

HUBERT BUTLER ESSAY PRIZE 2026

EDOARDO COPPI - WINNER OF THE HUBERT BUTLER ESSAY PRIZE 2026



"My essay argues that high culture rarely acts as a lever on events, but works instead as an atmosphere — the slow shaping of what a community can imagine, forgive, and recognise as human in the other. That argument did not start with this prize. It goes back to my degree thesis on the eclipse of the individual within the crowd, from Kierkegaard and Nietzsche to Freud, Benjamin and Adorno, which already asked how a person's judgment can dissolve into a mass, and what, if anything, resists that dissolution. Writing the essay felt like returning to that question from the other side: not what makes a crowd capable of cruelty, but what keeps a culture capable of imagining the person that cruelty overlooks. The essay's most personal moment, for me, is the smallest one: an afternoon teaching the victims of Nazi-fascism to students in the Val Trompia, a valley that has manufactured firearms for generations. Nothing about that hour changed what those students' families produce, but something shifted for fifty minutes, and I still think about it. Winning a prize named after Hubert Butler, a writer who kept an inconvenient truth alive for decades before anyone was ready to hear it, feels like a confirmation that this kind of slow, largely invisible work is worth continuing. I am very grateful to the judges and to the Kilkenny Arts Festival, and I am looking forward to being in Kilkenny for the ceremony." Edoardo Coppi, July 2026

Edoardo Coppi teaches Italian, History and Geography at a secondary school in Gardone Val Trompia, in the province of Brescia, and works as an independent scholar based in the Bassa Mantovana, along the Po Valley. He holds two master's degrees: one in Philosophical Sciences from the Università Cattolica di Milano, awarded summa cum laude, with a thesis on the eclipse of the individual within the crowd, from Kierkegaard and Nietzsche to Freud, Reich, Marcuse, Benjamin, Horkheimer and Adorno; and one in Modern Philology from eCampus University, with a thesis tracing the Enlightenment and Roman republican roots of the American constitutional process, from Machiavelli through Harrington, Locke and Montesquieu to the Founding Fathers. His broader interests include cultural memory theory, drawing on Eco, Warburg and Benjamin, and the social

history of Mantuan elite families during the early Habsburg period. He is the author of the novel *L'archivista degli omicidi dimenticati* (Montag, 2025) and collaborates with the cultural project *terre_basse*. He also practises ceramics and remains deeply attached to the landscape of the Bassa Padana, which often surfaces as both setting and subject in his writing.

INTRODUCTION BY PROFESSOR ROY FOSTER

‘Poetry makes nothing happen’ (W.H.Auden). What impact can high culture make in the real world?

In a mischievous essay about the poet Patrick Kavanagh, Hubert Butler suggested that for an over-stable society, poets play the role of naughty children, breaking windows and relieving the stuffy air. But in the 1930s, with society ‘shattered and rocking’, what had been a ‘pleasant freshness... became an ominous draught’, and with the political posturings of D’Annunzio and Pound, ‘poetry, like a neglected adolescent, met with bad companions’.

Perhaps this could be read as a characteristically subtle and quizzical response to W.H.Auden’s great elegy for W.B.Yeats, with its ambiguous assertion that ‘poetry makes nothing happen’. For the ninth Hubert Butler Essay Prize the response to this quotation inspired a record sixty-eight essays, many of a very high standard, and submitted from all over Europe. Many of the readings of Auden’s poem were impressively nuanced and complex, focussing on the implicit contradiction between not making things happen, and yet surviving as ‘a way of happening, a mouth’. The concept of ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture also received some stringent examination. Jonathan Nassim’s sparkling essay began with the Queen of the Night’s aria from *The Magic Flute* and returned to Papageno at the end, via Ludwig Koch’s recordings of birdsong in wartime: echoing the survival of poetry itself. Writing from Hungary, Adam Porkolab’s beautifully-constructed contribution revolved around the two desks in his apartment, one for the rational ordering of data in his working life, the other containing an accumulation of inspirational materials for his own writing; his discussion of the poet János Pilsinszky’s response to writing about atrocity was just one of several occasions in these essays where my fellow-judges and I were introduced to a new writer and thinker. Indeed, the range of reference and argument across these pieces was daunting; not just Matthew Arnold and Theodor Adorno recur, but Karl Kraus, T.E.Hulme, Victor Frankl and Clement Greenberg. But the best of

the essays delivered far more than name-dropping, and those that suggested artificial intelligence rather than midnight oil were blessedly few.

Above all, there was a striking number of defences of poetry's relevance in circumstances of crisis, invoking examples from Ukraine, Romania, Gaza and histories closer to home. Josephine Balmer approached Auden and Yeats via a strikingly intertextual range of classical and modern authors, and her own use of poetic practice as a 'steadying influence' at times of grief. Notably, Hubert Butler's own work was subjected to close and appreciative reading, in analyses as such as Colm O'Shea's invocation of the 'anthill' metaphor which informed the first volume of Butler's now legendary volumes of essays. The key concept of the local sphere offering writers a crucial site of resistance to the imposition of totalitarian generalisations echoed through many of the pieces we read and reflects the abiding influence of Butler's quietly subversive thought.

With such riches at our disposal, the extraordinary thing was that Catriona Crowe, Nicholas Grene, Barbara Schwepcke and I were completely unanimous in choosing the winner. Edoardo Coppi's essay went straight to the heart of the matter, addressing with force and elegance the question of how culture functions in the world, especially at catastrophic times. In Coppi's trenchant view the traceability of cultural forces is not a matter of levers and triggers, but cumulative and atmospheric developments. The way Butler's essays on atrocities in wartime Croatia preserved an alternative memory is instanced, echoed in the Ukrainian writer Serhiy Zhadan's determination to protect a cultural deposit in Kharkiv today. But the moving climax of the essay swerves to a moment of epiphany in a Lombardy classroom, when 'something shifted' and a realisation of the connection between past and present dawned on the students. This provides a vitalising instance of culture's traceability in the 'real world' and 'a way of happening' in the most important sense. 'Winning a prize named after Hubert Butler, a writer who kept an inconvenient truth alive for decades before anyone was ready to hear it', Edoardo Coppi has said, 'feels like a confirmation that this kind of slow, largely invisible work is worth continuing.' His powerful essay gives ample proof of that, and so does the flourishing existence of this prize.

Roy Foster, Chair of the Hubert Butler Essay Prize 2026