



Editorial

THOUGH EGO PLAYS A PART TOO, OF COURSE, and recognition, the Achilles heel of most poets is money, hence the distraction of the poetry prize. We cannot all be Frederick Seidel. We live in the age of the cash award, particularly for a first book.

There are poets who are, habitually, shortlisted for such things in a ‘musical chairs’ of judges and winners—frequently lampooned in *Private Eye*. There are poets listed once, and profoundly grateful for whatever attention it will give them. There are poets unlikely ever to be shortlisted, particularly if they have passed, unlaurelled, the ‘first book’ milestone (where the prize opportunities are greatest), but who are so attached to the idea of their unfair neglect that they cannot let it rest. They rail, sometimes comically, against the injustice; they become, in the Caithness poet George Gunn’s memorable phrase, a ‘bile-fed exclusoid’. Then there is the great mass of the others, which is most of us. If your first book is a distant memory and you are not published by any of the big five poetry presses in the UK which, statistics show, publish the poets most liable to win the main prizes, you can be comfortably released from the burden of short-listed hope, settle into a happy indifference at least where your own book is concerned, and observe the whole thing as the circus it is. What can irk, however, is the assumption, at least in the mainstream poetry community, abundantly buttressed by social media, that one bows with respect to the *authority* of such prizes and, by extension, their sponsors and their judges, the latter often poets themselves. Aren’t such prizes absolute guarantors of quality? Well, er, no. Or not necessarily. So much of any poet’s development, in their early reading innocence, is marked by tart, peremptory likes and dislikes; the notion one accept a consensus from others as to ‘best’, ‘foremost’, etc, seems an implicit denial of what got you into poetry in the first place: your own judgement, your own, as it were, ‘reading for *life*’. As Kathryn Gray writes in her finely nuanced analysis of all this, prizes, at least when judged by poets, may well be inimical to the poetry culture *as a whole* where a general readership is concerned. There is no reason why the UK’s major poetry prizes should have any poets on their panels. If one believes that only poets are fit to judge contemporary poetry, one dooms the art to its own minor subculture: it becomes a sort of guild.

In summer 2015 the results of a study commissioned by Creative Scotland on literature in Scotland were published. One of its major recommendations was the promulgation and development of a greater critical culture in the country’s literary arts. Excellent critical writing, for a so-called ‘ordinary’ audience, is one of the best defenses poetry has against the poetry hype, hyperbole and razzmatazz—enjoyable as it often is to the spectator—of the poetry prize. *The Dark Horse* has tried, from its inaugural issue onwards, to feature such writing. Its essays, reviews and interviews are some of the things I’m proudest of in the history of the magazine. And what they say is: don’t give up your own discrimination, your own singularity of taste, in the face of any prize; consensus is stagnation.