

# The *Dissenter's* Discourse\*

1.

**T**HE TIMES when it's hardest to write are the times when it is most important not to stop. Utterance seems to count in the human species, not so much so that one will be heard, one's voice raised and considered, though that matters too; but because, since we are languaging animals, to utter considered thoughts is to live most truly; it is an act that asserts agency and life; it is an act that also carries humanity on, and not just one's own. A writer might want or need to write for her own reasons, and they will likely be good reasons. But perhaps more importantly, societies need literature, poetry in particular, to be made so that witness is borne, so that justice is done, so that questions are asked that would not otherwise be asked, about the nature of any human life, about the nature of the world beyond the human, about the way of things now and whether that way runs true. It is hardest to write freely in pursuit of those questions when norms prevail too hegemonically, when the military rule, for instance, or the church or absolutists of any stripe.

Judith Beveridge, the great Australian poet, asked me, when I first met her, would you write poetry if you knew no one would read it, and, without hesitation, I answered yes. One writes poetry, if one can, because one can, and out of a sense that if it is not written human wisdom grows dimmer, human freedom grows less free, language deteriorates, the lesser angels of our nature, and newspeak of various kinds will prevail.

My son Henry is studying *Nineteen Eighty-Four* for his HSC; I'm rereading it, alongside him. It is a book that never dates. We humans always live on the edge of, or in the midst of, groupthink and purism of one kind or another. Political and spiritual democracy are never really out of the woods; like peace, they must always be spoken for and defended. Among other things, Orwell's novel was a cry for true utterance: for the kind of speaking forth a diarist and a poet perform, as the only sure antidote to totalitarianism—a thing practised, Orwell makes very clear, in and by means of bad language. Human speech of a kind no party owns, of a kind that articulates the freedom of each human life and of the human spirit at large, and of each heart to love after its own fashion—this Orwell, had seen, is what tyranny always has in its gun; and it is all that can ever defeat the radical conformism of phrase and deed, of which tyrannies are fashioned.

His hero/anti-hero Winston, as flawed as any of us, but capable of flarings of profound courage, reflects early on:

*He was a lonely ghost uttering a truth that nobody would ever hear. But so long as he uttered it, in some obscure way the continuity was not broken. It was **not by making yourself heard but by staying sane that you carried on the human heritage.***

Freedom of thought, autonomy of choice, a community of difference, tolerance and plurality, the divinity of each human life unmediated by thought police: this is perhaps the "human heritage," "the continuity," the profound sanity (of each of us and all of us) that literature exists, whether or not it is read, to conserve. Poetry in particular. That deeper speaking, that enactment of freedom.

2.

POLITICS IS the art of the possible; *poetry* is the art of the art of the impossible—saying what is felt but barely known and rarely named (in a way that does justice to the extremity of the feeling). Poetry, this impossible art, sees what escapes all but the sidelong glance; it stills time; it renders coherent the inchoate experience of existence; it catches the inner life of the actual world; it transfigures the personal into the human; it marries the physical and the metaphysical. Poetry is a

different way, a lyric mode, a more-than-merely literal mode, of seeing and saying; it is another way of breathing; it is the art of walking underwater.

Poetry is a fire that burns inside the stream; it is the way you walk underwater and still breathe. And somehow speak.

A poem hopes to render each of us—this woman, this man, this bird, this child—as any one of us at all. In poetry there are no Others. There are only selves. Two legs (or one or none) are just as good as four; in poetry, none of us are more equal than any others.

Each of us is a manifestation of being, as the phenomenologists put it; any poem capable of escaping its privacy will need to catch *that*—the being—not just the creed or cause or party affiliation—of the thing, the moment, the place, the woman, the child, the man, the bird, the world. In a good poem, it is her own Being a reader seems to read revealed; it is not so much the poet's secrets that are disclosed (they are transfigured to myth by metaphor), but the human secrets of the reader.

Whoever is configured in a poem—the *I* of the poet or whoever—is offered as a metaphor of human beingness, some aspect, some moment, of the human condition. She or he does not stand merely for herself or his tribe. And if they do, the poem falls short of poetry's purpose.

3.

THROUGH HISTORY, poetry has often been exhorted to profess political causes—both coercive and subversive. Regimes enlist poetry; the rebels enlist it, too. Poetry is often asked to assert or conserve various norms, some old, some new, some noble, some less so.

Now, poetry—this art, this finest human accomplishment—has a part to play in social change. But it does its work, it makes deep change happen and hold, at the molecular, not the social, level. On the whole, good politics—let alone bad—is going to make pretty bad poetry, because politics is not poetry's business. Poetry's business is what politics (like theory) oversimplifies or overlooks or overwhelms or flat out denies; poetry's business is life (its sacred diversity affirmed, conserved); its work is humanitarian; its work is divination, conscientious objection to cant and platitude; its work is disruption, revelation. And the fashioning of enduring coherence, where there is, otherwise, chaos and shrillness.

