
A letter to my young self on the occasion of a once-in-a-lifetime award.

Mario Petrucci *October 2014*

I am most profoundly privileged to receive this prestigious award – the award of Middle Age.

I've sworn to myself, a hundred times, that – if ever I were granted such a prize – I'd not forget to honour all the unhonoured (and perhaps even dishonoured) writing that goes on in every niche of humanity. In an era centred squarely on individual achievement, on winners and losers, I salute you at last: the rejected; the undecorated; the labouring, lonely anonymous.

So, what can be said about poetry in the wake of 9/11, economic uncertainty and impending eco-doom? Let me advance a compound question. Sweep away the politics and the infighting, and ask yourself: what is left? Discard the celebrity poet, the literary agent, the Poem for Today, the race for the Professorship or the Laureateship – and what is left? Flush the marketing proposal, the application criteria, the assessment criteria, the programmatic workshop, the sop of curriculum poetry – and *what is left?* These activities and personae are all implicated in poetry, in its actual presence in the world as much as in its devaluation; but let them fall away – all of them – and what remains is what has always remained: the expansion and the enrichment of consciousness, a tap root into the soul. It really is that simple, and that difficult.

When you fear that poetry may have become slack and slick, remember: the muse can change form, but it can never be destroyed. When you feel that nothing can possibly go wrong in Parnassus, that we've never had it so good: meditate on the Easter Island statues, on "Two vast and trunkless legs of stone". We write for a civilisation that must now stretch every fibre to ensure that its future isn't already becoming history.

And what of the young? Can't we provide them – and not just those born into lucky situations – with every opportunity to discover themselves within a context of humble, yet potent, support? Why not offer the burgeoning writers and artists among them due example by taking on big themes, by recalling radicalism and giving them, in ideas and language, real and rooted (rather than throwaway, fast) food? We needn't straightforwardly agree on what that food might be; in any case, you who are young will, and should, rebuild the world in your own way. Like us, however, you can bequeath those who come later either life-oriented words, tools, materials and seed, or the habitual tract along with weapons, ruins, those "lone and level sands".

Global culture is all but synonymous now with mass consumption and entertainment. Self-justifying socio-economic 'growth' and arbitrary novelty defeat us; and they risk tainting that near-indomitable, everlasting spring: the young. The idea of 'Making It New' must itself be renewed to incorporate the usefully Old. Remember what T.S. Eliot's soul-searching invention stood for. A culture can carry an old head on young shoulders, can stay youthful by many means – not merely through its actual children.

Forgive me my assumptions and presumptions. I, too, am young, still finding my way. What I can be certain of – what has brought my Middle Age writing its deepest, most youthfully veteran, liberation – is connecting with words for the sake of the work: not towards a 'product', not in the twilight of peer plaudits, nor in the shadow of criticism or neglect; but by the broad, rich light of the work itself. Just the work. I'll finish (or is it begin again?) by rewriting – for writers – the famous saying, often attributed to Gandhi, that may actually go back to Erasmus:

"Write as if you were to die tomorrow.
Write as if you were to live forever."

600 words