

INCUBUS: A New Preface

By Nicki Jackowska <http://nickijackowska.co.uk> 5 October 2015

*Incubus* was published by The Menard Press in 1981. It sat comfortably among Menard's more overtly polemical pamphlets, an honour to be alongside Sir Martin Ryle and Lord Zuckerman, among many other thinkers and writers of exceptional quality in their own field.

I might have said, at one time, I am a 'mere' poet, but now in 2015 and thirty-four years later, it is no longer possible to say that. I've seen a single poem of mine travel far and long, have a profound influence. From text to collection, to an International Conference in Warsaw, and thence to become the springboard for an entire evening's expression of *Behold's* themes.

Here is my Introductory Note to the original pamphlet:

*These poems were written in the face of a possible nuclear holocaust. They approach obliquely and personally, by way of love and potential death. Our urges towards life and love are being warped, our consciousness and language contaminated. Birth, rebirth and creativity have become a kind of defiance. We are even now victims of a criminal assault on our lives. The poems look back to previous crimes against humanity, and attempt to confront the lies which prevent us looking reality in the eye. They also explore the relationships which are being established between love and this most unnatural of deaths.*

I've now re-read *Incubus* several times, and am astonished at its relevance for present catastrophes. Aside from the Introduction's first paragraph, the rest could have been written in the face of the Nazi Holocaust or any other genocide or humanitarian crisis.

Approaching the too-monstrous issue by devious routes, the writer can infinitely increase the power of words to realise and evoke. Were I to spend a lifetime writing a head-on description of the devastation of Hiroshima – such as is still being recalled and documented on film – I would not move you more than one line I heard recently:

*You will only put your child on a boat  
when it is safer than the land...*

Benedict Cumberbatch quoted this at the close of his performance of Hamlet, in an appeal for this millions of refugees and immigrants trying to reach a safe haven, let alone a ‘home’.

*Incubus* does not evoke a nuclear explosion. The poems move quietly into cracks in our awareness, where the threat lies hidden, simmering, malignant, scarcely conscious. The poems address the affect of that threat, its monumental proportions. That which we cannot consciously accommodate. They also address how we may speak the failure and triumph of language, how we may mate with the devil as well as oppose him.

In these poems I speak with my own voice and the voices of others, use risky juxtapositions, subtle discomforts. I question, dislodge, sing and play. The intimacy of love and death, the sudden presence of an eagle in an English garden, places of safety, temporary refuge, these ironies. From *Opening Lines*:

*You would have thought, said god, that they  
had learned enough by now to get beyond  
the first line,  
and closed the book, bored  
by the story and the songs of  
death in his nursery...*

As I read, three ‘moments’ (in the Hegelian sense) run in parallel: the Holocaust; the Nuclear threat; millions of stateless, homeless refugees running from death,

and towards – what? To live somehow, somewhere. Not to mention technology run riot, German efficiency, splitting the atom, digital transformation, the Search Engines that hunt us all.

Thus, thirty-four years later, I am once more at the core of these issues that are re-cast upon peoples time after time. Casting their shadow also upon my imaginative life, my history – personal and public – and the work that is demanded, of necessity. Questions race in: how can a small pamphlet of poems, written in the decade before publication, rise to such relevance in 2015. I think of endurance, connections, the universality locked into the detail, the underground work, gestation and survival. Here I'm referring to the human spirit, all our languages, the body's memory, the transcendent power of art which yet remains rooted in earth and flesh. Embodied we must remain, or the cry of protest is empty rhetoric.

*Behold*, the text and the event, lies close to *Incubus*. They are intimately entwined. Just as the burning child at Hiroshima is kin to she, placed in a boat to escape the land's death blows.

*Behold*, re-telling *Incubus*, is a single text which gave rise to a new form of theatre. Looking forward, and to where next I must go, I invite you to view my involvement in a new project: *1001caps – Un Poema Visual*, which installation will both speak for itself, embrace my texts and collaborate in further performance of humanity's challenge – to know itself.

Links to: *Behold*, the Event

*1001caps – Un Poema Visual* <https://vimeo.com/108393043>

More material under Jackowska at <http://www.ilankelman.org/menard.html>

Original reviews of:

Jackowska, N. 1984. Incubus. The Menard Press, London, U.K.

Full text at <http://www.ilankelman.org/menard/Jackowska1981.pdf> (2,928 in PDF).

Sombre, and yet with a very real feeling for life, the poems battle with the corruption in our attitudes towards such matters as birth, rebirth and creativity that is brought about by the permanent threat hanging over us.....(she) knows how to choose her words carefully and when to stop using them and let the silence make its own impact.

- Jim Burns, TRIBUNE

Very interesting poems, based on love in relation to the nuclear threat. Menard are getting involved in the nuclear debate and this book is a fine bridge between their poetry list and their new concerns..... Do not think that here we have depressingly similar poems. The themes on the surface are individual, but the work as a whole takes one past the obvious towards a deeper and more worthwhile meaning.

- PRINTER'S PIE

Like any poet worth listening to these days, Nicki Jackowska is sharply aware of the nuclear danger and her poems are the result of a kind of gritty wonderment to be flung in the face of Thanatos.

- Jeff Nuttall, THE GUARDIAN