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Episode 70: Proletarian Poetry (May 2016)

Host: David Turner – **DT**

Guest: Peter Raynard – **PR**

Transcript edited by David Turner – 13/02/2017

Conversation:

DT: Hello, my name is David Turner and this is the Lunar Poetry Podcast and today I am in Kentish Town in north London and I'm joined by the founder and editor of Proletarian Poetry, Peter Raynard. Hello Peter, how are you?

PR: Good, hi.

DT: So, the main reason we've gotten together with the microphone today is to talk about the blog, in particular, so maybe we should start [with that]. If you just give us a few details about when you started the blog and why.

PR: Yeah. I started it eighteen months ago, quite naively really. I'd been interested in portrayals of the working classes more generally and quite despairing of the way in which they'd been portrayed. Particularly in fiction but also in novels and also in plays and films, whereby the working-class person was either involved in a horror story of either beating up their children or abusing themselves with drugs or criminality. Or you had those who just had to escape it through education or ballet dancing.

And there was never, sort of like, an everyday experience where it... They were working-class people and it didn't matter that they were working-class people. It's the same across in terms of race and gender where, you know, the Bechdel Test with gender. And so, I was going to do a PHD and I got accepted but then someone said I should do a creative writing course.

And then I met Malaika Booker who got me into poetry and introduced me to a lot of poets that I thought resonated with me. So, I decided to do Proletarian Poetry as a way of researching what working-class poetry was out there, I knew that it was and I knew there were certain homes for it. But I thought well let's see where I go. From my perspective, it's been quite amazing because no poet has said no... You know, the classic cliché, if you don't ask you don't get.

So you ask people like Liz Lochhead or John Burnside... I met Ian Duhig at a conference and I said I'd like him to appear on the site and the next day he'd emailed me six [poems]. So very generous all the poets have been.

DT: We'll probably get on to talking about what it means to be working-class and those issues in a minute. But have you approached any poets that have been surprised that you would class them... Or that they would fit on the blog?

PR: That's a very good point actually, because I've approached and said, "Oh, I like your poem" and they've said "Oh, I'm not working-class". And I make the joke... Well it's about the poem, because if it was about the poets, how do I then define it. Do I say, "Okay did you play bingo in a previous life? Or did you leave your kids in the car while you were getting pissed in the pub.

So, to my mind that's a minefield I don't want to go down... And I'm trying to be you know, I have many sympathies with the idea of class war, I didn't want to bring it into Proletarian Poetry because I wanted it to be more positive and more inclusive.

DT: Yeah, I was going to say there's a definite air of inclusivity around your blog rather than excluding. It does seem that you're trying to highlight a working-class nature in work rather than exclude writers for whatever stereotypical reasons.

PR: It just wouldn't come across well either, whether you could do it or not. I don't even think it's needed because I don't think it denies those of a true impoverished or discriminated background from being involved in the site. So, yeah it's very much about the poetry as opposed to who the poets are.

DT: Loosely, how would you define a working-class piece of poetry? What criteria do you use?

PR: I use it very simply and academics would probably roll their eyes at this but I define it as, those who lack power and or those who lack wealth. Poets fit into that category very well actually. And then within that, although I include poems that are the horror stories and the fairy-tales because they are true to working class life, I also try and seek out those that are about... Like Debris Stevenson wrote a poem about going to the seaside with her parents. People have written about their grandparents and it hasn't been overt that their grandparents were working-class but that came through. So, it's trying to be that mix of things.

DT: Yeah. I think, when I started the podcast I did feel like I wanted there be... I don't know whether I wanted to give an identity to the podcasts overtly, which is probably why I didn't go down that route, but I wanted it to perhaps be more specifically about working-class writers.

I didn't know how to work... Because I wasn't really sure what the podcast should be when I started it. But something resonated in what you just said, about those without voice and stuff. I mean, our podcast exists for those that don't have a platform to talk, usually. And I think, just working along those lines probably, you'll just end up with more working-class writers, won't you? Because if you're looking for marginalised people or people without a platform, ultimately the majority of those people will be from that sector or section of society.

PR: You'll also self-ghettoise it and people will say, "That's not for me". And you'll have that divide that you have in all types of things but also certainly in poetry with the perception that it comes from a certain demographic.

DT: Just before the microphone went on, we were talking about genres of poetry. We were just chatting about whether there is a need for more... It's an interesting idea that you can divide poetry into more subjects without making it less. Can't you? [**PR:** Yeah.] In fact, by dividing it up and showing the breadth of something you're making into a larger medium.

