWHCTD* came out I attended a poetry reading by Lavinia Greenlaw, David Harsent and Daljit Nagra at the Foundling Museum in Bloomsbury Square. It was raining and I was at the back of the hall, or rather what must be, technically, a morning room, dripping silently. Parents sat with children who squirmed in the Regency chairs. The walls were a beautiful light pistachio colour, and encrusted with Hogarth and Gainsborough. Nagra's reading was notable at first for the fact that, unlike Greenlaw and Harsent, whose readings were on the quiet side, he embraced the performance aspect of a poetry reading. He moved from what I guess to be his regular London accent into a sing-song imitation of new-immigrant Punjabi. It was disconcerting not because it was confrontational – nothing like the arrest of hearing Tusiata Avia launch from soft speech into the raw voice of the devil pau'umuku girl – but because it was comfortable. This accent has been mocked so many times, rendered knowingly comedic in a series like *The Kumars at No. 42*, that it has become dangerously anodyne in its familiarity. It felt difficult to know what Nagra was doing that was new, what side the joke was coming from, and who was laughing at whose expense. As Robert Potts pointed out in the recent *LRB* review of Nagra's collection – one of the few reviews that have done the collection the honour of a fair and considered critical evaluation – these are issues that Nagra himself is addressing⁵. But still the overwhelming response for me was that these poems were too easy, too nice; their wordplay was fun, the energy and creativity of the juxtapositions energising, but they didn't seem to be doing anything...difficult. This tricky area of cultural representation, the interrogation of post-colonial identity, felt like ground that prose writers like Hanif Kureishi and Salman Rushdie had already fruitfully explored, decades ago.

⁴ Daljit Nagra. *Look We Have Coming to Dover!* London: Faber & Faber, 2007. The *Guardian* review is here: books.guardian.co.uk/reviews/poetry/0,,2020115,00.html

⁵ Robert Potts. 'Cardigan Arrest: Poetry in Punglish', *London Review of Books*, 29:12 (2007)

But the poetry establishment perhaps is really the Establishment with that capital. Though Ezra's Pound oft-quoted insistence that poetry is 'news that stays news', in England it is sometimes news that feels slowed down, or entrenched in the prurient pull of headlines. Potts reminds us that Nagra is the second 'poet of colour' on Faber's list, after Derek Walcott. He also points us to the fact that a recent report from the Arts Council of England shows that BEMS or BMEs (or 'Black and ethnic Minority' poets – the latter acronym would seem to be the favourite) are underrepresented in publishing.⁶ Funding for magazines and organisations in the UK will increasingly be allocated according to 'representationality'. Earlier in 2007, Daljit Nagra would read at the same event as another excellent poet, and incidentally a friend and fellow-UCL student, Sandeep Parmar. Though, like Nagra, Parmar was born in London and is Punjabi, she grew up and was educated in California. Her influences, most obviously Sylvia Plath, Anne Carson and Carolyn Forché, are American rather than English, and she has expressed a frustration with English poetry's lack of intellectual engagement, its refusal to get a meaty grip on the metaphysical. This sense of the gap between American and British poetry is one John Burnside outlines in an essay written for *Poetry Review*: "What contemporary US poetry has, it seems to me, is a method – a showing forth of the process of reflection, a revelation of a provisional and ever-shifting internal dialectic – that much British poetry refuses to pursue, informed by a bad faith that says it is better to avoid such matters altogether, in order to avoid any risk of sentimentality, or pretension".⁷

The reading that included Parmar and Nagra was also organised by Poet in the City and was held at the National Portrait gallery – the event was titled 'Pukka Poetry'. A colonial hybrid, the word 'pukka' seems mostly used, thanks to Jamie Oliver probably, by white middle-class English folk keen to show their multicultural enthusiasm. There's nothing wrong with that, and the event itself was an earnest and enthusiastic celebration of difference, but it does beg the question as to who is defining whom, and how power comes into this. As Parmar muttered to me, 'Nobody I know, none of my family, ever says "pukka". The only time we use it is when somebody makes good on their immigration status. When they're safe, they get their greencard or residency permit, they're "pukka".'

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⁶ www.books.guardian.co.uk/news/articles/0,,1771834,00.html

⁷ John Burnside. 'Mind the Gaps: On Reading American Poetry', *Poetry Review*, 96 (2006), 56-67.

London is a city that nurtures poets. The Poetry Library in the Southbank centre is one recent discovery. The lifelike casts of male figures that are part of the sculptor Antony Gormley's current installation 'Blind Light', and that seem to contemplate suicide from every pitch and level of the surrounding buildings, all gaze toward the Haywood Gallery. The Poetry Library sits next door in the Royal Festival Hall, housing a fantastic range of poetry from all around the world and a staggering collection of English literary journals. They have listening booths, and some work spaces, and a softly spoken and knowledgeable staff. They also have photocopied printouts of different literary publishers who accept submissions of poetry collections, and of UK literary journals who look for poetry. Along with this are helpful tips about what to do and not to do when submitting. This to me seems immensely charitable, a fostering kindness that should not be taken for granted. It is incredibly nice also to have poetry gathered together in this way, when in the academic libraries I usually use collections are spread between novels and criticism, across countries and periods. It strikes you that poetry likes to sit adjacent to other poetry, and interesting conversations strike up – arresting juxtapositions jump into view when you're scanning the alphabetically arranged shelves. It is also a good place to find the New Zealand poets that I miss, and that baggage allowance has determined remain in New Zealand for now.

