

The Saturday Paper

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MAY 18 - 24, 2024 | N° 500

COMMENT

Stan Grant An ode to the end of poetry

Before he died, novelist Cormac McCarthy told physicist Lawrence Krauss there was no poetry today. McCarthy believed science had obliterated poetry. How could poetry compete with the beauty and brutality of mathematics?

Science has bent the horizon. It has revealed truths hitherto mysterious and also given us new and devastating ways to kill each other - after the gas chamber and the bomb, poetry was mere indulgence, vanity or gibberish.

McCarthy's final twin novels, *The Passenger* and *Stella Maris*, probed the questions of science, nature, God and oblivion. Destined for extinction, nothing will remain of us. Science will destroy humanity or science will save it. Poetry be damned.

McCarthy was updating the grim assessment of philosopher Theodor Adorno, who told us that to write poetry after Auschwitz was barbaric. Adorno was among the German-Jewish cohort known as the Frankfurt School, whose legacy of critical theory has shaped the academy and the body politic. The postwar thinkers pronounced the end of Enlightenment but, where they retained a sense of enchantment, their intellectual heirs have been prey to derisory cynicism and performative hopelessness.

Beauty has fallen to utility; words have lost their wonder. We are far from Wordsworth, who said poetry was the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings.

Modernity anaesthetises us. We do not feel; we proclaim. We hoard pain to set against one another, not to reach each other. It is a soulless exercise.

We have forgotten what Keats told us: a world of pain is necessary. Pain tutors intelligence. It makes for us a soul. No longer.

Poet Carolyn Forché says language breaks at the site of the wound. Only a modern poet could say that. How sad that we now lack the words to speak to something essentially human - the inevitability of sorrow.

Stan Grant is a theologian, writer and Charles Sturt University distinguished professor.

May 18, 2024

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The horrors of the 20th century left us with broken words. Critique has been a vainglorious response to the triumph of immoral markets, neutralising political liberalism and the creeping human redundancy of technology.

Adorno warned of the silence of a society with no words left to speak. Such silence paradoxically can be loud: the meaningless volume of so much superfluous punditry, where words go to die.

Discussion about the critical issues of our time deteriorates into the slogans and solipsism of activists, professional politicians and journalists.

The critic George Steiner called it “the detergent emptiness and uniformity of the jargon of the media and the marketplace in the West”. He said the lies and sadism of our age had settled into the marrow of language.

Poetry, mated with politics, produced a bastard child obsessed with being heard and recognised, consumed by the vulgarity of self-affirming identity. It eschewed the soul-affirming vulnerability of the stranger.

Perhaps it is not that there is no poetry in the world but too much poor poetry. Polish Nobel laureate Czesław Miłosz warned poems “should be written rarely and reluctantly, under unbearable duress and only with the hope that good spirits, not evil ones, choose us for their instrument”.

Not today. The writer Edward Hayes says poetry began an aesthetic decline following World War I and this accelerated after World War II.

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Hayes is conservative and dismissive of the rise and influence of modernists such as James Joyce. I would disagree with him there, but I am inclined to accept his lament for the loss of beauty and the divine.

In his book, *God Is Beauty*, Saint John Paul II argued everything in the concept of beauty is in God. One need not have faith in God to create great art, but great art emerges from being in awe of God. What is the alternative? To be in awe of ourselves?

Beauty should humble us. John Paul II reminded us beauty was in all creation. We cannot deify ourselves. We cannot deify our egos.

There are poets who resist the seduction of the self, those for whom words remain sacred. Former United States poet laureate Tracy K. Smith writes with unguarded wonder, love and God. She is steadfast in justice and truth, gifts offered and sought with grace and generosity. To Smith, human frailty is not a blight but a virtue. She knows something too many writers ignore – that poetry is small, not big; quiet, not loud. Poetry, she says, makes the reader want to slow down.

In her poem “The Nobodies”, people do not tower over history but endure, living, even thriving, in small everyday things. They speak in a language of kicked stones.