PR: As I said, I think it relates to accepting that the reader is no single person. That the reader is a diversity of people but also that reader would be interested in different types of poetry. And so, one night they may want to go to Bang Said The Gun, laugh their head off or get angry or get motivated to be activists in whatever way the poetry is coming at them. While at the same time they may want to sit quietly and read sonnets.

Then within that, I don't think I'm necessarily advocating strict lines on genres but there is more of an acceptance of it in the sense that there's a lot of poetry; as you said before

about mental health, there's science fiction poetry, there's poetry about comics. I'm not sure to the extent that there is crime poetry but maybe there should [be]. And so, if you are able to do that then again it becomes more inclusive.

DT: I think also, another problem with the way that poetry is marketed in shops is it assumes a lot of knowledge on the buyer, that you know who these people are and you know what kind of poetry they're writing and what the genre is. A lot of assumptions are made that you should know exactly what you're after before you go in and it puts up a barrier.

As you were saying on your podcast at The Poetry Library, talking about your local Waterstones and how many cookery books they stock. [**PR:** Yeah.] A cookery section in a book shop is far more welcoming, even if you've never cooked before, than a poetry section.

PR: You can guide your way.

DT: It's quite clear what the books are about.

PR: When you go to a poetry [section], you know that one column if you're lucky and it's anthologies at the top and then it's all alphabetical.

DT: Fourteen copies of the same Carol Ann Duffy collection.

PR: [INAUDIBLE]

DT: Going back to your blog. How does it work, are you mainly commissioning people to come onto the blog or do you accept submissions?

PR: Mainly I've gone out to people and as it's grown more people have come to me which makes me deeply uncomfortable because I'm not... If you're an editor of a magazine and you get hundreds and hundreds of submissions, it's quite easy to say no to three or four hundred people. But when someone says I really like your blog and here's my poems would you consider them, which I do, I find it very hard to say no.

In fact, I think I've said no once and that was someone who wrote a haiku and I simply couldn't bounce off it. That's the other thing with the blog, is that I will receive poems that are very good but if I don't feel I can write a response to it or I've written a response about it before... Please don't send me any 1984 miner's strike poems, by the way, you know because there's so many angles you can write about in that regard. So, it's not necessarily the quality of poems.

DT: You're not just printing poems on your website are you.

PR: No, I should make that clear. No, I purposely from the beginning, have two paragraphs where I write a commentary. It'll either be a kind of memoir, anecdote or some

kind of fact that I've found out related to the poem loosely. Then I integrate the poem into a commentary more directly related to it.

Like, for example, I published a poem By Claire Pollard on China. She'd gone there in 2005 and she, in her travels, had seen the beginnings of the emergence of a dual economy of communism being funded by capitalism. I found that fascinating and it's such at the fore now and I found this picture of Colonel Sanders standing next to Chairman Mao and I thought it was beautiful. Even Mao was on the case, so I could work from that. That's what I try and do in the poems I'm given or I approach people for.

DT: As it's a blog I was going to just talk about the Internet in general. I suppose there was a hope that the Internet and access [to it] globally would somehow break down the barriers that were put in front of... If we just talked about working-class writers for the moment by removing the need to be published in the normal way. Is your blog a sign that that hasn't happened? Do you feel like you're still having to work to champion this kind of writing, because it's not giving you an outlet elsewhere?

PR: I don't see it that way, I think there's an... It might sound like a bit off-centre comparison but, do you remember when Sky Sports came? Sky Sports came in and everyone said this is going to be the death of football. Now, I'm no supporter of [Rupert] Murdoch and Sky, though I do watch Sky Sports, hands up. But it actually increased attendances because people saw the glamour of it and they saw the fascination of it and they wanted to be part of it.

What I see with the Internet in terms of publishing is that, it's much easier to get published but it also enables you to or gives you permission to actually say, "I want to submit to these other places". I see more as a stepping stone, not necessarily to greater things but an amalgam of different avenues to which you can get published.

I think there's an interesting point there in the sense that, the rush to be published in print is quite ironic, in the sense that... There's a magazine, I won't mention [their name] who I know get hundreds of submissions and they'll publish fifty poems a quarter. They have forty-nine subscribers and it's not on the Internet. So, basically all these hundreds and hundreds of people are looking to get published so forty-nine people can read [their work].

DT: Or, forty-nine people can own the magazine they get published in, whether they get read or not is another matter!

