

The Death of Poetry

The consensus seems to be that poetry is dead. It was great in its time, but its time is past. Who reads poetry now, for God's sake? No music, no video clips, no pin-up poets - absolutely nothing sexy about poetry whatsoever.

So what killed poetry? Undoubtedly one of the culprits was pop, although this was just one aspect of an entertainment industry whose influence went so deep that it managed to ensure that no one any longer would have an ear for poetry.

In its day poetry was kept alive by a certain sensibility that many people in the middle and upper classes had. These were people who could travel out into the countryside and just sit and listen to the birds singing and the wind gently whistling through the leaves - or marvel at the ever-changing shapes of the passing clouds. They were people who could turn their backs on the chatter of urban life for a time and contemplate something that seemed grander or more profound or more uplifting - something poetic.

The people who grew up to be like this were people who were familiar with silence. Houses a hundred years ago must have been relatively quiet places - places conducive to meditating upon the shivering little bird on the bare branch of the tree outside in the bleak midwinter evening. After all, what else was there to do? If you wanted music you would have to play an instrument. If you wanted chatter you would have to invite people over and start chatting.

Added to this was a culture centred on books. Long before it was possible to cheaply reproduce and widely distribute either images or sounds, the printing press had made it possible for a culture to spring up which revolved around the written word.

Things have changed. People grow up with a constant supply of mass-produced music and chat and TV images and noise - a wall of sound keeping almost everything else out. The sheer extent of the exposure creates, in many people, a psychological need to keep the music and the chatter and the noise going. The place seems empty and time seems to pass in a deathly way without it. When no one any longer was able to take pleasure in silence there ceased to be an audience for poetry and the artform we had known for some 3,000 years died.

Since it is dead why don't we just leave it to rot in its grave? But some of us believe that we should try to keep alive the memory, at least, of what once was. We can still read the old poems there on the yellowing paper even though the audience for whom they were intended has largely disappeared.

As an effort in this direction we offer a little introductory tour of the graveyard of English poetry.