

The Manager: a poem

Selected Writings 2

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a poem

SELECTED WRITINGS
Volume 2

RICHARD BERENGARTEN



CAMBRIDGE

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To Whom it May Concern

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Editor's Preface

The Manager is the second volume in the ongoing Salt series of *Selected Writings* by Richard Berengarten. Through its previous publications, under the name Richard Burns, this book-length poem has a curious history. It was first effectively noticed by Barry MacSweeney, who published four sections from it as a work-in-progress in *Poetry South East*, 1980:

Richard Burns, a poet from Cambridge, is currently working in Gravesend. *The Manager* is a fabulous work. I wish I had room to publish more, or cash to print the lot. Its tense, hysterical edges (no insult) and jagged rhythms are just what we need in the eighties. More and more we need to record the breakdown, anger, frustration, paranoia and downright bloodiness of society. Richard has his writing hand on the thudding pulse. It will make a fine book.¹

In 1982, this first editorial response was followed up by the leading American journal of postmodern literature, *Boundary 2*, which published thirty sections.² Six years later, in 1988, Elaine Feinstein chose three extracts for *PEN New Poetry II*.³ Reviewing that anthology in *The Guardian*, Carol Ann Duffy wrote: 'Some poets soar above straightforward craftsmanship. [The] extracts from *The Manager* by Richard Burns give a genuine frisson with their stark originality.'⁴

In 1987, the author left England to live in Yugoslavia. One unex-

¹ Barry MacSweeney, guest ed., 'Introduction', *Poetry South East* 5, South East Arts, Tunbridge Wells, 1980.

² Richard Burns, '30 Extracts from *The Manager*', *Boundary 2*, XII/1 ed. William V. Spanos, State University of New York at Binghamton, pp. 15–31.

³ Richard Burns, 'Three Extracts from *The Manager*', *P.E.N. New Poetry II*, ed. Elaine Feinstein, Quartet Books, London, 1988, pp. 21–24.

⁴ Carol Ann Duffy, in *The Guardian*, London, July 29, 1988.

pected result of his move was that a draft of *The Manager* was published by the Writers' Association of Montenegro in 1990, so the book had the unique distinction of appearing in Serbo-Croatian translation eleven years before its first full appearance in English.⁵ Unfortunately, it came out when Yugoslavia was on the verge of falling apart.

By January 1991, Burns had returned to England, and the poet and editor Anthony Rudolf, a good friend of his, showed the English text to the far-sighted London literary agent Giles Gordon. Gordon's response was rapid and unequivocal: 'I suspect, quite genuinely, that *The Manager* may be a masterpiece and posterity will recognise it as such.' But he added: 'Therefore it is extremely feeble of me to say that I don't believe I'd be able to find a publisher for it [. . .] and certainly not next week.'⁶

Giles Gordon's predictions proved right. The poetics of *The Manager* were scarcely in keeping with the post-Thatcherian 1990s. Indeed, the poem is interpretable, at least in part, as an exposé of the hollowness and shallowness of Thatcherism. For all its wit, it is also replete with elements that some readers still find uncomfortable, discomfiting, disturbing. At any rate, a first full English edition was not to appear in print for another ten years, when Anthony Rudolf, a consistently loyal advocate of the book, showed a copy to the London publishing consultant David Elliott, who was immediately enthusiastic. The eventual result was that the firm Elliott and Thompson was founded *because* its editors knew they had to publish *The Manager*. It was their first book, and they took considerable pains in its printing and design. David Elliott's sleeve-notes claimed:

The Manager is a long poem of a new kind. In presenting the reader with fictional episodes from the life of one man, it offers an account of the disjunctions and contradictions of modern-day living. The text bristles with outrage, anger, obsession, loss and romance, interwoven with passages of a wry, sardonic humour. It merges characters, interactions and drama. Its medium, the 'verse-paragraph', enables the reader to capture an impressive

⁵ *Menadžer*, tr. Jasna B. Mišić and Vladimir Sekulić, with introduction by Anthony Rudolf, Udruženje Crne Gore, Titograd, 1990.

⁶ Giles Gordon, letter to Richard Burns. January 17, 1991. Text supplied by RB.

range of the registers, inflexions and nuances of contemporary language in all its forms.⁷

But perhaps not surprisingly, with the exemplary exceptions of *Poetry Review* and the *London Magazine*,⁸ the mainstream culture managers and fashionable reviewers bypassed the book entirely, wouldn't touch it with a barge pole. London stayed impermeable, unstirred, unmoved.