Whatever love is, poetry does that.

4.

IF IT *Others*, if it enmifies, if it cancels, if it peddles stereotypes and newspeak, if it theorizes, a poem won't be doing poetry's work—that softer, more enduring, more powerful labour. Poetry is what water does to rock. Poetry's politics is its refusal of political stratagem and idiom. The power of poetry—the danger it poses to piety and political control—is its insistence on, and its practice of human beingness—the mess of any given everyday life in all of its maddening and beautiful particularity and carnality and divinity and contradiction. Poetry forgives us for being human, at which it catches us in the act.

Poetry performs its politics, then, by refusing politics. By refuting in its language and its approach to what is real the deadening and deathly discourses and dictates of ideology. Poetry dissents. Its dissent is the heart's, the body's, the mind's. Poetry is the dissenter's discourse. It practises and models a way of seeing and being and saying that each human being needs to find if they are to come all the way true—and to stand clear of the clutter of what one is told one is or is not or should be or should not be.

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Refusing orthodoxies, practising plurality, poetry closes distances down.

There is a way of dying to one's self, Rumi writes, and coming back plural; and I think poetry is that way.

5.

SURE, POETRY is partisan: it wants justice; it wants freedom; it wants truth. It will speak for that which is disparaged or denied or neglected in dominant discourses (commerce, theory, science, politics, scholarship); it will tend to find inadequate the renderings made of the meaning of a human life in the idioms of daily discourse, online and in the market and in the papers and on the floors of parliaments; it will speak for the lives of those who cannot speak because they are powerless or because they are trees and rocks and fish and microbes and birds. And it will speak for those whose lives are not seen or valued. It wants equality; it despises pomp and purism. It cries and celebrates and holds us all to some sort of ethical standard, and, to a large extent, it forgives that which is profoundly human in all of us. It reports what it feels like and what it means to live a short while under all sorts of fire, heavy and light, friendly and enemy, on this good earth, amid the terror and beauty of the land, in the wildness of one's mind and in the wilderness of one's body, and in the company of one's loves and downstream of all one has done and left undone and failed and accomplished.

But poetry does not do its best work in the idioms of power and theory; it does not do its best work from the stage or from the soap box. It famously makes nothing happen, as Auden put it. Which is to say, it fashions the kind of silence—the absence of cant and cliché and dogma and cause—that deep and thoughtful, regenerative living requires; it makes a space inside all the noise, in which an intimate wisdom may arise; from how it elevates a consideration of human life, as Barry Lopez once put it, poetry, like landscape, enables the most radical transformation human lives, and sometimes societies, are capable of.

The revolutions it sparks take place, though, in the heart. The bombs that poems throw are, on the whole, soft. They never stop going off. And in their going off they do not maim so much as heal. They change lives, but they do not change governments. Except indirectly.

6.

POETRY REMINDS us each of us lives a life no one else can claim or name or defame, and it gives us back to that life, our own, that irreducible instance of being that only we can lead—all theory and politics notwithstanding—and to the wildness and sufficiency and grace we come in with. Poetry argues and demonstrates what a human life, all life, is worth, and what it costs; it has tended through history to practise language as well as language can be practised. (Because that is the kind of language you need for the deep divination of the real, the deeper speaker of Selves that it accomplishes.) It has freed language from the way everyday as well as arcane discourses reduce it—and reduce us.

Orwell and others have warned us what happens when literature gets co-opted by, gets colonised by, ideologies, no matter how worthy the causes they think they serve. It is the voice of all that cannot be cowed, all that refuses to be stereotyped, catalogued, theorised, labelled, controlled, commodified, enmified, reduced, shamed or invalidated. (By any kind of regime.) That kind of thing, in fact, the diminishing of any given human life, is what poetry most resists. The insistence on the truth of each human life, deeper than, and beyond the grasp, of all categorisation: this is a large part what we need poetry for. That is its politics.

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7.

THERE IS, of course, a chance that what I believe poetry to be, and what I believe it to be for, is conditioned by my privilege and gender and age and education. No doubt. There is a chance I speak here of the poetry a human being like me has found, across his life, and across his reading in many languages and times, to have helped—to have helped him and to have helped millions make sense of trauma and delight and unendurable terror and horror and loss. There is a chance others will see it differently, and that is altogether good. Let them argue down several thousand years of poetic practice, as well as my own quiet convictions.

There is also a chance the poetry I'm advocating is the kind I try to write. Granted there are other kinds. But there has always been the kind for which I speak a word here, and I hope that there always will be. If not, we are lost. Each of us. All of us. And the world we have almost squandered.

\*A version of this essay appears as the afterword in my fourth collection of poems, *Walking Underwater* (Pitt Street Poetry, 2021)

—Mark Tredinnick

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