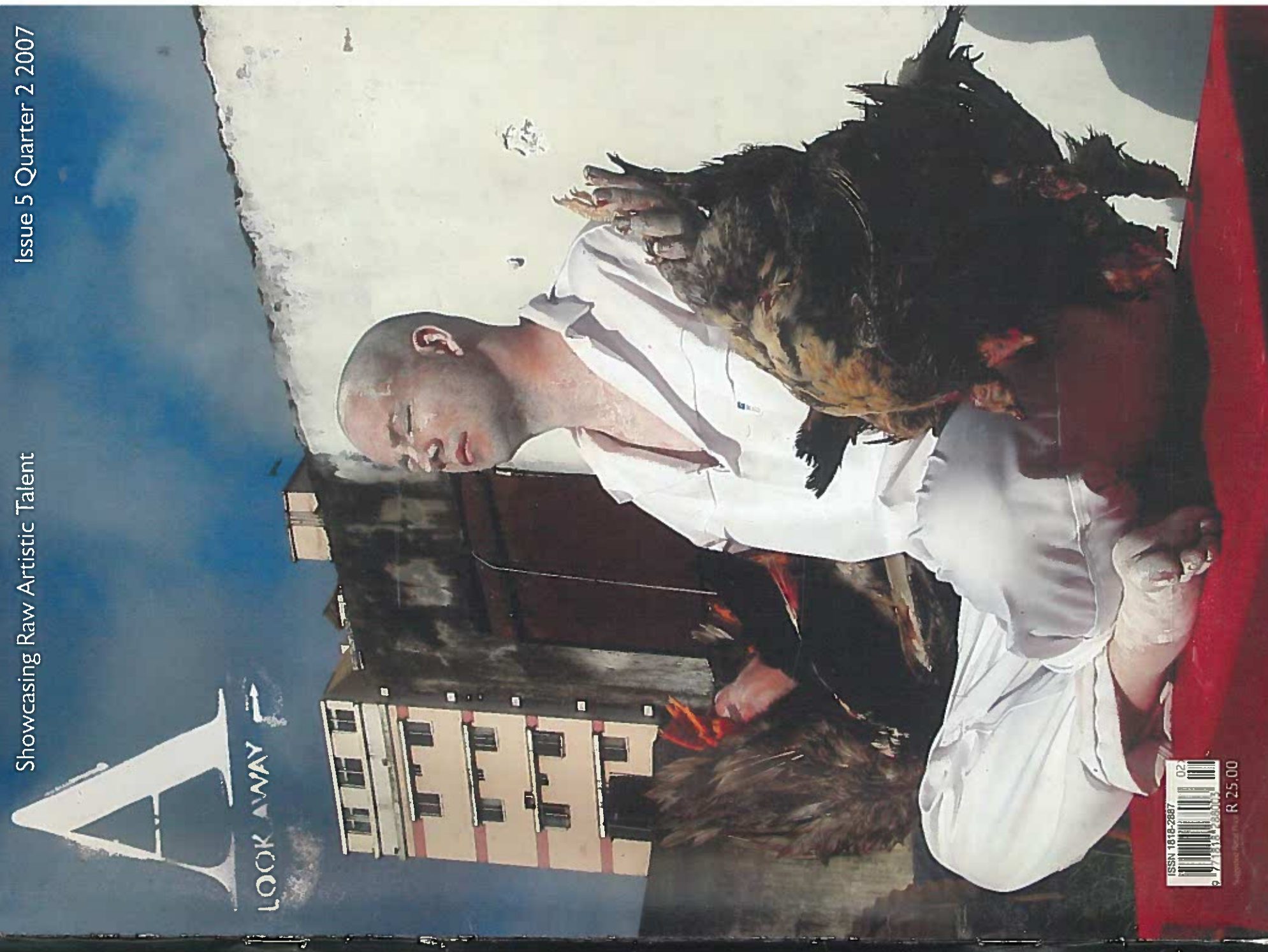


Showcasing Raw Artistic Talent

Issue 5 Quarter 2 2007



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ISSN 1818-2687 02
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THE WRONG ANSWER!

by Anton Krueger

A Look Away - Issue 5 - Quarter 2 2007

(A RESPONSE TO 'THE RIGHT QUESTION' - A Look Away - Issue 4)

When I first read Rick's eminently readable polemic on poetry in the last issue of *A Look Away*, I immediately wanted to respond in some way or another, but I never got down to it. And so all the many brilliant arguments I'd been mulling over kind of evaporated. Then I actually met Rick at the English Department prize-giving ceremony where he was clutching at least three awards for recent achievements, and it was only by chance that I discovered he'd written the article in question. So I decided to tackle a response after all and, in this way, I suppose it's now become a personal response. But maybe being personal is what poetry is all about, and this is my main contention with Rick's essay.

