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On merit alone – Mike Stocks

‘A project essential in every way’ is one way to describe *Anon*, the anonymous submissions poetry magazine; but then again, ‘a nasty individualistic Thatcherite competition’ is another. The first comment was made by a recent winner of the prestigious Arvon Poetry Competition, while the second was made by a very distinguished Scottish poet. What kind of literary project is it that can provoke such strong and opposing comments?

Here’s how it works. Poets send in their ‘anonymous’ poems and a details sheet containing their name, address and poem titles; an administrator processes the submissions and hands the nameless poems to me, the editor; while I’m deliberating, I post the copies of the poems off to *Anon*’s external readers, who without conferring give me their recommendations of Reject, Shortlist or Accept (this is my editorial safety net); finally I decide which poems I’m accepting, at which point the administrator gives me the details sheets of the accepted poets. The poems are published in the magazine over the names of the poets.

So *Anon*’s philosophy is to judge each poem without reference to the poet’s identity, status or previous work – a style of literary assessment that has a long tradition, starting with I.A. Richards’ groundbreaking *Practical Criticism* in 1929 and going on to the New Criticism movement of the 1950s and its lasting influence until today. It necessitates a time-consuming and expensive assessment process for a little magazine whose only income derives from sales, so why do I make life so difficult for myself?

It’s not because *Anon* is intended as an aggressive response to nepotism in contemporary poetry publishing; I believe that most editors of magazines sincerely publish the poems they like the most. But I also believe that when making aesthetic choices, everyone – including editors, and including me – is operated on unconsciously by non-aesthetic prejudices. *Anon*’s procedures demonstrably excise that prejudice.

And if there are any corners of poetry publishing where back-scratching might be going on, why get in a tizzy about it? Groups of like-minded writers, critics and publishers have always got together and forged movements, credos and self-promotional cliques; this is one of the engines of literary publishing, and it has its place. A magazine explicitly set up to be transparently focused on the work and nothing else also has its place, however, and where I feel *Anon* is particularly effective is in the most difficult part of the editorial process, the culling of the middle-ranking

poems. Spotting the few really good poems submitted, and the many dreadful ones, is generally straightforward – it is the stuff in the middle for which difficult, fractional editorial decisions have to be made for one poem over another poem, and where an absence of non-aesthetic influences proves useful.

Critics of *Anon* claim that editors aren't influenced by non-aesthetic factors. But I will bet my shirt that an editor faced with thousands of unmarked poems will produce a very different magazine to an editor whose submissions are linked to covering letters, publication histories, the status of the poets, personal friendships (or absence of), general preconceptions – and this is disregarding the occasional pragmatic temptation to choose a poem by a big name over a poem of equal merit by a 'nobody'. If I'm wrong? If editors are unaffected by non-aesthetic criteria? Then presumably I'm publishing exactly the same magazine that I would be if I knew who all the poets were in advance, in which case no one need be upset about anything...

*Anon's* concept is distinct and appealing. It does indeed represent a competition, but nasty and Thatcherite it ain't. It's pure egalitarianism, with no concessions over quality. Many of the people who get into the magazine write to me about the extra kick they feel in knowing that they succeeded on a level playing field. Word of mouth has readers recommending the magazine to their poetry peers. My marketing strategy is limited to paying cheques in and posting magazines out, and yet sales are healthy enough for us to break even, just about, which is very rare for little poetry magazines, many of which have microscopic sales while being supported by arts funding. If I had the will and the ability to be a whizz in sales I could sell a lot more; but I have neither.

Does *Anon* make for better poems from poets? No. We can only publish what we feel are the best poems from those submitted to us. Even the finest poets rarely write a truly lasting poem, I feel, and there have only been a few *Anon* poets who have risen above the usual middling to solid fare that fills Britain's poetry magazines. It is interesting to note however that in my view *Anon's* best poems have come from unestablished poets, rather than from the few established / famous poets who have bravely submitted work and been accepted. (I wouldn't know how many famous poets we've rejected, though a couple have written to me retrospectively to let me know!).

Could 'anonymity' prove useful in other areas of publishing? Possibly. For example, it's hardly news to suggest that some literary agents and publishers have dangerously debased the currency of books by knowingly putting out abysmal celebrity novels and similarly awful fare;

they could restore their reputations with some kind of *Anon* system for the assessment of new novels. Also, it would be good to see one or two reviewing outlets in the national press use anonymous reviewing, as used to be the case in the old TLS, to release some reviewers from the burdens of having personal feelings about the authors under review. Finally, when it comes to unknown novelists, why are publishers still relying on little more than a reader's report and the hunches of a few people in Editorial and Marketing and Finance? Using such stunted assessment procedures, no wonder they're terrified of investing properly in authors. This is the system by which twenty new authors are thrown into the sea in the vague hope that one of them might carry on bobbing up and down. This is bad for publishers, writers and readers.

Instead, publishers could publish half as many books (and no utter crap by the latest C-list non-entity) and spend the money saved on higher quality assessment procedures for scripts deemed (via the hunches and the reader's report) to have potential. This could involve giving the script to a large focus group of real readers, each of whom would submit it to a blind reading and provide independent 'no conferring' feedback to be analysed by the marketing department. Perhaps then the hit rate would go up from one author in twenty to three, or five. After all, anonymous procedures occur in other fields of assessment – not just in poetry competitions, short story competitions and even the occasional competition for novels, but in peer-reviews of academic research papers, in the submission of university finals papers, and so on. These methods introduce more accuracy and objectivity into aesthetic and commercial judgements – and there might be money in that for enterprising publishers...