PR: Obviously, the contributors get it too, so we can say one hundred people, you know. Whereas on a website you know, you're going to get hundreds and thousands of people. I wrote a poem for a C.A.L.M, Campaign Against Living Miserably about suicide and that got fifteen hundred views or likes on Facebook and then a woman emailed me and said, "Could I have that poem read at my son's funeral". He'd committed suicide a few weeks before. Now, if you only go down that route of hard-copy publishing that wouldn't happen.

DT: No.

PR: Because that readership of C.A.L.M magazine will not be subscribing to Rialto or some may you know but it's about access. So, I think it's about, just 'wild-firing, you know in a way. Submitting as many places you can.

DT: I like following blogs like yours, in that, you can be much more reactive as well kind can't you. Because there's a much faster turn-around. If something happens and you've got something that relates to it or you know someone could come up with something you can publish immediately, you don't have to wait.

PR: There is that, yeah. Some are far more responsive than I am. I got a poem that was about the [Jeremy] Corbyn anti-Semitism but because I had these people lined-up I couldn't publish it and therefore I can't be that responsive, I'm afraid so it does have its limitations.

But if I was just putting them out there, you could get that, but I feel the reason I do... Besides the ego of writing the bits myself is that I feel there's plenty of places now where you could just get your poem, if it's good, to be on a site. There's a poetry blog called And Other Poems done by Josephine Corcoran. She publishes poems [every] Tuesday and Friday and has over four thousand followers.

DT: Yeah.

PR: You know, if you get published on there, you're going to get read more than any other print magazine. So, I guess it's how you value it really and how much you want to be read.

DT: As you mentioned politics, briefly, there. Luckily enough in London we've just gotten rid of one... Has the current Tory government made your job easier in terms of finding poems that you like?

PR: Yes and no. Yes, because lots of people...It does tend to ignite a lot more response but that was quite well harnessed by New Boots and Pantisocracies, where they did over one hundred poems and it's going to come out as a book later on in the year by Smokestack. So, there is that. But it's funny, I was just reading a book about the depression in the 1930s and how the critics were so influential during that time.

They pressured the likes of Robert Frost and E.E Cummings to start writing politically aware poems and getting out of this modernist type of approach. It made me think about the critics here and how there's such a lack of power but at the same time, I think the power is more in the poets' hands now to go in those directions and those avenues. Whether it's through the internet or not to be responsive to the climate that we're in at the moment and likely to be in for a while.

DT: Yeah, let's not dwell on that too much as it's such a nice, sunny day. So, the reason we're meeting in Kentish Town today is because you have a spoken word evening coming up tonight at Torriano Meeting House and you've got two featured leaders. Who are they?

PR: Anna Robinson and Tim Wells. Anna has been writing about London for many years, she was one of the first poets that Malaika Booker introduced me to. She wrote these poems in a sequence called, Finders of London about the prostitutes who were killed, whether it was by Jack The Ripper or not. She gave a real human side to them that wasn't misogynistic and voyeuristic. Then Tim Wells who I'm sure listeners know a lot about who says he's made out of lager, reggae and Leyton Orient and is one of the great proselytisers, I think, of political ranting poetry and has been doing it for thirty, forty years now.

DT: These live events. Is it something you'd like to do more of?

PR: I'd like to, but whether my body allows me to... Yeah, I've done three now. I did one at the Poetry Library, one at the Poetry Cafe and tonight's. I probably won't do one now till the autumn. But it does raise the question of paying poets.

I think that's important because with the special editions there was a fund for it so I was able to pay the poets then. Then on the door at the Poetry Library the money would go to them as well. Tonight's is not, hence I have two packets of 12-inch reggae vinyl that I'm going to give as gifts.

And you know yourself there's a big issue now about poets being remunerated or paid for their art which is absolutely the right thing. In some ways that makes it difficult for me to then go and approach people to essentially ask a favour really. [Finding] the balance between helping them out as poets to promote their work, maybe sell books, at the same time promoting the blog and what I'm trying to do.

DT: Yeah, we had the same... Lizzy and I, when we were running our night Silence Found a Tongue, we were in a bit of a bind because we deliberately found a venue that would allow us to use the space for free. So ,we didn't have to charge people to come in because we wanted as wide an audience as possible and to not price out people who couldn't afford to come. But then you've got the guilt of not being able to [pay performers].

Yeah it was awful. We really wanted to pay people and we thought about asking for donations but then that can often cause some embarrassment. [PR: Yeah.] I don't know, if you ask for donations in a bucket and people just simply can't afford to give you very much, it can't help but look like they didn't really enjoy themselves very much. Then you've got to crawl over to the poet and say, "Sorry, we've only got four quid."

