

TOWER POETRY REVIEWS
2004–2014

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REVIEWS

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Selected and introduced by
Peter McDonald



2015

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PETER MCDONALD

Introduction

Reviewing contemporary poetry is no easy matter; and I, for one, can think of no universal formula for how it is best done. Maybe, indeed, it is best not done at all. The problems are varied, for no two collections strike out in quite the same directions, and no two poets (good, bad, or indifferent) operate in exactly the same ways. Nevertheless, one difficulty for a reviewer is so huge that it is almost impossible to face squarely, let alone to solve: the audience for a review of contemporary poetry is not only tiny by comparison with that for other kinds of writing, but also made up largely of other poets. Maybe, then, not as tiny as all that, for there are really quite a few of these. And poets – as literary history, not to mention common sense, should tell us – are not signed up to many disinterested conceptions of literary culture and critical discussion. They are, on the contrary, interested in often the most heated and intense ways: as vigilant guardians of their own art and its aesthetic (if we want to put it grandly), or as querulous and thin-skinned careerists (if we prefer – and I don't recommend this – a blunter way of putting things). By and large, nobody listens to things like poetry reviews apart from other poets, and those involved in the forever failing, but quietly heroic cottage-industry of its production and promotion. The exercise of

critical judgement (and again, that might be too grand an expression) does not take place on any wide field of engagement, with important things at stake; rather, as has been said before, it is more like a knife-fight in a phone box – intimate, cramped, and unlikely to end well. Everybody gets hurt.

Now, this seems an extraordinarily negative note to be sounding at the beginning of a collection of reviews of poetry from the last ten years. Shouldn't the other side of the coin be shown first? After all, a critic's judgement might as well – might better, really – run to appreciation as to dislike; that way, certainly, nobody will suffer harm. And this is true; I myself, as a critic, try nowadays only to write when I am being spurred on by a genuine admiration for the poems in front of my nose. Naturally, I would like to be able to appreciate more of what I encounter, and I'd be the first to concede that my failure to do so isn't necessarily the poetry's fault. For appreciation is one of the highest skills in criticism, and one of the rarest: it is worth aspiring to. There is a difference, though, between appreciation and approval, just as there is a divide between literary criticism and promotional copy. Much of what passes for critical discussion of contemporary poetry is (and for some time has been) merely a form of recommendation, one that tends to the hyperbolic. I do not believe that reviewing should be a form of professional networking; but I have to acknowledge that here the facts are against me. In time, all the hyperbole proves corrosive: it should be no surprise that, the higher the volume of praise from reviewers and prize juries, directed in predictable ways to a consistently small circle of predictable names, the less a general reading public feels inclined to tolerate contemporary poetry.

It is customary to lament this supposed lack of interest in poetry, as though, somehow, the right kind of positive messaging from poetry-recommenders could put it right. It can't, of course (I have

witnessed more than a quarter-century of its failure); and in truth the problem is nothing so innocent as a lack of interest: it is at best passive dislike, and at worst principled antipathy directed against the kind of poetry promoted by people whose interests are (often rather visibly) vested ones. None of this matters very much – as far as I know, it doesn't stop good new poetry being written, published, or enjoyed – but it does mean that the possibilities for alert, engaged, and stimulating criticism of new collections in the public sphere become both fewer and more circumscribed. Immediately, I think of certain reviewers and platforms as exceptions to this rule; still, I believe, they are just that – exceptions.

So, to the present small collection of reviews. Since 2005, Tower Poetry's website has hosted reviews of new volumes of verse (along with very occasional reviews of books about poetry). By no means everything has been covered: 126 reviews over a decade isn't all that many – and even this just-better-than-one-a-month figure fails to take account of the numerous months in which no new reviews were appearing. If not quite haphazard, the coverage was not (let's say) carefully planned. Even so, one ambition of the Tower reviews section was to find some of the best reviewers – often, but by no means always, younger poets – and to give them the freedom to write what they liked about new books of poetry. Nobody was told what to approve or disapprove, or taken to task editorially for what they had written. Perhaps as a result of this, Tower hosted some exceptionally interesting and searching pieces of criticism over the ten years, and provided a platform on which a number of emerging critical talents could find their feet.

