

Mehr Licht!

Why publish poetry in unexpected places?

Daniel Xerri



Introduction

On a recent trip to the Shetland Islands, I happened to see Heather Reid's poem 'Three Ways to Imitate a Great Spotted Woodpecker' published above the urinals of a public toilet in Lerwick.

The short poem was set in an aluminium frame and formed part of a project called 'Bards in the Bog'. Launched in 2009, the project invited poets to submit pieces that they would not mind being displayed in public toilets around Shetland. In the project's first year, a selection of the best poems was also published as a book by Shetland Library. Part of the initiative was meant to raise awareness of the poor sanitation conditions afflicting more than two billion people around the world. In fact, the book was launched on World Toilet Day and its proceeds were donated to WaterAid, which campaigns for worldwide sanitation. Besides this charitable dimension, the project has probably also managed to orchestrate an encounter with poetry for those people who might have long been detached from it. This was very much the intention of a similar project in Australia called 'Toilet Doors Poetry', which in 2006 published six poems and accompanying illustrations in the public toilets of airport terminals and cinemas across the country. Publishing poems in such unexpected places as toilets provides people with better access to the valuable experience of reading poetry, which is sometimes only encountered at school in unappealing circumstances that lead to long-lasting negative attitudes.

Toilets, Garbage Trucks and Elsewhere

Poetry is no stranger to public toilets, as attested by the latrinalia that many of us have come across or produced when using a public convenience. Coined by the folklorist Alan Dundes (1966), the term 'latrinalia' refers to the graffiti that is often found on the walls and doors of toilet cubicles. He preferred this term to 'shithouse poetry' because not all latrinalia adopts a poetic form. Despite the fact that some people create their best lines of poetry while sitting on the loo, poetry's connection with toilets has been more sombre for certain poets. For example, in the case of Ai Weiwei's father, the poet Ai Qing, poetry was the reason he was condemned to clean public toilets in a rural part of China. Nonetheless, Weiwei (2015) feels he learnt a lot about the value of poetry through his father's ordeal:

To experience poetry is to see over and above reality. It is to discover that which is beyond the physical, to experience another life and another level of feeling. It is to wonder about the world, to understand the nature of people and, most importantly, to be shared with another, old or young, known or unknown.

Weiwei's sentiments about what people get out of poetry have their parallels in the writings of many other artists, poets and educators. It is considered such a pivotal experience that there are efforts to maximize people's engagement with the genre both in education and the broader social arena.

Perhaps because of the idea that as many people as possible should have the opportunity to benefit from the

value of poetry, over the past few years it has become far more common for poetry to be published in toilets and other unexpected places. For example, poetry has featured on the side of garbage trucks in Sydney, on wet sidewalks whenever it rains in Boston, up a flight of stairs in Sarajevo (Xerri 2014), and on subway trains in New York, London and other cities. By writing poetry for commuters, the former Glasgow subway poet-in-residence John Rice (as cited in Xerri 2012: 110) claimed that he 'was trying to get them to see that if they read poetry it would be much more personal, to give them some sense of enjoyment, some sense of reflection'. Publishing poetry on trains and similar places takes up precious advertising space, but perhaps such initiatives are motivated by the drive to give people an opportunity to engage with something worthwhile.

More Light

Having spent the evening prior to his passing conversing about optical phenomena, Goethe's dying words are celebrated as having been a plea for more light. Rather than being an entreaty for social enlightenment, his 'mehr licht!' could well have been a request for a less sepulchral atmosphere in his bedroom. However, the words can be appropriated as a slogan to describe the various attempts to provide the general public with easier access to poetry. One could argue that featuring poetry in unusual places is important because poetry has the potential to illuminate our lives or, as Emily Dickinson is reported as saying in *The Belle of Amherst*, 'To find that phosphorescence, that light within — is the genius behind poetry' (Luce 2015: 13). The move to publish poetry in all kinds of public places is driven by the noble aim of encouraging more people to engage with the genre, to read words that might bring light into their lives. The poets who wrote the words might never have imagined their work adorning toilet doors, garbage trucks, and subway trains. Perhaps some of them might not approve of their poems featuring anywhere but in handsome volumes on the bookshelves of elegant libraries. Libraries, after all, are the bastions of civilization. According to Battles (2003: 6), 'In the stacks of the library... I have the distinct impression that its millions of volumes may indeed contain the entirety of human experience: that they make not a model *for* but a model *of* the universe.' However, it would be amiss to expect poetry to feature only in libraries given that these can also act as tombstones if the words are not released

