

The Editors Respond:

Misreadings and othering aside – did P.O. actually *read* any of the poems, or did he just *know* they were wrong? – there are important issues raised by P.O.’s review. It may be worth saying something about the most important – regarding the level of understanding that the reader brings to the poem. Poetry’s role *has* changed over the last century or two. Most of our stories are now told in other formats – novels, films, TV. Most of our declarations of desire or loss are now sung for us as pop songs (though not all: there are still great love poems). Most of our declarations of loyalty and tales of patriotism have, thankfully, receded into a past of bad newspaper verse, and earnest recitals. But poetry has continued to do some things better, perhaps, than any other art-form: to find clear ways of saying what is otherwise only partially understood, to weigh those articulations emotionally, and, sometimes, to make them sing. It works a frontier: not just of our understandings, but of our responses to them: a complex edge of meanings and the weight of meanings. We think P.O. has completely missed the innovation, the distinctiveness and the radicalism of contemporary verse.

A poem looks in two directions: towards the poet’s experiences, and towards the cultural understandings those experiences occur in. One of poetry’s dilemmas is this: should it explore the frontiers of our understandings, knowing that only a small, sophisticated audience will stay with it, or should it tell people what they already know, because that is the best way to reach the largest audience? While in no way agreeing that the presence of the subtle and the articulate is evidence of a taste for hierarchy (quite the opposite: the subtle and the articulate *are* the means by which that old insistence on democracy and communion is kept alive –) the fact is that the difficulty of the material really is the elephant in the room, when it comes to poetry’s popularity. And that is beyond the scope of any anthology to resolve, no matter how much attention the editors pay to readability.

While we agree that there are serious issues raised by the understandings the reader brings to the poem, we do not agree that this is just a matter of whether one has had a university education or not. Poets are simply people with a fascination for the possibilities of the word: who have selected the word as the medium of their interface with the world. The extent to which they operate in the university world is hugely variable. We would probably agree with P.O. that one way of getting poetry wrong is to write in an overly academic way – in a manner that is too dry, too pleased with its cleverness, too quick to exemplify theory as if the theory were the point. But while that does describe some verse written in institutions, it is far from being a just description of a great deal more: there are many writing in universities who are fully aware of such pitfalls, and who write with courage and imaginative energy.

And we certainly reject the idea that education ‘sets a limit to the range of available tones and acceptable attitudes’. On the contrary, it increases the possibilities exponentially. If P.O. only sees ‘polite clapping and feigned looks of interest’ at readings given by page poets, that is because that is what he wants to see. There are good readings from page poets, and there are poor ones, and there are good presentations by performance poets, and there are poor ones. For some, a quick glance at a page of text may yield only a dull item of cultural paraphernalia. But if one picks it up and reads it, one may find ideas so difficult to manage that there is just about nowhere else in the society willing to entertain them. It is our contention that the contemporary poem, at its best, has developed into one of the most subversive, disconcerting and unpredictable things that humans have invented. One has to

pay attention to them, of course. Their riches are only available if one actually lets them speak. If one insists on seeing them through one's stereotypes, they won't reveal much at all.

MI, JB, JJ, DM