

Meena Alexander's responses

Is the poet today charged with a social task or mandate as representative of shared values and ideas?

I respond to this question as a South Asian woman poet living and working in New York City. While certainly there is that ultra refined coterie that haunts the world of poetry, everywhere, around me there are young people using the language of a new poetry, slam and hip hop and rap. There is a terrible urgency in their words, a belief surely that poetry is directly accountable to the world around. Now while I do think its important to step back, to let the silence speak, to let the waves of sensuous language pour through – the domain it seems to me of poetry, the attempt to touch an invisible horizon, certainly does not preclude the need to answer to the world, an often violent world in which we live and move and have our being. After all, it is the task of the poet to bear witness. To what you might ask. And that is a hard question. I would suggest that there is an inner reality within each of us that is bound, however elliptically to the real solid world. And it is about this that the poet must tell the truth. After 9/11 in New York city there was a great outpouring of poems, and people who rarely read poems out loud, did so on the radio and on television even, as a mode of consolation, as a way of crystallizing their grief and fear. At the same time there was a website that started up in the United States called Poets Against the War, in response to the bombardment of Iraq. Soon enough, sadly soon enough, for the general public, there was a turning away from poetry to the more usual narratives that hold sway, those of fiction and non fiction prose. It seems to me that without poetry we cannot survive history. We would die of too much reality.



Modena City Ramblers, *Morte di un poeta*

Meena Alexander (Allahbad, 1951) è considerata una delle più stimate scrittrici indiane della diaspora. Ha pubblicato otto volumi di poesia, due romanzi e un'autobiografia, *Fault Lines*. Attualmente risiede negli Stati Uniti e insegna letteratura inglese all'Hunter College di New York.

Is the poetic language's lack of communicability a consequence of the poetry's loss of its social representativeness and relevance?

Certainly it seems to me that the loss of relevance can lead to an internal splintering, something bordering on pure abstraction, but I would defend as the right of the poet, this ability to move fluently between the separate spheres of consciousness. Of course pure solipsism is hard to bear. Still, without the inner music that charges it, poetry would become mere rhetoric.

To what extent does poetry today contribute to the renewal of ordinary (?) language or the language of culture? Is it possible to acknowledge songs as having that social representativeness that has for long pertained to poetry?

Yes, indeed there is a truth here, that songs have taken over the space that traditionally was the preserve of poetry. Indeed in my own native culture, in the poetry of Malayalam, there are deep sung rhythms that serve to draw the listening public into this enchanted sphere of words linked to music. And in Kerala there are huge crowds that gather to hear poets read and sing their own work. Often, in my secret mind I do draw on those rhythms of Malayalam that I translate into – if I may use that verb – or that I fit to the encircling sounds of the English in which I write. Often a poem starts in my head as rhythm or a pulse of sound and with it come images, or even lines. And after all it is that music it seems to me that allows us to enter into the difficult spheres of knowledge that poetry offers us. And this knowledge lies at the very heart of what we think of as culture.

[a cura di Andrea Sirotti]