Even so, as often happens with genuinely new, original and powerful poetry, reception of *The Manager* started to go through a series of slow and gradual drifts. The book began to find its own way and ways, turning up in unexpected peripheries, rooting itself here and there, occupying edges, filling hollows, spilling onto and over ledges. For example, it achieved glistening responses in Swansea (Wales), Plymouth and Exeter (Devon), Athens (Greece), South Bend (Indiana), New Orleans, and Tblisi (Georgia). From South Wales, poet and critic Jeremy Hooker wrote:

I find *The Manager* brilliant, a work of sustained brilliance. It is everywhere exceptionally well written, with a linguistic versatility that is rare in any writing and sometimes calls to mind Joyce, not by suggesting a debt to him, but by virtue of its control of language, its knowledge of words. [...] The work has immense verbal richness, it delights in words, it knows them intimately, it knows their many diverse use for different purposes, and therefore has a considerable range of voices, a range far wider than *The Waste Land* [...] It is in the voices, above all – romantic, lyrical, sardonic, self-condemned by cliché, ‘managerial’, ‘popular’, ‘bitter’, tender – that *The Manager* at once composes and reveals, projects and diagnoses a whole modern world with its conditions of life [...] I do not know another poem, or indeed any writing, which is at once so expert in our modern consumerist

⁷ David Elliott (unattributed), description on inside front flap, *The Manager, a poem*, 1st edition, Elliott & Thompson, London & Bath, 2001.

⁸ ‘This is an extremely ambitious and interesting work – one that needs to be read and reread.’ Jonathan Treitel, ‘From the Ludoslovakian’, *Poetry Review*, 92/1, 2002, p. 55. See note 10 below for Angus Calder’s review in *The London Magazine*.

specialist language, and so witty in exposing their superficiality and heartlessness.⁹

From Edinburgh, the historian and poet Angus Calder wrote for *The London Magazine*:

In a cycle of a hundred poems, with three very fine detached lyrics, Burns takes Charles Bruno from cynically philandering middle management through marital and mental breakdown to the point where he speaks as a prophet in the Old Testament sense, winning past death to endorse life. [. . .] Burns has pulled off the rare feat of creating an experimental poem which is at every point wholly accessible. [. . .] It cannot be said that Charles Bruno alias Adam Kadmon alias Cadman is a ‘consistent’ or ‘rounded’ character. Which is, I take it, part of Burns’ point. Each in his own prison, to bring in Eliot again, experiences himself as multiple. Escaping the prison to face up to our Usness entails not ‘rounded’ bargaining but open-eyed dissolution, as far as possible, into the life around us. Well, that’s how I’d put it, and I wouldn’t have phrased that thought this way if I hadn’t been thinking hard about Burns’ truly remarkable poem.¹⁰

Two further comments endorsed Calder’s response. The novelist Nicholas Mosley wrote: ‘I found *The Manager* intensely powerful and moving – like Dylan Thomas’s raging against the dying of the light. It is a savage paean of praise for life. The protagonist becomes a giant figure.’¹¹ And the critic and journalist Val Hennessy noted: ‘I found it absolutely riveting. It is a wrenched-from-the-heart work, packed with good things and zapping along in a very compelling manner.’¹² Similarly, in January 2003, Steve Spence in Plymouth published a rave review on the *Terrible Work* website:

This epic poem sequence [. . .] looks set to become one of the major works of the last part of the 20th century, hovering edgily on the 21st [. . .] There are a hundred ‘poems’ which revolve

⁹ Jeremy Hooker, letter to Richard Burns, 2002. Text supplied by RB. See also the same author’s review. ‘Handling Experience’ in *Swansea Review*, 22, 2003, pp. 114–118.

¹⁰ Angus Calder, ‘A Spectacular Vafriety of Registers’, *The London Magazine*, December/January 2004, pp. 88–94.

¹¹ Nicholas Mosley, note to RB, 2001. Supplied by RB.

¹² Val Hennessy, note to David Elliott, 2001.

around the life of 'The Manager', a title which hints both at the pervasive nature of late 20th century business culture and the notion of an individual attempting to manage his own life. I guess the work's unifying subject is ultimately the attempt to reconstitute the idea of 'history' from the ravages of postmodernism, both as a political theory and as cultural deprivation, but it's a poem which so abounds with life, with energy and with such a wide array of voices and different registers that you just have to dip in and go with the flow. It's a poem about people, about society, about breakdown in an age of information overload and business uniformity, that takes on big issues through fragmented narratives which point towards a wider picture. *The Manager* is a work which revels in form, technique and wordplay while never quite losing sight of its objective. It's a poem which has 'heart' at its centre, feeling as its source but which never denies the pleasures of the cerebral in so doing. It's that rare thing, also, a poem 'about' language which nevertheless has the potential to reach a wide audience. Hopefully, that will happen because I think it's also an important statement about the confusions and difficulties of the age we live in from the pen of a writer who is clearly working at the peak of his powers. I suspect this work has been some considerable time in the making and looks like becoming Burns' magnum opus. [. . .] This may well turn out to be the book of the decade. Get hold of a copy and read it. Re-read it.¹³

Then, in summer 2003, a highly successful dramatised version was performed by lead actors from the Royal Shakespeare Company at the 50th Stratford-upon-Avon Poetry Festival. Roger Pringle, director of the Festival, wrote in the programme:

It is well known that a major new artistic or literary work rarely achieves immediate acceptance, let alone acclaim or even recognition. There is often a time-gap before it reaches a wider public. It is almost as though the world offered a natural resistance, which a new work has to challenge and break.