One problem about reviews as a literary form is that people tend to simplify them on sight, so that they can become only one of two things: 'good' or 'bad'. Actually, many of the best reviews (whether on

Tower or elsewhere) are more complicated than that; but it is the 'good' or the 'bad' label, and nothing much else, that gets remembered. So, one of the nuggets of received wisdom in the British poetry world is that Tower has given more than its share of 'bad' reviews, often to the kinds of poet who never (in the usual course of things) are subject to any kind of 'bad' reception. Reading through all of our reviews for the purpose of making this selection, though, I have been struck by two things: first, that there are far fewer 'bad' reviews than that particular myth supposes; and second, that any negative judgements made have been backed up by illustrations and detailed readings: the evidence has always been on the table. The same applies, in respect of quality of close reading, to positive evaluations being made in our reviews; and here, I think, properly critical appreciation takes the place of prefabricated general praise. We managed, in other words, to hold contemporary poetry (or some of it, at least) to standards that were clear and generous, but were standards for all that, rather than infinitely flexible antennae of prevailing fashion.

I do wonder, though, whether this degree of independence would have been possible in many other reviewing environments. In print journalism, for example, an editor might legitimately lose patience with reviews of contemporary poetry that suggested something – sometimes, a lot – was lacking: if this is the case, he might conclude, why bother with reviewing the stuff in the first place? And in fact (or in my subjective, unverified sense of things) the last ten years have seen less reviewing of new poetry in mainstream print media. This could be owing to the other besetting problem, that of praise-inflation: if everything is so marvellously good, why aren't more people reading it? On the web, of course, freedom appears to be a kind of absolute; but here, too, the reviewing of new poetry is (with exceptions) also anxious to do the expected thing, and keener, as

criticism, to be up to the minute than up to scratch. Proliferation and freedom are not the same.

I should add that the measure of freedom Tower has enjoyed has not been won without a price; and, indeed, that such freedom cannot maintain itself indefinitely. I'm sure my own role as director of Tower over the years has occasioned some of this (nothing edited by me, indeed, could ever expect the approval of influential poetry-figures who have kept me very fully appraised of their intense and bitter enmity, occasioned by, yes, my own reviewing from longer than a decade ago). But this isn't the whole story. I have, for example, a fairly large file of reviewers' emails (more of them from recent years) that apologise for not being able to review this or that book, on the grounds that it is a poor one, and that its author, or his or her publisher, would never forgive any reviewer who pointed that out. I, of all people, can hardly say such fears are groundless. The rise in the academic industry (maybe a better term would be the guild) of 'creative writing' has also, I suspect, helped to tighten lips: might not a 'bad' review, after all, be taken as a declaration that some (doubtless expensive) practitioner was not fit for their post, or worth the cost of their courses? Would lawsuits be far behind? (In the academic world of English Literature before the advent of 'creative writing', Professor X could quarrel in print with Professor Y's footnoting skills, his gaps of reading, and even his fundamental ability to read, without fear of the corporate lawyers; but call a new poem a dud, and its author – nowadays more than likely to feature in glossy promotional materials from his University as that wonderful thing, 'a published poet' – may feel obliged to fight for his professional life by threatening yours.) The climate for critical reviewing of poetry is no better now than it was ten years ago; it may perhaps be worse; and I myself have no appetite either for the endless grudge-match against the

professional promoters of poetry, for whom everything they promote must be beyond any kind of critical stricture, or for allowing intelligent and original younger critics to compromise their own prospects in the little creative/academic world where – maybe, one day, with a few breaks – they might end up making a living.

Have the last ten years been good ones for poetry? Candidly, there's no easy answer to a question like that, and the nearest I can come to an honest response – that I suppose they've been OK – might well be hopelessly off the mark. This selection of Tower reviews gives a certain amount of insight into what has been happening, but by no means a comprehensive one: there are gaps, and some of those gaps look pretty big to me (can we really never have reviewed Don Paterson?), though these are all the results of accident, not design. Nevertheless, the pieces that follow here do encompass a lot, and they manage this (I believe) intelligently, searchingly, and often wittily: whether they're 'right' or 'wrong' in their judgements really isn't for me to say – nor indeed for anyone to decide for quite a few years to come. In the meantime, I hope they offer at least a glimpse of what good poetry reviewing might look like, and provide a measure of intellectual stimulation, thought-provoking attentiveness, and (why not?) literate entertainment that goes beyond their immediate occasions.