In support of his thesis against the personal in poetry, Rick quotes this little gem from the pathologically pokerfaced Thomas Stearns Eliot, who said that writers of poetry should strive for "continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality" (1974: 296).

I don't know, I tend to think that in the same way that features of portrait painters inevitably appear in every picture they paint, so an aspect of the author unavoidably emerges in what he or she writes. Also, I suspect that despite his attempts to remove his "personality" from his work, Eliot's poems turn out to be entirely revelatory of the isolated, aloof individual he may have been. I may be wrong, but I've generally figured him to be

a man almost psychopathically out of touch with his own or other people's feelings; insulated and isolated, his soul carpeted in myths. I mean, we all know what kind of people bankers are. Besides, Eliot himself confessed that his poems were influenced by his personal circumstances; as for example when he confessed in a letter that his first marriage brought him to "the state of mind out of which came *The Waste Land*" (1988: xvii).

Another example of a writer who advocates an "impersonal style" is our own John Maxwell Coetzee. When he was still involved in the creative-writing MA at UCT he was forever telling his wards that their writing was "too emotional". Then, when his biographies started coming out, everybody started realising what a bitter, unfeeling specimen he really is. Zakes Mda once described him as "cold", which seems to be a bit of an understatement. Nevertheless, my point is that an abstract, detached mode of writing, far from being a sign that the writer is writing "impersonally", is often proof that the writer has invested his entire frosty deportment into every line.

Another thing - if you want to talk about expressive creativity today, I don't think it's true that its concerns are more civic than individual. Much recent poetry involves the offhand, instinctive genius of Bukowsky and the trippy para-diddles of Ginsberg, rather than the mechanical

'A story was once relayed to me about a friend of a friend who ended up running naked on the beaches of Cape Town, her mind having slipped away after one too many sessions with Coetzee. Him, well, in retrospect, perhaps she shouldn't have popped that c after all...

constructions of the Apollonian architect-uses-prescribed-by-Popé (who also gets a mention in Rick's essay). Aesthetic symmetries may be all very well, but to me there's a difference between interior design and painting. Interior design may be a soothing, pleasant complement to social etiquette, but modern poetry (and modern art) is often discordant, even anarchic. As Nietzsche says

"One must still have chaos in oneself to be able to give birth to a dancing star" (1976:17). So, too much discipline can stifle the soul; over-socialization can lead to repression, to illness, to depression, to neuroses. And poetry can be a mature outlet for repression, it can provide a healthy space in which to become unsocialised, to break free from constraints; which is why I see Rick's article as potentially dangerous, because it advocates more rules, more discipline, more "responsibility" in writings; whereas poetry may be one of the last escapes from those confinements.

This doesn't mean that I think everything that anybody ever scribbles down is wonderful. I was the *Limet* English poetry editor for a few years and believe me, I was shovelling out loads of steaming garbage weekly. But for me what often made a poem as dull as dust was an overemphasis on form and style, rather than too great a focus on the personal. Those "traditional" poems with regular rhythm and rhyme would send me to sleep. "Oh no", some writers told me, "free verse is

lazy". Well, if it is then we need more laziness in poetry, more inspired mayhem, more lively discord rather than lifeless drivel.

On the issue of trying to follow the greats, I agree with Rick (and Harold Bloom) that there is an "anxiety of influence" in the developing poet. So there is both a reverence for past masters, and a desire to conquer them; there's this uneasy balance between trying to imitate and trying to supersede. Also, let's not forget about another classic Eliot quote: "Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal" (1920:5).

So maybe instead of saying that poets should specifically strive for aesthetic order, it might be more accurate to say that if you want to be a poet, it's likely that you'll probably be interested in reading a lot of other people's poetry. I mean, there have been philosophers like Wittgenstein who claimed never to read other philosophers because he wanted to maintain the purity of his own thoughts, but in general, it's likely that if you want to write poetry you'll love reading it. So maybe these are the frauds which Rick is talking about, the people who want to wear the poet's beret, who want to carry around that mole skin, who want to be known as "poets", who want to pour their hearts out; but who are too hard to be able to take in the hearts of others. So there we're in agreement.