And despite the centre holding firm, there is an energy on the outskirts, a drive and commitment to a challengingly plural poetry that is thriving in London. James Byrne who is the boyfriend of Sandeep Parmar, is a poet who straddles the underground and the mainstream. He edits, publishes and distributes *The Wolf* magazine, which has been running for five years, biannually, solely through his own finances, time, sweat, and the hoarded monies from modest art grants and random philanthropists. Not just keeping it running, Byrne actively solicits poetry and essays from poets he admires throughout the world. He also fosters translations of poets not writing in English, frequently poets who have been forced to relocate for political reasons. He has recently published the Iraqi poet Saadi Youssef. In 2006 he published 'Trumpeldor Beach' by Fiona Sampson, which was shortlisted for the Forward Prize for Best Single Poem in 2006. This year he is taking *The Wolf* abroad for the second time, on a self-funded tour that includes Paris, Wales, Brighton and London. Though *Poetry Review* and *PN Review* still stand at the forefront of the poetry journals here, for my money *The Wolf* is the most exciting of the magazines. The others I am most likely to read are *Ambit*, *Magma*, and *Stand*, but the list is vast and I am only just starting to get a handle on it.

The totemic marker of *The Wolf* points to an earthiness and openness to spirituality that I've noticed particularly amongst young poets in London. While this has the potential to devolve into boring new-agey-ness, the best channel a line of strength that has fed poets like Ted

Hughes and Peter Redgrove. This seems to be the opposite pole to the anecdotalism and public humour of the more conservative, traditional schools. One exemplary figure who should be mentioned here is the shamanist poet and activist Niall McDevitt, well known in London for his walking tours of Blake sites in London and his regular ‘death day’ visits to Bunhill, the cemetery where Blake is buried. The first time I saw McDevitt perform was on the evening of the launch of *The Wolf’s* 13th issue. McDevitt read from the backlist of his poems, a significant number of which have been published by Byrne, and punctuated his performance with an Irish drum. His work is expansive, with a prickly mysticism, a cross between much-loved Blake and Ginsberg.

Energy and diversity also exists in both large and small-press publishing here, though many would argue that the large presses are too often guided by the prize system with its ability to cement that elusive thing – commercial poetic success. Critics also seems afraid of looking beneath the conferred Eric Gregory or Forward Prize laurels and, despite the alert attention of the LRB and Poetry Review, criticism lags behind.⁸ Amongst more established presses – and beyond the usual suspects of Faber & Faber, Chatto & Windus, Picador – Bloodaxe has an admirably diverse list; Michael Schmidt’s presence at Carcanet has guaranteed excellent collections as well as the indispensable *New Poetries* anthologies⁹; Salt Press, that grew out of Salt Journal, founded by John Kinsella, combines incredibly canny marketing and commercial success with a fantastic list and street cred among poets. Noted small presses include Donut Press, Tall Lighthouse, Flipped Eye Press, Wrecking Ball Press, Seren Books. And chapbooks are an extremely popular form here, some publishers, like Scotland-based Happenstance Press, specialising in them. These are usually beautifully designed and waistcoat-pocket-sized, priced at £3 or £4. They are also often far more adventurous in form and content than a typical collection – they have become a useful way for poets to get a first publication out and into bookstores, but are also increasingly being used as a self-contained form by more established poets.

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It is as difficult to offer any definitive approach to poetry in London as it would be to summarise or even know the city itself. London, and its poetry, is a vast and disordered metropolis made up of smaller villages and communities. The life- and London-loving Johnson offers a definition of the city’s endless diversity that doesn’t correspond to size or

⁸ ‘“Terrible Things”: The in-clubs of Poetry Criticism’. *The Wolf*. 15 Summer 2007. pp 20–24.

⁹ www.carcanet.co.uk/cgi-bin/indexer?product=1857548973

history or tradition, but to the changing juxtapositions of enforced community: 'It is not in the showy evolutions of buildings, but in the multiplicity of human habitations which are crowded together, that the wonderful immensity of London consists.' Poetry here tends towards and sometimes meets the promise of that immensity – a vastness that will evolve from infinite possibilities of proximity. Though readers and critics, like tourists, are often forced to navigate by the stately and showy, the most interesting afternoons of walking or reading for me have occurred after getting lost. Someone tells you a name or sketches a map or points you in a direction; after taking the wrong turn you happen onto a different street altogether, one that leads into an alley that opens into a neighbourhood colonised by new growth. Here there are the different localities of echo and association that make the experience of being a stranger so welcome:

'Now that my drum beats itself,
I know that my dead mentor's hand's at work.
This sound I lipsing and others think is mine
could only come from beyond this world –
this little from there makes abundance in my hands.
Inside the drum hides a spirit
that wants me to succeed beyond myself.
I foresee a thunderstorm breaking out in my head –
I wonder how I can contain the gift in lines
that I must chant to earn my griot's name.
I bow to the master who never forgot my service.

-Tanure Ojaide, from 'My Drum Beats Itself' printed in *Wolf*, 13, Autumn 2006.