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THE LITERARY AGENDA

# POETRY

David Constantine

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# *Poetry*

DAVID CONSTANTINE



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**The Literary Agenda**

*Poetry*

## Series Introduction

The Crisis in, the Threat to, the Plight of the Humanities: enter these phrases in Google's search engine and there are 23 million results, in a great fifty-year-long cry of distress, outrage, fear, and melancholy. Grant, even, that every single anxiety and complaint in that catalogue of woe is fully justified—the lack of public support for the arts, the cutbacks in government funding for the humanities, the imminent transformation of a literary and verbal culture by visual/virtual/digital media, the decline of reading... And still, though it were all true, and just because it might be, there would remain the problem of the response itself. Too often there's recourse to the shrill moan of offended piety or a defeatist withdrawal into professionalism.

*The Literary Agenda* is a series of short polemical monographs that believes there is a great deal that needs to be said about the state of literary education inside schools and universities and more fundamentally about the importance of literature and of reading in the wider world. The category of 'the literary' has always been contentious. What is clear, however, is how increasingly it is dismissed or is unrecognized as a way of thinking or an arena for thought. It is sceptically challenged from within, for example, by the sometimes rival claims of cultural history, contextualized explanation, or media studies. It is shaken from without by even greater pressures: by economic exigency and the severe social attitudes that can follow from it; by technological change that may leave the traditional forms of serious human communication looking merely antiquated. For just these reasons this is the right time for renewal, to start reinvigorated work into the meaning and value of literary reading for the sake of the future.

It is certainly no time to retreat within institutional walls. For all the academic resistance to 'instrumentalism', to governmental measurements of public impact and practical utility, literature exists in

and across society. The 'literary' is not pure or specialized or self-confined; it is not restricted to the practitioner in writing or the academic in studying. It exists in the whole range of the world which is its subject matter: it consists in what non-writers actively receive from writings when, for example, they start to see the world more imaginatively as a result of reading novels and begin to think more carefully about human personality. It comes from literature making available much of human life that would not otherwise be existent to thought or recognizable as knowledge. If it is true that involvement in literature, so far from being a minority aesthetic, represents a significant contribution to the life of human thought, then that idea has to be argued at the public level without succumbing to a hollow rhetoric or bowing to a reductive world-view. Hence the effort of this series to take its place *between* literature and the world. The double-sided commitment to occupying that place and establishing its reality is the only 'agenda' here, without further prescription as to what should then be thought or done within it.

What is at stake is not simply some defensive or apologetic 'justification' in the abstract. The case as to why literature matters in the world not only has to be argued conceptually and strongly tested by thought, it should be given presence, performed, and brought to life in the way that literature itself does. That is why this series includes the writers themselves, the novelists and poets, in order to try to close the gap between the thinking of the artists and the thinking of those who read and study them. It is why it also involves other kinds of thinkers—the philosopher, the theologian, the psychologist, the neuroscientist—examining the role of literature within their own life's work and thought, and the effect of that work, in turn, upon literary thinking. This series admits and encourages personal voices in an unpredictable variety of individual approach and expression, speaking wherever possible across countries and disciplines and temperaments. It aims for something more than intellectual assent: rather the literary sense of what it is like to feel the thought, to embody an idea in a person, to bring it to being in a narrative or in aid of adventurous reflection. If the artists refer to their own works, if other thinkers return to ideas that have marked much of their working life, that is not their vanity nor a failure of originality. It is

what the series has asked of them: to speak out of what they know and care about, in whatever language can best serve their most serious thinking, and without the necessity of trying to cover every issue or meet every objection in each volume.

Philip Davis

## Acknowledgements

Unless otherwise indicated, the translations in this monograph are my own.

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# Introduction

## Note

The grounds for this monograph lie in my own experience of reading and trying to write poetry, which experience is inevitably partial. I was born in 1944, studied Modern Languages, taught German language and literature, and feel myself to be both very English and very European. I am a translator, chiefly out of German. Most of my living and travelling 'abroad' has been in Europe and to a large extent I have developed my social and political concerns and allegiances in dealings with the history and the present circumstances of Britain in Europe. This life has necessarily shaped my understanding of poetry, what I ask of it, and what kinds of poetry I like and don't like. I have always read beyond Europe, especially in my nine years as co-editor of *Modern Poetry in Translation*, a magazine whose constituency is the International Republic of Letters. Still my knowledge is partial. Poetry itself, however, is abundant and comprehensively various; and I can hope to say things about it, out of my own experience, that readers will answer out of theirs. 'Where there is much desire to learn, there of necessity will be much arguing, much writing, many opinions; for opinions in good men is but knowledge in the making': those words from Milton's *Areopagitica* hung framed on the wall in my English teacher's classroom. They come back to me now—particularly 'knowledge in the making'—as very apt for an attempt to engage people in thinking about and, more still, in reading poetry.

