

Can Poets Change the World?

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By addressing the issues of their time, poets have made significant contributions to campaigns for social justice. In 1812 Shelley exhorted people to protest the massacre of innocents at Peterloo. At the beginning of the twentieth century W.B. Yeats cursed the British occupation of Ireland. In post-war Australia Judith Wright reminded Australians of the need to respect indigenous people, and during the Cold War, Yevgeny Yevtushenko gave tributes to the scientist Sakharov's opposition to the authoritarianism of the Kremlin. To derive inspiration for themselves and for readers, such poets reflected on specific contexts and conflicts. To do otherwise would have been to separate poetry from politics and thereby make a false distinction; to behave, in Adrienne Rich's terms, as if poetry could stand outside history.¹

There is, however, another thesis – that poets cannot change the world and it is pointless to try. W.H. Auden's claim that poets don't make things happen was a fatalistic prescription for artists to kid themselves that they could be citizens yet not confront social issues, a surprising conclusion from a poet who exposed fascism and European democracies' rejection of refugees. A more optimistic interpretation of poets' responsibilities was given by Shelley when he said that poets could influence public aspirations because they were the unacknowledged legislators of the world: in any culture their visions could act like a moral imperative. In similar vein and in the tradition of Judith Wright's twin fires of poetry and activism, Adrienne Rich wrote in her poem 'Splittings' that love and action could not be separated.

These references to poets' responsibility to address social issues are not intended to suggest that there exists only a poetry of politics. Neither does it imply that a measure of a poet's craft depends on their ability to address political issues. On the contrary I suspect that the higher the standard of the poetry, the greater the impact for any audience on any topic. It would hardly be poetic if lines were reduced to rhyming jangle or predictable polemic for the sake of politics.

Even if we ignore the argument that poets as citizens have a responsibility to engage with a public, the conundrum 'can poets change the world?' still contains other unresolved questions. How is the notion 'world' to be conceived? What

changes do poets envisage? What aspects of the poet's art might hasten such changes? Answers to these questions address the tension between justice and injustice. They confront people's struggles for dignity and identity. They demand a view of sovereignty that embraces qualities of a common humanity.

Poets Interpreting 'The World': the Issue of Justice

The curses of oppression and powerlessness, of authoritarianism and poverty are high on the concerned poets' agenda. For centuries poets have also been opponents of the destructive violence of militarism and of unnecessary wars. In 'Anthem For Doomed Youth', Wilfred Owen recorded his dismay about the pointlessness of the First World War.

What passing-bells for those who die as cattle?
Only the monstrous anger of the guns.²

During the time of the Vietnam War, the usually apolitical Australian poet A.D. Hope depicted young conscripts made powerless by distant politicians' fascination with militarism. His terse lines could be repeated in relation to the carnage in the 'Coalition of the Willing's' current Iraq War.

Linger not, stranger, shed no tear;
Go back to those who sent us here.

We are the young they drafted out
To wars their folly brought about.

Go tell those old men, safe in bed,
We took their orders and are dead.³

In 2003, the pacifist poet Sam Hamill declined Laura Bush's invitation to the White House to celebrate 'Poetry and the American Voice'. Instead he suggested that a dozen poet friends contribute poems to speak out against the Iraq war. Within four days he received 1,500 poems and had established the web site 'Poets Against the War', which now presents over 20,000 contributions from people of many nations and age groups.⁴

When wars end, when a sort of peace arrives, poets have also given inspiring visions of justice. Five years before the indigenous people of Australia became citizens, the poet Oodgeroo Noonuccal wrote 'Aboriginal Charter of Rights', a record of the aspirations of a people unrecognized. Two verses from that poem show the explicitness of her pleading:

We need love not overlordship
Grip of hand not whip hand wardship
Opportunity that places
White and black on equal basis
Give us welcome not aversion
Give us choice not cold coercion
Status not discrimination,
Human rights not segregation.⁵