PR: I don't think anyone's solved this to be honest. Yeah in some ways, London's is in... As it always is, it's an island where you can go to a poetry event every single night of the week and that is partly a good thing, well greatly a good thing. But at the same time, you can only spread the punters so far around, you know.

When I did the Poetry Cafe evening for Proletarian Poetry I had a great line-up Hannah Lowe, Innua Ellams, Malaika Booker, Jo Bell, Owen Gallagher and Jools Sparks. It was the day of Pride, it was boiling hot and those who know the Poetry Cafe know it's very warm downstairs [in the basement]. There were like 15 people there, which was okay, which was fine but I was expecting a full house. It's difficult.

DT: I think one thing that would go a long way to easing that situation would be if institutions paid people for a fucking change. I've got so many friends who have been... Especially when they're young, [if you're] under twenty-five it seems to be a big problem when you're still studying in some way or you're a new graduate. There's this tendency to say, "Well I've got this great opportunity for you. You can come and read at the Royal Academy of Art".

Or read at the Tate galleries who are particularly bad at this who say, "Our wide audience is your payment". It's disgusting, they're charging people often £16 to come in to some of the big exhibitions.

PR: And they're funded as well.

DT: And they're funded by the Arts Council and by the government, it's all subsidised and they don't pay young poets, well whatever age it doesn't matter. It just sends a message out to everyone that this kind of work isn't worth anything, isn't worth any kind of payment.

PR: I think one way, and I think there should be more of this, is the intermixing of evenings and publications of the different arts. You have got publications now like Bare Fiction, The Interpreter's House who will publish short stories, creative non-fiction. Bare Fiction even publishes plays. If you are able to do that and obviously, a lot of [INAUDIBLE] work and going to galleries you should be able to mix the arts up. You would think that these people are also reading poetry as well as going to see a play.

DT: It links back to talking about genres, in that, you're putting all readers in one group. As if the readers are only interested in poetry.

PR: Yeah.

DT: As if the people reading and writing only concern themselves with poetry for their whole lives. As if we haven't got full lives.

PR: It's that mix of, isn't it, form and topic. And they do seem to be all spread-out and mixed up.

DT: This is a subject that winds me up, particularly. I think, because it shouldn't be difficult when you're planning large events... If you take open-mics out of the equation, you know. People putting events on in the backs of pubs for no money and volunteering their time is an amazing thing and hopefully it'll continue for a long time. They don't need to think about paying, you know, if people are willing to come along and read for the first time. But yeah, as you're moving up... Well these places are just taking advantage of people I think.

PR: Yeah. I think one thing I'd like to say in relation to that and about Proletarian Poetry is it is all about access. You know the background I come from... I don't know about you and I know you only recently started reading poetry, the same as me. I would never have thought of doing poetry. I did an MA in creative writing and the poetry module was the last

one I chose and I did it as a dare. An old fellow like me said, "Shall we do it together? Go on I dare you. Malaika Booker was sitting in the room and changed everything.

I've had friends back home who have read the likes of Tony Walsh, who writes about The Clash, you know growing up in a working-class community. One friend said, "A poem he wrote, it made me so angry. But in a good way". You know, it really stirred him. I never would have thought of entering that world.

You know the level of awareness I think of poetry that is about working-class people, young people, non-white people is somehow... I don't understand why you can't break that barrier because if you think about it in terms of; you can read a poem in thirty seconds and it can stay with you all night. If you read a novel will take you a minimum of two, four, eight hours and beyond.

DT: Yeah.

PR: And just the practical side of poetry, I can't fathom how it isn't more popular.

DT: Absolutely. I think the issue of access should be at the forefront of a lot of discussions because that's... If you're not encouraging people to come and have a look, they will just continue to ignore it. Why wouldn't they? There are so many other things happening and people have got a lot on their plate. They're not just going come on the off-chance.

PR: But, you know, subscribe to Proletarian Poetry, get your email.

DT: And on that note. What's your website? What's your web address?

PR: If you can spell proletarian, it's www.proletarianpoetry.com.

DT: The link will be in the description so there will be a clickable link and you're on Twitter @ProletraianPoet.

DT: That's probably all we've got time for today. It's been really nice to chat to you, thanks very much Peter.

PR: Great, really enjoyed it.

DT: Yes. If anyone out there wants to follow, I'll be retweeting stuff over at our Twitter account which I need to plug more @Silent_Tongue. Apart from that see you later.

End of transcript.