

## THE TITLE OF POET

Are there, statistically, now more poets than poems? The Italian poet Eugenio Montale wrote about ‘the 30,000’ – his conjectural number of what he called ‘Sunday poets’, people who wrote poetry as a kind of vacation from life. (A vacation, not a vocation, as it were). In the English speaking world perhaps the figure is more like 3 million. The social media are packed with announcements for poetry competitions, readings, and meetings for poets.

I suppose there is a logical case for saying that anyone who writes a poem is a poet. But are the so-called poems of the 30,000 (I’ll use Montale’s figure as a stand-in for an unknown number) real poems? Almost all those I see – whether published on the Internet, or on paper in reviews and slim volumes – don’t *look, sound, or feel* like poems. They are simply, to use a phrase of Sorley MacLean’s, ‘chopped prose.’

This often applies to the ‘poems’ of ‘award winning poets’ who presumably take themselves much more seriously than Montale’s ‘Sunday poets’. And even to some ‘great poets’. MacLean in a correspondence with Hugh MacDiarmid in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century asked how it was that T S Eliot could be so widely acclaimed as ‘great’, without having written a single love poem.

Curiously, in this century some rather tortured love poems by Eliot to his wife Valerie have emerged, but they were never published when he was alive. This raises the issue of how much ‘public poetry’ prefers to posture with fashionable attitudes of the day, rather than to risk the exposure of personal pain. Eliot’s approximate contemporary Isaac Rosenberg (1890 – 1917) – contemporary at least until Rosenberg was killed in the Great War which Eliot (1888 – 1965) took good care to avoid – struggled with ‘private poetry’ – meaning private to the poet and his or her friends. Eventually private poetry does get published, but it is not written ‘for publication’.

I cannot see from Rosenberg’s published letters that he describes himself as a poet. He did call himself a painter. That was his profession, or trade. Montale’s trade was as a journalist. Hardy’s was as a novelist. For that matter, Eliot’s was as a publisher. It is rather new for ‘poet’ to be considered a profession. But it now is. To take the example of Northern Ireland, where I grew up, my rough contemporaries Heaney, Mahon, and Longley can all be considered professional poets. (Yes, they also earned money from teaching, but this was *as* designated poets.)

Whether as a profession or not, the title of poet is claimed by many of the 30,000. There are no official bodies to regulate it. Although anyone can profess to the title of poet, other titles such as ‘surgeon’, ‘medical doctor’, ‘psychologist’, ‘barrister’, ‘solicitor’ etc. are *protected*. Mind you, if ‘poet’ was a protected title it would, like these other titles, become part of a protection racket. If ‘poet’ had been a protected title when Rosenberg began to publish poems, I doubt whether the regulators would have let him through. He had not even been to university! (He went to the Slade School of Fine Art).

I imagine that if the title of poet were regulated now, qualification would require attendance at the courses in Poetry usually given in departments of Creative Writing. The 30,000 have often attended such courses. But as the German poet Wilhelm Lehmann wrote, ‘poetry *originates*’ (‘Die

Dichtung *entsteht*'). The poem comes first – and often out of nowhere. In a poetry class, the 'poets' produce 'poems' In real life, the poems produce the poet. I first began to wonder if I was a poet because I found myself writing poems. Actually it felt more as if the poems were writing me. I wondered if this was a kind of epilepsy following a head injury a year previously.

The words 'poem', 'poetry' and 'poet' are from the Greek 'poien' which is usually translated as 'to make', and yes, 'to create'. And one Middle English (and Scots) term for 'poet' was 'maker' (or 'makar'). Teachers of poetry and creative writing can go a long way on this one: 'Let's make a poem!'

But an exploration of Indo-European word origins (my bible in this is Carl Darling Buck's huge *A Dictionary of Selected Synonyms in the Principal Indo-European Languages*) suggests that 'poien' was a later, more literary word than earlier words which described poets and poetry in terms of prophetic vision. 'Vates' was the Latin word for poet before 'poeta'. Like its Old Irish cognate 'fáith', it means 'seer', and it is actually cognate with the Old English word 'wode', meaning 'mad'. Before the poet was a 'poet', he or she was a mad visionary. The modern Irish word for poet is still 'file' – again, a seer. And a visionary does not make or create the vision: it possesses him or her. The origin of the word 'poet' is in the ancient Greek project of taking control of nature, the Platonic turning of the world upside down in which instead of the world creating us, we create *it*. Whereas poems create *us* – or at least our thinking. Many world-changing ideas have sprung from poetry. The first great work in philosophy, well before Plato, was Parmenides' *Peri Physeos (On Nature)* which is a 161 line long poem.

