

Judge's Report

Mario Petrucci on Poetry Competitions

At times, judging a competition can seem like rubbing your eyes first thing after a heavy night out. With each rub, you see a little more a little more clearly; then – all at once – you see clear. But, too often, it's only your own drawn face in the mirror that you went to all that trouble for. Differentiating the very adept from the moderately adept isn't always a simple case of looking – especially in competitions, where the judge knows his seeing will be scrutinised. It's as far from private reading as reading can get. You have to all but rub your eyes clear out whilst absorbing the beneficent, continued percolations of coffee. And you try to see behind and beyond that mirror.

So, what does this particular judge see? Among other things, that poetry is like an equation whose terms are impossible to define, and to which there is an infinitude of solutions. Perhaps that equation is something like this:

$$\text{Language} \quad + \quad \text{Suggestion} \quad = \quad \text{Poetry}$$

At its best, *Language* combines (more organically than mathematically) a number of technical qualities (such as rhythm, form and diction) with aspects of linguistic innovation that, together, generate a layered impact – this may be felt as excitement or intensity, but equally as a profound 'stilling' born of recognition, a remembering of something we realise we must have always known. This has little to do with entertainment. There's no problem if a poem entertains; the harm arises when poets become preoccupied with their 'entertainment value' or with delivering what's required to climb the echelons of literary celebrity. Meanwhile, *Suggestion* is much more than subject matter as mere content or fact – though, of course, it might subsume those. Poetry can't be simply a rhythmic or rhyming form of reportage; not for this reader, anyway. *Suggestion* incorporates such attributes as allusion, reference, imagery and tone – plus that Factor 'X' (or should I say Factor 'Z' because, by now, 'X' is pretty worn and predictable?).

If poetry were reincarnated somehow as science, it wouldn't be Newton's Laws of Motion but something closer to the Periodic Table: in some ways, the components might seem completely fixed, stuck with their ordering (though that very order wouldn't be without its surprises and unexpected discoveries), yet the point of the components would be to establish a universe bursting with necessary combinations as simple and lucid as sodium chloride or as complex and arcane as DNA. My analogy is flawed, of course; and, in any case, poetry isn't science and suffers if overly treated as such, in spite of the current fad for that very comparison (as illuminating, in some regards, as the comparison may sometimes be). In poetry, we're nudged towards the acknowledgement that nothing is possible (actually, how can the most ordinary language unambiguously achieve anything at all, including such simple meanings as "pass the sodium chloride"?), even as we sense that, through poetry, *everything* is possible. This thought is not altogether unrelated to Keats' notion of Negative Capability: we must carry the paradox, the impossibility, but carry it productively and somehow make something possible. Put a different way, poetic language is a constant falling-short – but miraculously so.

One of the great strengths of grassroots poetry remains its desire to address – frankly and unpretentiously – those crucial and intense moments that constitute the vertebrae of a lived-in life. A protestation of love; an abeyance of loss; a glint of clarity in consciousness; some shard of the essential self rendered in words. Here, subject matter can come into its own; and it seems to me that most competitions I've judged attract certain aspects of content strangely into their orbit. Some topics are no surprise at all: locations close to the competition's HQ; poetic recipes; failing relationships (why is it never *working* relationships?); death/ loss; Auschwitz; Iraq. 'Science' too – especially, recently, Darwin – or is that down to my biog? It's up to the entrants, I suppose, as writers, to decide whether such subjects are common because of their fundamental universality and human importance (and so can never be exhausted) or because of their faddishness – or both. But then there are prominent references within a set of entries which, as a judge, make you ask *why?* Maps, for instance. Or the terracotta army. I can only suppose that, once you step beyond obviously topical events and concerns, what these filaments of subject matter represent are either chunks of popular culture you've missed (a big TV piece on the terracotta army?) or else mysteriously attracted, emergent splinters of Zeitgeist. I wondered, for instance, whether the prevalence of snow and ice in one summer competition presented a peculiar knot of statistical interests or a surer indication than any scientific research could provide of our aggregating archetypal fear that (natural) ice may soon become extinct.

Finally, there are those subjects a particular judge will hope for. For me, these include convincing representations of the unintelligible or (less rarely perhaps) the not *quite* intelligible (thanks again, Keats); metaphysics (rather than just the physics); the peripheries of matter, emotion and occasion – all that wonderfully old, dully glowing stuff at the edges of those universes; and, perhaps most desired of all, the subject of language itself (cheers, Wittgenstein), even if on the surface of it the poem seems to be talking about something else (failing relationships, the terracotta army). I said earlier that poetry deals with “those crucial and intense moments that constitute the vertebrae of a lived-in life”. Let me correct that approximation: poetry can deal with *anything*, whether it be a wicker chair or Afghanistan, provided the language can rise to the occasion, in fact *becomes* the occasion. Whatever the apparent subject of the particular poem, poetry comes into being when even the most ordinary concern is not merely embroidered by, but is made extraordinary *through*, language. This needs to happen even where the poem is a straightforward event or emotion, simply rendered: that simplicity, its very plainness, cannot itself be banal.

A chief offender here is that type of ‘workshop poem’ consisting pretty much of straight (or near-straight) description professionally scoured of infelicities. Theodore Roethke warns that you can’t make a poem merely by avoiding cliché. Nor can you make important poetry simply through virtuosity. Contemporary poetry seems somewhat enmired in the habit (or nervous tic?) of guiding the reader through all its junctures and effects, step by step, labelling the experience carefully in its line-sized jars. It’s like trying to make love to a Teach-Yourself record. Fortunately, the best poems one finds by this anonymous route (of the competition) usually avoid most of these pitfalls most of the time. But, rather than provide a judge’s map for competition-winning poems to help you get to the spot marked ‘X’, let me leave you instead with poetry itself and that clichéd suggestion (which, for all its commonness, few seem to actually follow) to read widely. Here, ‘widely’ doesn’t just mean more books of the same ilk; it means poetry you might not respond to (or find!) immediately, poetry outside the usual range of nationality, taste, comfort and institutional admiration. Decide for yourselves what those wider ‘poetries’, taken as a whole as well as in their parts, might or mightn’t achieve in you. And please don’t use a given competition’s winners simply as an indicator of poetic vogue, or the judge’s literary preferences, in order to better hone your future entries, or as some kind of instructive resolution to a manufactured competitiveness among poets and poems; use what competitions generate as a means of exploring your own awarenesses of language and its undying ability (in its highest forms) to enact and embrace a saving consciousness. Or maybe forget everything I’ve said, and just write.

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