The Manager is a long poem which explores modern experience in a modern idiom. It is a poem of its time and for its time; an expression of our age, and a critique of it. In turn humorously, ironically, even savagely, it examines contemporary behaviour in the business-world, male/female relationships, family life, politics. It is a sequential, connected poem which, like its publishing

¹³ Steve Spence, January 2003, <http://www.terriblework.co.uk/Archive%20whole.htm>, consulted July 17 2008.

history, contains elements of surprise and fascinating twists. And because it disregards established poetic norms and creates its own, publishers in Britain did not know what to do with it. Not so, however, in former Yugoslavia. An earlier version of the poem was first published by the Association of Writers of Montenegro in 1990 in a Serbo-Croat translation. (At the time the author was living in Serbia.) Eventually, the book was taken on by David Elliott and Brad Thompson, who founded their new firm, Elliott and Thompson, in order to publish it. Their finely designed edition came out quietly in November 2001.

Since then, by word of mouth, around the edges of the poetry world in the UK and abroad, by means of appearances at poetry readings, at festivals and conferences, and among the literary avant-garde as well as among well-known writers, journalists and critics, a slow and steady swell of praise has been growing. It is our belief and hope that the appearance of *The Manager* as the finale to the 50th Stratford-upon-Avon Poetry Festival marks yet another phase in the appreciation and recognition of a major long poem.¹⁴

Writing from West Point, New York, the American critic Patrick Query comments:

Virtually every thematic element of the poem is contingent, shifting, negotiable, ungovernable. The form, though, is never negotiable, and from that tension emerges the special genius of the poem; and this is why Burns may be said to have written, against impossible odds, a great poem of hope. [. . .] *The Manager* itself is a kind of provisional answer to some of the most vexing questions about the place of poetry in the contemporary world. [. . .] Despite its strangeness, *The Manager*, one might say, is a thoroughly hospitable poem. [. . .] Yet *The Manager* is about more than managing, more than simply hanging on. It is also about the deliberate search for a meaningful order that includes both life's fractious material and its capacity to support utter beauty and joy.¹⁵



¹⁴ Roger Pringle, 'Introduction', *Programme for The Manager*, performed by Jasper Britton, Alexandra Gilbreath, Henry Goodman and Richard Burns, at the Shakespeare Centre, 50th Stratford-upon-Avon Poetry Festival, August 24 2003.

¹⁵ Patrick Query, 'Form and Redemption in *The Manager*', forthcoming in *The Salt Companion to Richard Berengarten*, ed. Norman Jope and Paul Scott Derrick, Salt Publishing, Cambridge, 2009.

As is suggested by this brief outline of some of the critical and editorial responses to *The Manager*, in terms of its balancing on peripheries and positioning along border zones, no other major English poem of our age could have had such a tortuous path towards reception by readers in its own language, while at the same time achieving such consistency of commentary and evaluation from those who have been fortunate enough to discover and respond to it. To conclude this sketch, the scale of its originality and the clarity of its insights are fully recognised by the major theorist of the nuances of modernity, Zygmunt Bauman:

Many have tried, and many more will try, to crack the mystery of our condition, which is unlike any other we or our fathers or mothers have ever known before. Most have failed: our experience seems to escape any nets sewn of words which have been forced into stiff definitions. But images often say more and, unlike arguments, may be used as mirrors to hold up to the countenance of our experience. Richard Burns is master-supreme of images. His images speak, and they speak of truth that cannot be grasped in any other way.¹⁶



The publication of this edition of *The Manager* as a single volume in the ongoing Salt series of Richard Berengarten's *Selected Writings* not only initiates the proper and timely contextualisation of this long poem within his own overall oeuvre, but consolidates its position as a major text of European postmodernism. For this edition, appropriately, the author repossesses his ancestral name.

CHRIS HAMILTON-EMERY
JULY 2008

¹⁶ Zygmunt Bauman, complete text for back cover commendation, 1st edition of *The Manager: a poem*, 2001. Text supplied by RB.

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Of the many friends who have helped me, I should especially like to mention Peter Mansfield (1942–2008), who was ever-available with patient help and advice, and painstakingly shaped and edited the text; Anthony Rudolf, who has been constant in support and encouragement; and Nasos Vayenas, through whose presence composition ended and began.