Remembering that teacher, two or three others also come to mind, at school and at university, also several fellow-pupils and fellow-students and students of my own who confirmed me in my love of poetry and helped me greatly in my understanding of it. Even with those of them who are dead, my conversation continues, I recall their words, their tones of voice, can imagine how they might answer if I put new

questions to them, I have books of poetry on my shelves that they gave me or recommended to me. So it continues, letter and spirit.

For this particular writing I am most indebted to Helen Constantine, who read it all and discussed it with me; to Sasha Dugdale, for 'much arguing' over its grounds; and to Phil Davis, who, as editor and friend, always encouraging, patiently helped me to shape it better. I thank Tom Chandler for his patient, meticulous, and tactful copy-editing, and Simon Constantine for helping me with the Index.

### **Poetry, society, and the state**

My premise is: literature matters. It matters for individuals and for the society they are members of. We live now in a time and a place where that premise is inadequately or only nominally acknowledged, or is flatly denied. Humane letters are sliding (being shoved) towards the margins; out there, marginal, peripheral, they cannot thrive. Therefore we have to answer back, and not in any personal interest but for the public good. I shall deal chiefly with poetry, the writing and the reading of it, but some of what I say might apply to other literary genres also. I don't think poetry a grace or a luxury that society might adorn itself with from time to time and drop altogether when it pleases. And I don't think that poetry is for the few, happy or not. It is for the many, belongs and can only thrive among them, speaks of and to their concerns. No society that I know of has done without poetry; some have striven officiously to exterminate it and failed; which must mean that its will to live is very great and that we need it.

**Poetry in society.** Poetry gets written, for the most part, in solitude or in the sort of concentration that temporarily isolates the poet from society; often it is read in such a solitude and isolating concentration also. But writer and reader in their kindred activities never cease being social creatures and the poetry they write or read is thoroughly informed by the society they live in. That is a fact and not in the least a matter of regret. I don't mean that poetry is in any essential way restricted by or to the particular society in which it is written or read; only that it is a thoroughly social activity and its social nature constitutes a large part of its value.

**Poetry and the state.** By 'the state' I mean the organization and governance of society which will be shaped by the dominant

politics and will at any one time in any one place be more or less likely to nurture or stunt the citizens so organized and governed. The relationship of poetry with the social order has never been easy and since Romanticism it has been decidedly and unavoidably fraught.

**Society and the state** may (but need not) in practice amount to the same thing. A people shaped and indoctrinated by a particular social order may not be able to distinguish itself from and act or think independently of the dominant politics and its structures by which they are organized and governed. A particular ideology—that of the market, for example—may be so successfully instilled into so large a proportion of the people that it will come to seem not just the normal but also the only way of being human. A society in that mindset will have very little time for poetry. Or, put the other way, in such a society the writing and reading of poetry will perforce be a contrary act, an act of opposition. Then by its very nature affirming a way of being human that the social order disregards, despises, or denies, poetry may seem to be a marginal and forlorn activity and consequently negligible; and some poets have wilfully furthered that marginalization, so courting their own extinction. A large part of my endeavour will consist in trying to persuade any who need persuading that poetry springs from and belongs in the heart of society and that it does good there.

**Common and strange.** Poetry is at one and the same time plumb in the midst of social living and at an angle to it, odd, slant, strange. It is common, commonplace, it thrives in and serves our common lives, but does so by virtue of its slant relationship to them. Poetry lives in that dynamic tension; fails and dies without it. The material of poetry is the stuff of common life, the lives real people live and might live in the here and now; its medium is words, which are the common property of the tribe, at everyone's disposal; and out of those common words it makes art, using words strangely, and so works estrangingly, which is to say illuminatingly and unsettlingly, on the common life to which we have become habituated.

Robert Graves (in his poem 'From the Embassy') calls the poet 'an ambassador of Otherwhere'. The currency of that land, its language, is 'Otherwhereish'. Made of our common words, poetry sounds, in the company of those words, like speech brought to us by translation

from abroad. Poetry signals its strangeness. Formerly it did so by the use of metre, rhyme, particular forms and arrangements of the lines, a diction very different from that of common speech. These were the markers of its otherness. They said to the reader or listener: this is poetry, a particular kind and degree of attention is being asked of you; the pleasure and the benefits are great, but to come into them you have to attend otherwise than you attend to any other kind of language. 'Metre,' says Coleridge in his *Biographia Literaria*, 'in itself is simply a stimulant of the attention, and therefore excites the question: Why is the attention to be thus stimulated?' And his answer to that question is: 'I write in metre, because I am about to use a language different from that of prose.'<sup>1</sup> Metre is a sign that what you are reading or listening to is poetry. So alerted, you read and listen in a way that is consonant with that language.

