

THE SELF IN POETRY

the internal/external roots of poetic imagination



Maria Jastrzębska



Jane Routh



Jacqueline Saphra



Margaret Wilmot

Maria Jastrzębska:

Recently I taught a workshop for Women's Aid. It was both uplifting – the sheer courage of the women – and depressing. Years ago I'd worked in a refuge. There are more resources now and feminism is hopefully more diverse and inclusive too. But how many women still face violence and abuse? "I don't know which year it really is or who I am" ends a poem *'You can smell the river'*, in my latest collection. Writing this piece I realise how blurred my notion is of where the last century ends and this one begins – gains made and all the steps backwards.

I think of Gertrude Stein hammering language into a hall of mirrors, Suniti Namjoshi in *Conversations with Cow* shifting identities – both last century, then Ana Becciu distrusting patriarchal language with her refracted 'I'. Certainly, language we use now is often more textured, against a backdrop of the great machinery of social/media, advertising, non-stop self-documentation.

For myself having grown up bicultural and then come out as lesbian/queer I've always questioned identity, perspective. Add to that philosophers questioning essentialism with a performative notion of who we are. I've grown more playful expressing self/selves in poems. Crow, a multi-lingual trickster, crone, fool and story-teller also features in my new book, disrupting standard English with lines of hybrid Ponglish. My previous collection (*The True Story of Cowboy Hat and Ingénue*) was a book-length prose poem where storyline and genre itself were deconstructed to tell multiple stories. I'm also focussing on internalised oppressions, those twists of self-doubt in the gut. Meanwhile Poland has taken such repressive steps against the LGBTQ+ community that with Polish writers we're talking about the need for protest poetry again. Elsewhere war and destruction abound so that the future looks scarier than ever. Luckily, poetry is a place to explore in, to connect with 'our place in the family/of green & breathing things' as Victoria Adukwei Bulley says in *Air* (*Quiet*, Faber & Faber, 2022) – sometimes to thrive.

Maria Jastrzębska latest collection: *Small Odysseys*, Waterloo Press, 2022.

Jane Routh:

I did, as a teenager, have one poem printed in my school magazine. Or rather, half a poem (its censored half being 'not very nice' and containing the word 'acrid' with which I had been especially pleased). There's been a wonderful sea change in writing support for young people since then, 'can't' and 'don't' replaced by workshops, courses, dedicated prizes and publications, mentoring. Young writers are producing poems never less than technically competent and also – infused with the energies of youth – often adventurous and innovative too.

Yet the ‘who am I?’ preoccupations and self-absorption of young people remain the same, perhaps even amplified by social media. Changed demographics in our younger generations now add another dimension to self-reflection: we hear so many more voices questioning identity. In marketing’s perpetual quest for ‘new’ and ‘emerging’ writers, self-identity poetry (or ‘selfie-stick poetry’ as one critic recently called it) has gained such traction it feels as if it has become normative.

(Naturally, I offer this thought with all the caveats that every generalisation needs. In Carcanet’s 2021 *New Poetries VIII*, for example, there are poems which are engaged socially and historically – yet its greatest number of contributors are indeed trying to make sense of what one of them terms ‘hidden dimensions of identity’).

Too often as a reader beguiled by blurbs, I’m disappointed in such new books these days. And that affects me as a writer: I’m discovering fewer touchstones, fewer inspirations – but most damagingly, have felt poetry is flowing away from me.

Curiously, having made myself write this down, I immediately feel less ‘adrift’. I now want to read more outward-facing and forward-looking poems. (I wonder whether this, too, is age-related?) I shall have to find out whether I can also *write* the sort of poems I want to read.

Jane Routh latest collection: *Listening to the Night*, Smith|Doorstop, 2018

Jacqueline Saphra:

Lately I’ve been experiencing a weariness with reading, let alone writing poems that are narrowly personal and confessional. Do I care anymore about my experience of giving birth, my father’s rages or even my mother’s death at 56? Yes I do. Deeply. Am I moved to write poems about these things? Not particularly. Or at least not without context. I look back with some longing to the time when I could write my internal life and assume it was enough, without any doubts surfacing, without the news, the news, the news.

In *Velvel’s Violin*, my collection due later this year, I focus on my Jewish heritage. I knew and intended at the outset that there would be an implicit resonance with today’s geo-political upheavals, a warning of the consequences of xenophobia, racism and prejudice. But as I journeyed deeper into the book, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine forced me to write into the present moment in ways I had not anticipated. The collection became a personal exploration of complicity, responsibility and survival; it took on its own momentum. I wrote about then, but I also wrote into now; I wrote into presences but also absences. Whether it’s the chance phone call that led to my Grandmother hastily leaving Lithuania in 1939, or my awkward meeting with an orthodox great aunt who was a Holocaust survivor, or the destruction of Russian tanks outside Kyiv, this book became my attempt at a reckoning not just with Jewish identity, but with our infinite capacity for denial and cruelty.

‘Confessional’ or not, the vulnerable ‘I’ in these poems is forced to put herself on the line. Discerning a shape for the vessels to carry this material pushed me well beyond my comfort zone. My usual reliance on given forms as a way of holding the darkness did not feel right or even possible. Some poems chose to be prose/poetry hybrids; in others, the poem led the way, finding its own music, its own white space, defying obvious organising principles. Poetry tells me such subject matter often defies organisation.

Jacqueline Saphra forthcoming collection: *Velvel’s Violin*, Nine Arches Press, 2023

Margaret Wilmot: Imaginative Roots

The thought of ‘external roots’ – by which I assume social and cultural influences – left me thinking of orchids, their roots seeming to drink from air, as maybe we (or I) do, beyond any thought or awareness. I remember my astonishment long ago that an Indian student had never heard of Adam and Eve. ‘And what do *you* know about the Mahabharata?’ he asked with deserved asperity.

For me, imagination is wakened when one of those dangling orchid roots drifts against a wafting dendrite. Other internal nerve threads come out to play, excited children, me too! and their spontaneous electricity may – if one can keep hold of that live wire – thrust a thought forward along its own path, into its own shape, own truth. The purely confessional feels problematic, weighted, always seems to lead back to Me playing by myself.

Still, of course, *what I do is me: for that I came*. We draw from the pool of what we are, what we know, what we come from; from an identity which over the years like that tangle of root is no longer singular. These days it’s the surprise connections which particularly thrill, and in an odd way reassure, as if the air we breathe is not just the air of now: entering Trondheim Cathedral, say, to a tune I haven’t heard for a hundred years (childhood in California feels that far away). I save it up in my mind until I see my son (an organist in Norway), who says ‘Yes, it’s a favourite here,’ and plays me a few bars. I still can’t hear the old words in my head, for days, but maybe it’s that long listening, trying to hear simply what is there, somewhere, which in a larger context exemplifies how poems may develop – when I am lucky.

Margaret Wilmot latest collection: *Man Walking on Water with Tie Askew*, The High Window, 2019