In some way, I can also understand where Rick's coming from, in the sense that there does

seem to be a general trend in poetry today to over-romanticise things. Perhaps the impetus for Rick's diatribe against sentimentality comes from a valid place. As a co-editor of *A Look Away*, he's trying to stem the stew of sloppy, self-centred pieces that pass for poetry, which Rick aptly characterises as bleeding "emotions onto a porous paper with a leaky pen and an even more leaky heart". Here I was reminded of what the Dennis Hopper character says in the vastly under-rated film *Search and Destroy* (1995): "Just because it happened to you, doesn't make it interesting." So I agree that poets who are only interested in "expressing themselves" might be taking things too far. There has to be more to it than that.

What might make poetry less self-centred would be tying it in some way to a certain time and place; locating it within a matrix of a particular culture. What I missed in Rick's essay was any mention of South Africa. Instead, Rick quotes from the colonisers, from the guys who set out to dominate and exploit this country. I think if you want to talk about *South African* poetry today, Arnold and Eliot might not be the lodestones we require.

Okay, let me rephrase that. I'm not entirely opposed to these two past masters, and nobody will deny they wrote some pretty fine lines. Of course, I'm immediately swept away to the London streets of Sherlock Holmes and Jack the Ripper whenever I read "A lonely tab-horse steams and stamps." And then the lighting of the lamps,² and I remain as moved as the next guy by the last two lines of "Dover Beach," but sometimes the sensibilities expressed by these poets are as foreign as lines coming from any other distant shore. I mean, if you're going to be quoting foreign poets, why not also bring in Basho and

²"Preludes"... yes, I know it was written a few decades after Holmes and Jack, but you know what I mean.

involves a scientific, distant tone. Of course, then you'd need to remove yourself from the picture. Of course, then you'd need to pretend that you're observing some specimen far off on the forest floor. Of course you'd probably need to "murder to dissect"³; but I think that when you're writing for Benoit's mag, you need to forget all of that and let it rip.

I mean, I've got nothing against history. I stand in wonder before the monuments of the past, from the *Epic of Gilgamesh* to the *Tale of Genji*, from *The Legend of Seyavash* to *Sakuntala*. These are all rich and delicious excursions into worlds of possibility; but the subject was poetry today - here and now - and that's a different congerie of-seels altogether.

In some way, maybe trying to be a poet is like trying to become a rock star - you've got to find your own way. Here's an example: in the seventies, they opened the Guitar Institute of Technology (GIT) in California, and over the years this institution promised to make a Rock Star out of anyone. So they tried to breed guitarists, teaching people to play solos, like Phil Lynott, to eat it up like Jimi Hendrix, to salute those about to Rock with Angus Young. But what happened? Pretty soon people discovered that there was only one Jimmy Page; Nobody wanted clones. So pretty soon advertisements for bands began to read "no GIT musos-need apply".

So this is the thing: sorry Jack Black, but there's no school for rock. There's no school for poetry. You have to work out a method of your own. The one distinguishing feature of working poets today is that there is no one distinguishing feature.⁴ So

³The "Table Turned" - William Wordsworth. I've always been interested in how writers justify what they're doing. I wrote a paper once on three whizzers (Wilde, Hemingway and Kerouac), looking at what they had to say about how and why one should write. They offer three completely different views. You can read the paper here: <http://kaganof.com/jagology/2007/03/11/three-men-three-manifolds/>

if you consider yourself a poet then even my few suggestions here are possibly little more than gobbledygook. Nevertheless, to re-iterate my main points of disagreement with "The Right Question":

- 1) Creative writing is always personal.
- 2) Aesthetic rules and constraints are not the most important considerations to bear in mind when creating something. On the contrary, being too critical can kill your creativity.
- 3) You have to develop your own style.

You've just got to do it. And just keep doing it until you can convince other people to listen, until the levee breaks.

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⁴In retrospect, it occurs to me that my disagreement might simply indicate a divergence of taste, in that, by reference to them, Rick is revealing a preference for the Augustans (Pope), Victorians (Arnold) and Moderns (Eliot); whereas my own fancies incline towards the Elizabethans, Romantics and Post-moderns.