

Poetry Can and Does Tell the Future

By Dorothy Porter

Like most poets I'm very superstitious. The poetry of Yeats' ripples with visions, spells, alchemy and portents. Yeats not only believed in but also notoriously practised magic. He claimed unapologetically the ancient Celtic tradition where poets are akin to priests and magicians. A true poet was judged by magical results, such as could the poet conjure spirit voices or tell the future? Yeats' own poetry claimed, and in the immortal way of poetry, still claims to do both.

My experience of poetry, in a terrifyingly personal context, has been that indeed poetry can and does tell the future. And the poem doesn't have to have immediate Western Canon status. It simply seems that no poem ever really loses its roots in the spirit world and the primitive power of incantation. There is a Mister Hyde, in the mirror of some poems, leering back with things the poet mightn't know — or want to know.

There is a famous poem of Yeats' — "The Second Coming" — that never fails to send a shiver up my spine with its images of a churning nightmare world in moral chaos. It is a futuristic horror poem — where the monster wins. And leaves the smell of its victory in the soul long after the poem has been put away.

Yeats died on a cold dark winter's day in January of 1939 — the year that the Second World War was ignited. "The Second Coming" was written some years before his death, but has nevertheless always felt to me like one of the few poems that prophesied the horrors of the Nazi occupation of Europe.

In the wake of the “rough beast” slouching “towards Bethlehem” you can almost smell the smoke stacks from the crematoria at Auschwitz and Treblinka.

“The Second Coming” is not a poem confined to its contemporary historical context. It is a poem that never fails to speak to me directly. And two lines in particular, where Yeats’ decries the intellectual apathy and political violence all around him read today as fresh as accusing paint —

*The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.*

What does it mean “to lack all conviction” I ask myself, as an Australian writer. Does it mean a cosy life of small pleasures in a safe western democracy? Does it mean going with the flow, following the publishing market, not rocking the boat, being entertaining rather than polemical at writers festivals? Does it mean more literary novels and modernist poetry of exquisite unmeaning? Does it mean — *Tough luck on you, Jack, I’m right.*

And who are the “worst full of passionate intensity”? Does a cash-for-comment shock-jock frothing over the air waves to outer Sydney really have passion or intensity? Or a fundamentalist mullah calling women adulteresses and cat’s meat? Or a politician mired in rank heartless cynicism accusing refugees of throwing their children overboard? I think there is something dead and rotting — not passionate intensity — behind these men. And I mean MEN. There is an old old story of bigotry, greed and opportunism behind them all. Perhaps Yeats was giving his enemies too much credit. Too much glamour.

I have always liked the words “passion” and “intensity”. And I particularly relish the spice of their presence in poetry. I want to reclaim them. Let’s write more poems with passionate intensity. And more novels with passionate intensity. And more essays with passionate intensity. But wait. From where are we going to harvest this passionate intensity? Has mainstream Australian writing become too comfortable and bland?

Is it easier to write with both passion and conviction if you’re writing about the past? And if writing in the radioactive minefield of the present — is it easier to rant at the usual barn sized targets from the safety of the inner suburbs than

really venture into dangerous turf and get your hands dirty? How much raw guts does effective conviction need?

Then again neither our federal government nor the majority of Australians, who've happily supported the government for the last 10 years, give a bugger about the writing community — what we say, do or think. When one of our greatest poets, Judith Wright, died, her death wasn't even worth a passing mention in Parliament. Let alone the State funeral offered to the family of Steve Irwin.

There are times, as a poet, I feel full of conviction — and passion. But I feel paralysed, as if nothing I write will change anything or anyone.

Yet ... In some ways I've learned from paralysis. Sometimes paralysis makes you shut up and hear voices not your own. And it's a trap for the writer as much as for the politician to be in love with the sound and fury of your own voice — especially when it signifies nothing.



Dorothy Porter

Dorothy Porter has published many collections of verse including *Driving Too Fast*; two novels for young adults; and four verse novels, *Akhenaten*, *The Monkey's Mask*, *What a Piece of Work* and *Wild Surmise*. *The Monkey's Mask* won *The Age* Book of the Year for Poetry, the National Book Council Award for Poetry and the Braille Book of the Year. *What a Piece of Work* and *Wild Surmise* have been shortlisted for the Miles Franklin Award.