Many of the abovementioned markers have fallen away in much recent and contemporary English verse; the fear being, I suppose, that far from awakening attention to something vital and always new they will sound like reminders of something as out of place in modern society as quill pens and inkwells—at best quaint, like the fancy dress and bizarre courtesies in the House of Lords, at worst wholly irrelevant and negligible. Wordsworth himself—whom Coleridge in the *Biographia* has constantly in mind—quite programmatically sought to establish the *lingua communis*, 'the real language of men',<sup>2</sup> as the proper language of poetry. Coleridge's objections to that programme spring from his fear that by wholly adopting such a language poetry would lose its purchase on the reader's life. And if poets shifting exclusively into that register also let go the other markers of poetry's distinctiveness (a possibility which Wordsworth never entertained) they risk failure in the whole poetic undertaking, which is to command attention for an experience which, so poets believe, people and the society they live in cannot, and should not try to, do without. In practice, the poets who don't employ rhyme, metre, and stanzaic forms and who keep close to common speech, must devise other ways and means of quickening the faculty latent in everyone for the good that poetry brings. Some external markers of otherness are necessary or the poem will not command attention and will not be able to bear upon the quotidian reality in which poet and reader live their lives.

**Notes**

1. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* (London: J. M. Dent, 1949), 182. All further references to this—the Everyman edition—of *Biographia Literaria* are included as *BL* and page number in my text.
2. William Wordsworth, 'Preface to the Lyrical Ballads', in *The Poetical Works of Wordsworth*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), 734.



# The Writing and Reading of Poetry

## Realization

Writing and reading are kindred acts. In both a realization takes place. Both are 'knowledge in the making'. For most poets on most occasions writing is the slow process by which the idea of the poem is realized. By 'idea' I mean the whole complex of thoughts, images, feelings, memories, and imaginings that on each occasion go into the making of the particular poem.

It is true that sometimes a poet may simply write out a poem as though under dictation or as though seeing it and reading it from a script already completed in the head. Goethe relates that as a young man he would rise in the night under compulsion like a sleepwalker and write out a finished poem slant across—in too much haste to straighten—the first sheet of paper to hand. And for this writing he preferred pencil, because that was softer, to a quill pen which by its scratching might wake him out of his trance.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, in 1797, approaching fifty, he wrote out a couple of his most celebrated ballads as though from a finished text, but acknowledged that he had carried them in him, gestating, for fifteen or twenty years. As a young man or in middle age Goethe's making of those poems was, whether rapid or very slow, a process of realization. It had gone on for hours or years with no, or only intermittent, conscious participation in it by the writer.

Most poetic composition, proceeding 'externally' on paper or on a screen, is messier, more obviously a struggle towards adequate realization. And always, in my own experience and in my understanding of other writers' accounts, it is only in the process of composition that the poet begins to realize what exactly the demands of the poem will turn out to be. Only by that process do you begin to



realize (in the sense of 'understand') what it is you are trying to realize (in the sense of 'say', 'make palpable'). The idea of the poem is realized in the process of composition: it is made real, present, and palpable to the poet and so, later, to any willing reader. The means of this realization is words: not just in their manifold meanings but also in their order, their sounds, the shape they are given on the page, their organization into lines and larger units. It would be true to say that a poem achieves its realization in the entirety of its rhythm, whether engendered by and against a strict prosody or in some other discipline, the material living body of that rhythm being, of course, words.

The idea of the poem has to be realized, for the poet's own satisfaction, and also for its communication to other people. The poem, not there even to the poet until its realization in a particular rhythm, is still only latently there when it appears in print on a page. The reader is a vital participant in the making of the poem. It is the reader who animates the conventional black signs on a white page which we call the text. This act of enlivening realization is not the same as but is kindred to the poet's own. It is a steeping of oneself into the living text, a thorough and pleasurable engagement. The reader bodies the poem forth by bringing to it (ideally) the sum total of her or his experience to date. Focused by the grammar of the poem, by the real lexical senses of the words in that particular order, reading closely with precise attention, the reader necessarily and very beneficially converts the poem into his or her own life—and enlarges that life in so doing. Coleridge's term for this experience is 'pleasurable excitement' (*BL*, 154, 180), as the words in their rhythm come to life in the listener or reader.

Realization—making real and, as part of that, having things dawn on you as you write or read—is a fair word to describe a good deal of what goes on in the writing and reading of a poem.

### **A local habitation**

'And as imagination bodies forth / The forms of things unknown,  
the poet's pen / Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing /  
A local habitation and a name' (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 5.1,