Although Oodgeroo speaks of the needs of her people, she was writing as an international citizen. Within her own rhyme and rhythm she reflected the vision

of the Universal Charter of Human Rights. From another continent and in other troubled times, the German playwright and poet Bertolt Brecht wrote of the peace of justice, which could replace fear and the oppression of Nazism. He also opposed Stalinist Communism and the de-humanizing features of bureaucracies. Even in translation, Brecht's satire gives memorable dimensions to a vision of justice that he wanted to be as widespread as human rights and as common as the 'Bread Of The People':

Justice is the bread of the people
Sometimes it is plentiful, sometimes it is scarce,
Sometimes the bread tastes good sometimes it tastes bad
When the bread is scarce there is hunger,
When it tastes bad there is discontent.

...

Since the bread of the people is so important,
Who friends shall bake it ?

Who bakes the other bread ?

Like the other bread
It should be baked by the people,
Plentiful, wholesome daily.⁶

Interpreting Change and Assessing Identity

Goals of peace and justice require a struggle to define and to redefine, to ponder and communicate a vision with universal appeal. In this struggle the poet's task is to present pictures that readers and listeners can respond to by saying, 'I can identify with that', or, 'My understanding has increased'. If poets breathe life into the premise that the personal is the political, they will inevitably confront those issues of identity that are at the hub of destructive conflicts.

Whether in families, on the streets or within bureaucracies and other work places, questions of identity arise: Who am I? Will I be taken seriously? Will people like me be afforded dignity and respect? If such questions are ignored or are answered in the negative, they feed not only individual antagonisms but also the latest polarization between cultures: the West and the rest, democracies against rogue states, Christianity versus Islam, Palestinians and Israelis. The multi-dimensional nature of poets' efforts to affect meaning rejects such polarization, often by showing that between the alleged opposites lie the colours of the rainbow. In her poem 'Reason and Unreason' Judith Wright warned of the dangers of viewing the world only through a simplistic logic:

Could I reject arithmetics,
their plain unanswered arguings
or find a cranny outside categories,
where two and two make soldiers, love or six?
My heart observed the silence round its songs,
the indifference that met its stories;
believed itself a changeling crazed
and bowed its head to every claim of reason;

but then stood up and realized
when work is over love begins its season.⁷

In rejecting the harsh simplicity of opposites, poets can respect the uniqueness of identity and show the healing qualities of people's awareness of what they have in common. Significant Palestinian and Israeli poets such as Mahmoud Darwish and Yehuda Amichai show the search for a secure and universally accepted home is a need shared by Arab and Jewish peoples. Without such a home their sense of identity remains blurred and self-respect is fragile. In his poem 'We Travel Like Other People' Darwish writes:

We travel like other people, but we return to nowhere. As if
traveling
Is the way of the clouds ...
We have a country of words. Speak Speak so we may know the end
of this travel.⁸

In his poem 'Of Three or Four in a Room' Yehuda Amichai refers to one person only who sees

... how people who went out of their houses whole
are given back in the evening like small change.
And in front of him, voices wandering without a knapsack,
hearts without provisions, prophecies without water,
large stones that have been returned
and stay sealed, like letters that have no
address and no one to receive them.⁹

A Sovereignty of Non-Violence

Even when cursing injustice, poets make a case for non-violent revolution, for a sovereignty that celebrates humanity and can be nurtured through poetry. Sovereignty need not be about border protection, waving flags, singing anthems and eroding civil liberties. It can be a big-picture idea, concerned with sharing, not possessiveness; expressing international, not national, interests. It is a vision whose poetic and musical dimensions would include the promotion of human rights as the means of security. Such a sovereignty would be so cosmopolitan and inclusive that those usually voiceless would be heard: women, indigenous peoples and the representatives of oppressed minorities would stand a chance of occupying centre stage.