Sorley MacLean's irritation with 'chopped prose' and with critically acclaimed poets who had never written love poems was probably fueled by his anger at the neglect of one of the greatest bodies of poems ever, the hundreds of poems in Scottish Gaelic by anonymous men and women, mainly from the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. These poems are often love poems (whether of ecstasy or terrible loss) and they describe the landscape in which they originate. As MacLean showed in his crucial essay on *Realism in Gaelic Poetry*, these poems are the exact opposite of what Yeats and others described as 'the Celtic Twilight' or Matthew Arnold as 'Celtic magic'. Instead of this mush, they are intensely accurate in observation, and they are intensely emotional. Whether these poems are anonymous or not, it is doubtful if most of those (at least as many women as men) who uttered them ever used the title of poet.

When someone adopts the title of poet, he or she is also likely to adopt the 'persona' of poet – to behave like his or her idea of a poet. Even Robert Graves was not immune to this. He saw his poems as miracles, and attributed them to the state of grace called inspiration which sprang from the woman he loved, his 'Muse'. In his old age Graves tended to act out the persona, play the stage role of poet. Yet when I first met him in 1961 when he was aged 66, he was more practical: 'If you want to remain a poet, don't tell lies, and don't join clubs' (by which he meant any association). For him, the persona implied a duty to honour the Muse. In contrast, for some the persona becomes a license for bad behaviour – as in Shelley, for example. Or in those many French 'poètes maudits'.

As William Blake wrote, ‘in a commercial society there are impostors abroad in every profession.’ The phrase ‘poetic licence’, for a sloppy disregard of accurate statement, reflects this. There is a *game* of ‘poetry’. Martin Seymour-Smith wrote about refusing to play the game and a friend advising him:

Get on the pitch among the knaves and fools  
And play the game according to their rules...

Sign up to a creative writing class! But, as Seymour-Smith went on:

Could you explain the absence of a ball?

Usually on the playing fields of poetry readings, competitions, classes, lectures by professors of poetry, and poetry festivals, while the ‘poets’ run around playing the game or warming up on the sidelines, and the audience of other ‘poets’ applauds, the ball of poetry is nowhere to be seen. (Perhaps outside the playing field there is a young man or woman kicking or bouncing the ball of poetry down the street.)

Poems proliferate according to technology. Before the invention of printing, they were passed around either in writing or orally. Ballads and folksongs seldom carry names. The names of their composers must have dropped away, being less important than the poem itself. The fate of poems in manuscript was uncertain. The poems of Catullus, written in the first century BC, survived in only one manuscript which was lost and then found in 1300 AD.

Printing books enabled the poets to be named – of necessity, since books require copyright. Still, some poets prefer not to be named. One of the most original poets of our time is ‘Biddy Jenkinson’ which is a pseudonym, and furthermore she writes only in Irish Gaelic and refuses to have her poems translated into English.

With the Internet, it also makes sense to name poets, otherwise the poems could not be indexed. And since poems by the same author are often interrelated, it adds to their meaning if they form a collection.

Where do I stand? My books of poems are published under my own name. But I think the first time I ever described myself in print as a poet was when I was running (unsuccessfully) for Oxford Professorship of Poetry in 2010. I cheerfully describe myself as a writer, a neuropsychologist, a farmer (when I was one), a publisher... But I am shy of stating ‘I am a poet’. Whether I am a poet or not depends on my poems. I describe ‘Biddy Jenkinson’ as a poet because her poems are poems, and she is the one who wrote them down. But given the existence of the 30,000 I single her out by saying she is ‘a real poet’ – ultimately because her *poems* are real.

I suppose my position is that I don’t claim the title of poet, but I am happy for those who respond to my poems to grant it to me – one by one.

Seán Haldane