

The Buffoon

'You have not wasted your time; you have helped to save the world. We are not buffoons, but very desperate men at war with a vast conspiracy.'

– G.K. Chesterton, *The Man Who Was Thursday*

Over the years I have known Harvey Hix and his writing, he has been a facilitator and editor as much as a poet and author. His previous publications have let politicians shoot themselves in the foot by the use of juxtaposed quotations (Bush and Bin Laden in *God Bless*, 2007) and facilitated – or curated – dialogues on the page between writers and artists (*Ley Lines*, 2014), writers who have never met, and writers and their past selves (*Counterclaims: Poets and Poetries, Talking Back*, 2020). In *as much as, if not more than* (2014) Hix's poems enveloped and utilised quotations from contemporary poets, whilst his sonnet sequence 'If Design Govern' in *Lines of Inquiry* (2011) writes about, from and back to a selection of major poets.

It's something of a shock then to be presented with 'The Buffoon', in many ways an unsubtle and direct sequence of polemic, where the titular character 'serves up bullshit' and 'clogs language as tar clogs lungs'. As I write I am unsure if the opening list of Hix's work is a contents list or a poem; either way, the sequence moves on to offer short prose pieces which expand, explain and – worse – make us complicit in this buffoonery. For surely we are all implicated in 'the Dupe' character Hix has created as the Buffoon's antithesis?

Hix has written that '[e]xplanation and evaluation more often follow inspection than attention', and in the same piece ('Rationale', in *Lines of Inquiry*) goes on to argue that '[i]f a poem or painting resembles a joke in that you get it or you don't, then explanation ought to be the last resort of criticism, because it can only occur when the poem/joke is deprived of its best effect, and only as a cause of that deprivation', so I will do my best not to explain but to think around Hix's work.

The Buffoon is clearly not a trickster (though he may be 'the trickster's loutish twin') who dwells in folklore and mythology for comical, moral and humane reasons, nor is he a fool, whose innocence and childlike state reveals hypocrisy and power for what they are. The Buffoon has no morals, his bullshit and debased language is the means to power, the buffoonery a front which hides a real menace: the seeking for and abuse of power in any way possible. We might wonder where Hix got his inspiration from, but we do not have to look far, for both the USA and UK are led by buffoons at the current moment, intent on self-serving strategies, speeches and diversionary spectacles. We might ponder the connection between buffoon and *buffeted*, the effect of the Buffoon upon society,

undoing decades of genuine social and cultural achievement. However, the Buffoon and their entourage are *buffered* from the effects of their own actions; it is only the Buffoon and their comrades who are able to make money in times of national unrest, emergency and lockdown, whilst the rest of the economy and population can go to hell.

But who is it has let the Buffoon into power? The Dupes, that is *us*. We are seduced by 'a person who does silly things, usually to make other people laugh', which is how the dictionary defines buffoon. Somehow, even if we did not vote for the Buffoon (in a democratic system that thinks 6 outvoting 5 mean the 6 are right, and that this is a fair system which represents 'the voice of the people') we are complicit in allowing the Buffoon a political platform, each one of us 'a sucker for symbol over substance'. Hix is even harsher on this point, stating that '[i]n search of self-interest, the Dupe buys whatever the Buffoon is selling'. This selling is aggressive and perverse, riding on the back of deceit and scaremongering: 'The Buffoon hollers *fire* in a crowded theater, and the Dupe panics.'

And to accompany the written exploration of buffoonery, flags, collaged together from images of big business, politics, war, ecological disaster, occupation, exploitation, news and popular culture – the detritus of consumer society, Western capitalism and colonialism – assembled into recognisable bars and stripes. It may be that '[t]he Buffoon causes a lot of collateral damage', but remember it is 'the Dupe [who] buys whatever the Buffoon is selling.'

So, what are flags? They are signs of belonging, of tribe and nation, team, club or society. They are territorial (terroritorial?) and many people take this stuff seriously. In Cornwall, where I live, there are a sizeable number of residents who object to incomers like myself, even though it is tourism and incomers (not to mention grants from the European Union) which have helped move parts of the county out of severe deprivation and poverty. The Cornish flag is a white cross on a black background and regarded as a sign of resistance and separation, with many locals arguing that Cornwall should be separate from England and the United Kingdom. On my first visit to the United States, to teach sailing at a summer camp in Michigan, the mornings began with the raising of a flag and the singing of a patriotic song. When a group of English camp instructors were asked to organise a British Day, we were naive enough to put a Union Jack up the flagpole above the American flag, only to be coldly informed that we could have been shot for doing so. The flags were hastily re-arranged, and the day proceeded uneventfully.

But flags can also be deconstructed and revealed as what they are, simply arrangements of shapes and symbols. Artist Jasper Johns layered and patterned

variations of the American flag, turning it into pop art, before later re-imagining it in white. One of Tom Phillips' ongoing art projects reproduces flags he has found on old picture postcards, where poor quality print and separation has transformed any flags present in to small blurred areas of colour. Painted large they become abstract canvasses without any political or regional meaning.

We talk of things being *flagged* up, drawn to our attention; we are to take note. And we may say that we are *flagging*, tired and worn out, unable to keep up our energy or enthusiasm. Perhaps more pertinent are the signal flags used by the navy, which – along with the simple flag system used by platform managers and train guards on the railways – mean we all know what is signified by a red flag being waved. Danger!

'The Buffoon' may come as a shock to Hix's readers used to more subtlety, but it is Hix's way of waving a red flag, to warn and scare us, to remind us that '[w]e have given our hearts away to a sordid Buffoon.' We cannot be reminded of this often nor directly enough. Fascist politics must go, pandemic or no pandemic, global crisis or not. The Buffoon is still pushing his NeoLiberal agenda, still making money out of others' despair, poverty, illness and unwillingness to speak out. As Hix's argumentative, belligerent and accomplished text makes clear, it is time to oust The Buffoon and his cronies.

'I took him for a kind of buffoon. Now I see he is a devil.'
– Iris Murdoch, *The Green Knight*

Rupert Loydell, May 2020