RB
CAMBRIDGE
2000 & 2008

The Manager

a poem

Under the plane tree an old woman knits. She has passed beyond need or mourning. She neither frowns nor smiles.

She is patterning our destiny. She is fashioning our future. She is reworking fate. She is making history.

We shall bear her across the river. We shall wear every garment she threads. Each evening we shall wash them

And by night hang them out. They will dry under the stars. Swathed in her images, we'll lie naked until morning.



Part One

One

GEMINI

May 22–June 21

This entire week you need to stay on guard. Rely on old friends only. Be thoroughly critical

Of business speculations. New clients may want something you would be sorry to part with.

Beware of approaches of a romantic nature. Your open, generous character may be undermined.

Developments at work will directly affect your love life. Aim to manage your affairs with tact

And circumspection. Avoid making pledges, promises or vows. Lest untamed angels in disguise

Try to enter your confidence, their forked tails and folded wings hidden beneath their smiles,

Particularly Friday. Admit them on no account. They aim to erode you: wear your words away,

Strip them of meanings, empty your acts of hope, sear and scar your heart, ground the flight

Of your dreams, smother you in sorrow. Over the Bank Holiday you may rot and shrink In their shadow.

And sudden breakdown or memory lapse tumble and flood you in darkness.

Two

Our evenings together, my love, are an economic miracle. Glimpsed through a one-way window that never opens.

The Man of Sundays looks in. The Man of Timelessness out. Tattoos are cut in his cheeks and his loincloth

Is pure crocodile. No matter if state subsidised for our educational benefit, he's nearly large as life

And sandwiched safe between Hymns of Praise (which this week comes to us beamed down from the parish of Bishop's Cleaving

With a final five-minute appeal for the Distressed Mortgage-Holders' Fund, a national cause all too close to our hearts)

And our favourite Late-Night Classic, The Sabbatarian Spinechiller, timed to prime us with suitably resonant nightmares

For the onset of our workweek. Edified by such rich appetisers to keep us in trim, Africa O Africa, for our regular

Emotional feastings monitored by digital watch, who needs Freud, needs Guilt. To strains of Oh-Isn't-He-A-Bit-Like-You-And-Me,

Trapped by us in our living room, our crocodile-man can't see anything. He gapes at The World About Us. Never mind.

Tonight it was pork chops. Your eyes are blurred too. At least you've done snipping out your offers from the colour supplements

And in a little while we both will tumble into breathlessness. One after the other. In whichever order we come.

Three

Dad I can't get to sleep. I keep sort of hearing creakings. I'm not really afraid but I am

A bit afraid. I think the noises are coming from over there in the corner. Now my little one. Listen.

On top of that shelf the elves are building a castle. In the corner by the desk

A colony of fairies. All made of light and shadow with bodies that shine like angels. No they don't have wings

Like butterflies. They fly with arms like ours. And on the wardrobe a dragon, four inches long.

His scales drink in sunlight. They swivel to catch the rays. So he can fuel the flame he has for a heart.

His nest is a mess because he kills moths and spiders. He chases them out of dream and turns them yes into stars.

And in the fireplace dwarves are digging to the cellar. To mine the glitter from coal and forge bows and arrows and swords

Tinier and finer than needles. That glint on the air like dust. Each one studded with a thousand sparkling jewels.

Four



Well Charles what'll it be. You must be bloody joking. Put a squirt of vodka in it. Hair of the dog. Hail Mary.

How's your patch doing then. Which branch did you say you're handling. Turnover how much. That can't be bad.

Good ole Middlesex. Firm's longest established cock-up. Everything in triplicate but contracts not a dickybird. Cross between

A morgue and the Natural History Museum. So can't say I'm sorry to hear you've been moved up. Fresh blood just what's wanted

And so much the better if you're making a bit of a go at it. Which must take some doing with Wilkins running the Stanmore show.

I suppose he's still there. Or has he been moved down to Staines. Just as I thought. He's been around for donkeys. Part of the F & F.

I say. I don't like the sound of that Charles. Try one of these antacids. New stuff. Swiss or German. Take two each night

Regularly mind. Works wonders you know. What're you eating. Ploughman's right you are. A scampi for me please my love.

No Wilkie's not a bad stick. Loyal as the corgis. But he's nothing but a glorified super-squaddie really. Always on time with his orders

And always sticks by the book. Never should've got past corporal if you see what I mean. All right sergeant I suppose if you must.

Thinks he can handle policy but won't ever go it alone. Keeps shooting off memos and phoning through to the top. I hear Sir K's

Had a bellyful. Poor ole codger should have got his handshake years ago. We'll have to find a way to kick him upstairs. Cheers.