It also has to be acknowledged that throughout history, some poets have promoted nationalism, have sung the praises of militarism and have prepared soldiers for war. Yet the historical record shows most poets and other artists – composers and dancers, painters and potters, sculptors and satirists – protesting injustice and celebrating humanity. Creativity in their poetry and in other art forms has required 'boundaries to be crossed or not recognized, (and has) encouraged risk to be taken in pursuit of shared sights and sounds'.¹⁰ In 'The Call of the Wild', Canadian poet Robert W. Service used his respect for an unexplored wilderness to encourage such risk-taking and avoidance of conformity:

They have cradled you in custom, they have primed you with their preaching
they have soaked you in convention through and through,
they have put you in a showcase, you're a credit to their teaching
but can't you hear the wild it's calling you.

Let us probe the silent places let us see what luck betides us,
Let us journey to a lonely land I know
there's a whisper in the night wind
there's a star a gleam to guide us
and the wild is calling, calling, let us go.¹¹

Such a challenge contains a feeling for a view of sovereignty where no-one needs to be defended, all participants could benefit and no-one would be harmed. The Mexican poet, diplomat and social critic Octavio Paz has written of a sovereignty of art forms such as poetry which provide the crucial other voice to be heard somewhere between religion and revolution. Paz's vision is of inclusive policies and relationships, of conversations between people from different walks of life who share aspirations for a life-enhancing existence. His vision is:

... other-worldly and this-worldly, of days long gone and of this very day, an antiquity without dates, heretical and devout, innocent and perverted, limpy and murky, aerial and subterranean, of the hermitage and of the corner bar, within hand's reach and always beyond.¹²

The sovereignty imagined by poets is pictured as a responsibility to promote bonds between peoples. The pacifist American poet William Stafford writes about a feeling for humanity to be realized through reflection in quiet times and places. In his poem 'Great People Distracted' Stafford depicts humility and a willingness to acknowledge doubt as key ways to be in touch with qualities of humanness:

If great people
get distracted by fame they forget
this essential kind of breathing
and they die inside their golden shell.
When caravans cross deserts,
it is the secret hidden under the jewels.

Sometimes commanders take us over, and they
try to impose their whole universe.
How to succeed by daily calculation:
I can't eat that bread.¹³

The bread that Stafford refers to is not Brecht's 'bread of justice'. On the contrary, it is a picture of a one-dimensional use of power that tolerates no critics and values only compliance. It is the stock-in-trade of conventional views of sovereignty, a way of thinking that suits the promoters of terror and a 'war on terror'. Such use of power has none of the qualities of a humanistic culture in which justice is synonymous with the attainment of human rights, where dialogue is promoted across ethnic and religious boundaries and where non-violence is as relevant to people's health as to environmental protection. In her portrayal of the life-enhancing qualities of non-violence, poet Denise Levertov

imagined what the world might have been like if uranium had never been mined and weapons of mass destruction never manufactured. She recalled that uranium deposits existed beneath the lands of indigenous peoples whose leaders knew that a dangerous power slept beneath them. Reverence for a common humanity demanded that such lethal material should be left to sleep. Here are lines from her poem 'What It Could Be':

But left to lie, its metaphysical weight
might in a million years have proved
benign, its true force being
to be a clue to righteousness—
showing forth
the human power
not to kill,
to choose not to kill
transcending the dull force of our weight and will;
that known profound presence, untouched
the sign
providing witness
occasion
ritual
of the continuing act of
non-violence, of passionate
reverence, active love.¹⁴

The Techniques of Poets

In their damning of injustice and their advocacy of non-violence, these poets conjure a multi-dimensional picture of what is and what ought to be. In the artistry of their imagination they make connections to beauty as well as to ugliness, they express love to overcome despair and to give hope for the future. The German poet Schiller's 'Ode To Peace' was a plea for brotherly love and provided the libretto for Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. Yeats reminisced that poets should have more substance in their love than in their enmities. Adrienne Rich emphasized capacities she saw as essential to women, including 'alertness to the pain of others, a fierce attention to relationships of all kinds and along with these a sense of self with boundaries less rigid and guarded, more flexible and embracing than most men's'.

