

Poetry Pamphlets as Public Private Space

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Tonight I'd like to talk briefly about the pamphlet as a special form of communication with a long and rich history as agent of expression. The many held here at the British Library represent various high-points in the pamphlet's continuing life. The pamphlet is of course not necessarily a poetry-form, though I believe poetry and pamphlet are natural partners. Surveying the astonishing range of opinions in the English Civil War collections here, for example, you would witness a nation awakening to its own emotional and philosophical complexity and doing so through what appears at first to be the most modest of physical forms. In the thought and fervour of the French Revolutionary tracts you can witness France daring to think aloud. Pamphlets are also about curiosity, comedy, and pleasure. In the parcelled pages of the 18th and 19th century chapbook, which I would class as part of the pamphlet family, there was news, satire, poetry and song. Travelling from market town to market town, the chapbook sellers made no apology for bundling information and delight into their backpacks.

Politics and religion: the pamphlet is in a way the party guest bent on talking about subjects traditionally thought best avoided. I think poetry is a little like that, too. Actually, though, the modern poetry pamphlet is more often an intimate object than an especially public one, or rather, like the best poetry itself, it thrives in the ambiguous territory between the individual life and social intervention. The pamphlet's special intimate quality is probably a function of its small format. Think of its name – the pamphlet – it *sounds* like a little thing – and when you think of some of its other family members, the booklets and the leaflets, that's true for them, too. This may be the

ravings of a librarian who has spent rather too long in the company of the printed word but in my mind the sound of the '-let' suffix also has an affection to it, as if the pamphlet is something you cannot fail to love. Of course, it would be fatal to patronise the pamphlet – a poppet it is not – and you should never underestimate the power of a pamphlet's compact universe. Leaflets and booklets – and so perhaps pamphlets – are forces of public information, too, so once again you have that curious and powerful ability of the pamphlet and of poetry to appeal to many by appearing to be directed to only one.

The formal similarities the pamphlet has with other important printed objects give it a force that can only come from being *as if* it is a personal object; *as if* but never quite. At the more relaxed end of its immense expressive spectrum it gives pleasure as if it were somewhere between a well-chosen birthday card and an inspired birthday *present*; in other cases it can be as sombre and as moving as an order of service but of course the pamphlet is enacting all of the commemoration itself; it can be a souvenir programme where the event is the language of its own poetry; and when the poetry pamphlet engages with the visual arts it becomes exhibition and exhibition catalogue in one, a seemingly private memento of the sensation you are holding within your hands.

The idea of these Awards was brought to us by Lady Marks and were inspired by the Callum MacDonald Memorial Awards in Scotland, established by Tessa Ransford and continuing with great success. Tessa recognised the importance of small press publishing to the cultural infrastructure in Scotland and we could only add our own understanding that the poetry pamphlet is vital to other cultures within and across the nations within the UK as well. The British Library, by virtue of the legislation – and in my own case, no small degree of enthusiastic collecting – has an exceptional collection of modern poetry pamphlets from these islands. And there is barely a major figure in British poetry who has not used the poetry pamphlet form. I will just mention some.

The only collection published by Edward Thomas in his lifetime was a pamphlet, *Six Poems*, published in 1916. It is a glimpse of the lyric poetry which only fully emerged posthumously, following Thomas's death in the First World War. W. H. Auden's first book, *Poems*, was printed by his friend Stephen Spender, on the sort of press normally reserved for medicine labels. Inspired amateurism can be part of pamphlet life. Dylan Thomas's *18 poems* was published in 1934 when Thomas was barely out of his teens, the very short book one of the first places a poet can begin to develop their talent as a public gift. Philip Larkin's *The North Ship* published by the Fortune Press, 1945 was in a way a false start – in later books Larkin rejected the Auden and Yeats influences he displays here – but Larkin's lonely melancholy is already present, and the opportunity to *make* false starts, to do 'research and development', is one of the great qualities pamphlets afford (I should say that for these Awards our definition of a pamphlet was liberal: anything, even a hardback, of 36 pages or less, was welcome, and so *The North Ship* duly would qualify).

Triumphantly, the sixties saw the emergence of artists who would stretch and mature the pamphlet form. Bob Cobbing, Ted Hughes and J. H. Prynne each used it to provide very different kinds of experimental work. All united, however, in their understanding that the pamphlet had qualities that longer, commercially-produced books, could not hope to match. The modern roll of honour can go on – Laura Riding, Philip Larkin, Linton Kwesi Johnson, Seamus Heaney, Paul Muldoon, Penelope Shuttle, Tom Leonard, Edwin Morgan, Denise Riley have all made important interventions with their poetry pamphlets. It is no surprise that when the current laureate, Carol Ann Duffy, published her first book, nearly forty years ago, it was... a pamphlet. It is not always about higher production qualities or about a short book being a stepping stone to what is called mainstream publication. A poetry sequence need not be *crowded out* by other poems if it stands alone in a pamphlet. In a way, the pamphlet is actually a variation of the liquid concentrate with which Spender's chemist's press was more familiar. Roy Fisher's 1961

collection *City* has homespun elements to its printing – again, friends were involved in its making - but its evocation of an English city is matchless and makes a new start in modern English poetry’s approach to urban life. It’s with Fisher I’ll conclude because although this quotation refers to the city perhaps we can take it this evening to refer to the fertile overlap of printing technologies and poetry of the highest order, captured in the pamphlet form. Fisher says with a wry nod to anthropological language: “The society of singing birds and the society of mechanical hammers inhabit the world together.”

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