*And it's not the future their eyes see,
But history. To stand close*

*but history. it stretches
Like a dry road uphill before them.*

They climb it.

I read Smith as I read other great poets of another time, such as Anna Akhmatova.

*You will know everything except joy
Even so, live.*

Thank God some would not let the totalitarians of the 20th century steal our words. They wrote under threat of death because, in the words of Wisława Szymborska, writing is the revenge of a mortal hand.

In this company, I would put the poet Nam Le. Nam says he writes with his elbows out, trying to create enough room that he may live with the freedom of contradiction.

Reading is a subjective experience to an objective truth, and any relationship to text is self-revelatory. I would not presume to interpret Nam; I can say only how his work speaks to me.

As I read his new collection, *36 Ways of Writing a Vietnamese Poem*, I see him digging into the false gods of certainty and identity.

*They'd rather we be one than many.
They'd rather we be many than One.*

Nam writes about writing about writing, and who is writing about who is writing and who decides who writes and what is writing.

*In English, mind You.
You dink I writee Yiknamee?*

These are war poems, a war before he was born, which even today we do not understand or even agree on naming. The Vietnam War? In Vietnam, it is the American War.

Novelist Viet Thanh Nguyen says war is fought twice – first on the battlefield, then in memory. Memory wars last longer.

Nam is still fighting a memory war that put him here in a country where he feels compelled to write poems about what is or is not a Vietnamese poem.

Nam and I talk about this, about our mutual suspicion of boxes. Nam asks, What is it to be Vietnamese? I ask, What is it to be Aboriginal? Those labels are imposed and freighted with history and violence. The borderlands are trip-wired. As Nam writes: Every shortcut code risks death.

*When they say X it is us who are X
it is us who are X'd
it is us who die.*

I admire Nam's dexterity, defiance and doubt, but it is sad all the same. Sad for Nam. Sad for me. Sad for you. Sad for all the words between us.

Maybe writing nothing would be the most poetic thing of all. Perhaps we should live poetically. I find more poetry in drinking a cup of tea and looking out a window than in much of what poses as poetry today.

When we write, we make it real, this whole world of unsatisfying words, this

shadow of Adorno, this Devil's deal.

To write poetry after Auschwitz is not barbaric. Auschwitz was barbaric. What we have done to words is barbaric. The ubiquity and immiserisation of politics is barbaric. The attenuation of media is barbaric. Both own too many of our words.

When we consider the world in which we find new ways to kill each other, new ways to hate, new ways to shout, we must shudder that the Nazis won the battle for our souls.

Reluctantly, I agree with Cormac McCarthy: there is no poetry today. How can there be? Words are no match for equations that can kill God.

Need that be the end of it?

Paul Celan lost his parents to the Holocaust but told us language was not lost – despite all that happened. It had to go through its responselessness, through horrible silence, through the thousand darkneses of death-bringing speech, but still it was there and vital and necessary: language.

Stan Grant's column runs every fortnight.

This article was first published in the print edition of The Saturday Paper on May 18, 2024 as "The end of poetry".

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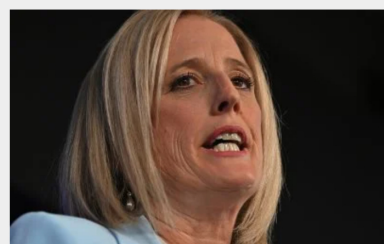
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Stan Grant is a theologian, writer and Charles Sturt University distinguished professor.



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Stan Grant that hell is of God's ai God-shape

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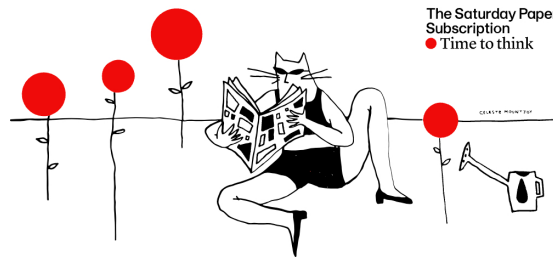


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