To change others' views of the world also depends on promoting different pictures of reality, often through the use of satire. For example, poets' mocking of authority has ensured that the public are not so easily anaesthetized by false claims about the reasons for a war, the non-existence of human rights abuses or the good intentions of political leaders. In his *Hitler Chorales*, to be sung to the melodies of traditional Lutheran hymns, Brecht wrote:

He'll paint the filth and rot
Until it's spick and span
So thank we all our God
For sending us this man.¹⁵

The title poem of my recent anthology, *Tell Me The Truth About War*, is a reminder of the lies told about the existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and the hollow ring of American, British and Australian leaders' belief that they could easily introduce democracy and that loss of life would be of little consequence. Such leaders

... also needed to throw their weight around
use their weapons
to convince the world of their truth:
by killing people to protect them
they would be welcomed in the streets
by installing puppet governments
their armies could demonstrate democracy at work,
which was another good reason for having a war.¹⁶

If poets act alone, however, even the most powerful expressions of love and the most pithy satire to debunk authority would achieve little more than a warm inner glow for a few readers. Unless connected to a wider public, poetry would have no more direction than flotsam and jetsam on a windy beach. Yet poets have been catalysts in drives for justice and non-violence, for human dignity and for a view of sovereignty that emphasizes the interdependence of peoples. As responsible, artistic citizens, poets can help to realize the beauty of non-violence in all its forms, including symbols of sovereignty that are consistent with centuries-old traditions. These traditions remain inspiring because the authors made and are making connections to the social and political issues of their time.

Endnotes

¹ A. Rich, *On Lies, Secrets and Silence: Selected Prose 1966–1978*, W.W. Norton, New York, 1979.

² W. Owen, 'Anthem for Doomed Youth', in R. Ellman and R. O'Clair, eds, *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*, Norton Press, New York, 1973, p. 210.

³ D. Brooks, ed., *A.D. Hope, Selected Poetry and Prose*, Halstead Press, Rushcutters Bay, NSW, 2000, p. 129.

⁴ S. Hamill, http://www.poetsagainstthewar.org/paw_background.asp

⁵ O. Noonuccal, 'Aboriginal Charter of Rights', in K. Walker, *My People*, Jacaranda Press, Milton, 1970, p. 7.

⁶ B. Brecht, 'Bread of the People', in *Poems 1913–1956*, Methuen, London, 2000, p. 453.

⁷ J. Wright, 'Reason and Unreason', in *Collected Poems*, Angus and Robertson, Pymble, NSW, p. 201.

⁸ M. Darwish, 'We Travel Like Other People', in P. Forbes, ed., *Scanning the Century*, Bury St Edmunds, UK, Viking, p. 359.

⁹ Y. Amichai, 'Of Three or Four in a Room', in P. Forbes, ed., *Scanning the Century*, Bury St Edmunds, UK, Viking, p. 344.

- ¹⁰ S. Rees, *Tell Me the Truth About War*, Ginninderra Press, Canberra, 2004, p. 271.
- ¹¹ R. Service, 'The Call of the Wild', in *The Spell of the Yukon*, Dodd, Mead and Co., New York, 1916, pp. 38–9.
- ¹² O. Paz, *The Other Voice*, Carcanet Press, Manchester, 1992, p. 9.
- ¹³ W. Stafford, 'Great People Distracted', in *Even in Quiet Places*, Confluence Press, Lewiston, 1996, p. 25.
- ¹⁴ D. Levertov, 'What it Could Be', in *Poems 1972-1982*, New Direction, New York, 2001, pp. 248–9.
- ¹⁵ B. Brecht, 'Hitler Chorales', in T. Des Pres, *Praises & Dispraises, Poetry & Politics, the 20th Century*, Viking, New York, 1998, p. 108.
- ¹⁶ S. Rees, 'Tell Me the Truth About War', in *Tell Me the Truth About War*, p. 151.

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