

How poetry can change lives

Winning this year's TS Eliot award has made me rethink the purpose of my craft.



Poet John Burnside, winner of this year's TS Eliot award Photo: CHRIS WATT

By John Burnside

8:39PM GMT 17 Jan 2012; *The Telegraph*

It's unusual for me to wake late to the sound of London traffic on a Tuesday morning, with vivid and apparently real memories of having spent a large part of the previous evening discussing the importance of poetry with other poets, journalists, radio and even television interviewers. So winning this year's TS Eliot award was as thought-provoking as it was gratifying to the ego and restorative of the bank balance.

Normally, I wake in the Fife countryside, to the sound of my neighbour's sheep and the occasional buzzard and, on one level, that is what most of my poetry is "about": everyday experiences, the land, the lives of other animals, the light on a certain kind of winter's day, in a specific Scottish place, the seemingly unremarkable details of the here and now. Yet whenever the question "What does poetry do?" or "What is it for?" is raised, I have no hesitation in replying that poetry is central to our culture, and that it is capable of being the most powerful and transformative of the arts.

There are poems that have, literally, changed my life, because they have changed the way I looked at and listened to the world; there are poems that, on repeated reading, have gradually revealed to me areas of my own experience that, for reasons both personal and societal, I had lost sight of; and there are poems that I have read over and over again, knowing they contained some secret knowledge that I had yet to discover, but refused to give up on. So, at the most basic level, poetry is important because it makes us think, it opens us up to wonder and the sometimes astonishing

possibilities of language. It is, in its subtle yet powerful way, a discipline for re-engaging with a world we take too much for granted.

When the purveyors of bottom-line thinking call a mountain or a lake a “natural resource”, something to be merely exploited and used up, poetry reminds us that lakes and mountains are more than items on a spreadsheet; when a dictatorship imprisons and tortures its citizens, people write poems because the rhythms of poetry and the way it uses language to celebrate and to honour, rather than to denigrate and abuse, is akin to the rhythms and attentiveness of justice. Central to this attentiveness is the key ingredient of poetry, the metaphor, which Hannah Arendt defined as “the means by which the oneness of the world is poetically brought about”. It’s that power to bring things together, to unify experience as “the music of what happens”, that the best poetry achieves. Most of us feel that this is true of the great dead poets society of history, of Shakespeare and Milton, of Coleridge and Shelley and, of course, of TS Eliot, an American who re-envisioned and so renewed and enriched our idea of England. Yet I would argue that poetry is, or can be, as central to our experience now as it has ever been. To read “I Am Your Waiter Tonight And My Name Is Dmitri”, by the great contemporary American poet, Robert Hass, at the height of George W Bush’s xenophobic repudiation of “Old Europe”, was to be reminded not just of the injustice and futility of war, but also of the very richness and complexity of history that Bush sought to expunge.

The Wisconsin poet Nick Lantz’s collection, *We Don’t Know We Don’t Know*, brings together the natural history of Pliny the Elder and the wittering of Donald Rumsfeld to extraordinary effect, forcing us to ask questions about how our vision of the world and our political attitudes are manipulated by the powers that be. Apparently personal, apolitical lyrics by Lucie Brock-Broido, say, or Alan Shapiro make us think again about the dynamics of our day-to-day relationships with other creatures, from spouses and children to the wild things that we keep forgetting are out there, where the suburban garden or the porch light ends.

All of these poets insinuate their way into our lives with their music and wit, but they stay on to make us think again about how we live and what we are capable of – just as poets have always done. Poets today are as challenging, both of public life and private accommodations, as Andrew Marvell was when he gently confronted Oliver Cromwell’s foreign policy in his “An Horatian Ode Upon Cromwell’s Return from Ireland”; or, in more intimately reflective mode, TS Eliot was, when he drew together and made immediate essential philosophical ideas about the basic facts of life – time, place, endurance, the difficult disciplines of love – in the *Four Quartets*. As much as it has ever done, poetry renews and deepens the gift that most surely makes us human: the imagination. And that is as essential to public as it is to private life, because the more imaginative we are, the more compassionate we become – and that, surely, is the highest virtue of all.