and allowed to engage with those readers who might be unwilling to set foot in a library. Irrespective of what some poets might wish for their words, what matters in the end is that those words have the opportunity of touching the lives of the people who read them, even if it is while relieving themselves in a public convenience. The presence of poetry where one least expects it helps to demystify a genre that many people have come to dislike thanks to their education. The act of placing poetry on a pedestal in the classroom serves to alienate young readers from texts that could potentially provide them with so much joy and intellectual stimulation (Xerri 2013, 2016). Despite the fact that for some young people school is their only means of encountering poetry, leaving poetry on the printed page and making them read it solely for examination purposes risks sounding its death knell (Dymoke 2009). In certain classrooms, young people come to believe that poetry is only something one finds at school, and once compulsory schooling is over they need not encounter it ever again. By taking poetry to people rather than expecting them to come to it, it is made to seem more accessible and democratic than it is perceived to be in some poetry classrooms.

Not everyone might agree with the idea that poetry's exalted nature should be 'tarnished' through close proximity to excrement, rubbish and public transportation. Owing to the status that poetry has traditionally occupied in high culture, the beliefs of certain poets, critics and educators might hinder the widespread promotion of poetry. They might still believe that poetry is an elitist genre to which only the most cultivated minds should have access. However, it is important to note that, if the genre continues to be held captive by those who want to keep it firmly planted on a pedestal, poetry will continue to be perceived as distant by those readers who might benefit from the process of engaging with it.

Conclusion

Given that education might sometimes estrange people from poetry by restricting their sense of engagement with it and their conceptualization of what it is, it might be important to reverse the effects of poor poetry lessons by placing poems in locations where they are likely to be read. Featuring poetry where it is not typically found is an important means of providing people with access to



the valuable experience afforded by words that might speak to them in uniquely personal ways and enable them to derive pleasure and feel connected with others.

According to Beck (2010: 208), the 'combination of finding unexpected messages in unexpected places creates a powerful stimulus that resonates long after they have been experienced'. If poetry is a source of joy and illumination, then it is perhaps necessary to give as many people as possible the chance of receiving more light through the discovery of poems in unexpected places.

References

- Battles, M. (2003) *Library: An Unquiet History*. London: William Heinemann.
- Beck, E.T. (2010) Embracing poetry in unexpected places. *Journal of Poetry Therapy*. 23 (4), 201-214.
- Dundes, A. (1966) Here I sit: A study of American latrinalia. *Kroeber Anthropological Society Papers*. 34, 91-105. Available from <http://digitalassets.lib.berkeley.edu/anthpubs/ucb/text/kas034-010.pdf> [Accessed 21 May 2017].
- Dymoke, S. (2009) *Teaching English Texts 11-18*. London: Continuum.
- Luce, W. (2015) *The Belle of Amherst*. New York: Dramatists Play Service.
- Weiwei, A. (2015, July 1) On poetry: The Cultural Revolution—and the necessity of culture. The Poetry Foundation. Available from <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/articles/detail/70234> [Accessed 21 May 2017].
- Xerri, D. (2012) Poetry on the subway: An interview with children's poet John Rice. *New Review of Children's Literature and Librarianship*. 18 (2), 105-115.
- Xerri, D. (2013) Colluding in the 'torture' of poetry: Shared beliefs and assessment. *English in Education*. 47 (2), 134-146.
- Xerri, D. (2014) The poetry of cities: On discovering poems in Istanbul, Sarajevo, and Bratislava. *Journeys: The International Journal of Travel and Travel Writing*. 15 (1), 90-108.
- Xerri, D. (2016) 'Poems look like a mathematical equation': Assessment in poetry education. *International Journal of English Studies*. 16 (1), 1-7.

Daniel Xerri teaches at the Centre for English Language Proficiency, University of Malta. He holds a PhD in Education from the University of York. His research focuses on creativity in language learning and teaching. Further information about his talks and publications can be found at: www.danielxerri.com