MATTHEW SPERLING

John Fuller, *Ghosts*

November 2004

The key terms for John Fuller's work are adjectives like 'skillful', 'accomplished', 'stylish', 'graceful', and nouns like 'ease', 'elegance', 'mastery', 'fluency', 'facility'. It might not be unreasonable to bring all these terms under a single heading: 'Oxford'. Fuller is in a succession (some would call it a 'mainstream') of Oxford-educated poets who have shared and promoted these values, running from Auden and his satellites (including Fuller's father, Roy) through Betjeman, Larkin and his pals, down to James Fenton (Fuller's student), Andrew Motion, and so on.

The critic Andrew Duncan has recently characterized this tradition less favourably: 'narcissistic, theatrical, aware of style and of holding an audience, anti-political, preoccupied by surfaces, precocious but failing to develop'. This is going a little far; to write off Auden, say, in these terms, is surely to throw the baby out with the bathwater. But it's important to acknowledge dissenting voices like Duncan's, and to consider whether they might have a point.

It's the last item on Duncan's charge-sheet which is the most telling; and it's related to the last terms in my list of adjectives. The precocity comes with early fluency – the self-confidence, the ready eloquence, the sense of secure, unchanging values that an Oxford education can help to give some people. But fluency, facility – finding things easy to do, and

being praised for them at a young age – can easily stop you from trying anything more difficult, or anything new. It's easy for a writer of great facility to produce a sort of poem which quickly becomes facile.

Ghosts is John Fuller's fifteenth collection. It is, at all times, fluent and accomplished. There are no bum-notes, no howlers, no solecisms. The whole texture is smoothly masterful. Anyone who's ever been talked at in a too-hot lecture theatre or an oak-panelled book-lined study will recognize the EngLit suavity:

Take the example of
Virginia Woolf, who
In 1941
Walked into the Ouse on
The 28th of March,
Thus forever putting
From her like a locked door
The fear of going mad.

Before we fall for this, with its seductive hints of Nicole Kidman in a wet dress, and Phillip Glass tastefully droning in the background, we might consider how the parody of scruple presented by the cautious dating, the scholarly mannerisms ('Take... thus...') fails to cover up the absolute cliché of the phrasing ('like a locked door') and the banality and glibness of the thought. This second poem in the book, 'Prescience', starts by telling us that Death 'will arrive when it / Decides to, and will not / Be denied' (Hold the front page!) then jog-trots us through 88 lines of limp trimeter.

This trope of over-extension runs almost throughout; we get poems of 32 stanzas, of 29, of 20, of 19, of 18... It adds up to about 1,500 lines altogether, but the number that can raise the pulses, or excite, or amuse, is in the high dozens, not the hundreds; not a great hit-rate. Too much of the book is footling, deliberately trivial. 'Dates' spends eight stanzas

toying with the sort of high-table trivia even Larkin wrote off in a few choice phrases ('regicide and rabbit-pie'). 'Final Moves' spends eighteen lines thinly versifying a correspondence chess match: 'Your Kg8... Your Ng5' (Fuller is routed here, incidentally, by Beckett's more thorough and witty presentation of a chess match in *Murphy*). That both these poems are also about death, like most of the poems in the book, does not make them any more serious.

This isn't to say that there are no good things in the book; just that they are drowned out by fillers, by lines that sound bored, and are boring. It's no coincidence that some of the best moments come in the sonnet-sequence 'Happy': the exigencies of rhyme, and compact form, spark Fuller into life, and also bring us the one moment of real joy, as a baby walks and topples over: 'Viva the vertical! Hey, horizontal!' This living and excitable language, alert from moment to moment, is echoed later: 'That route between Now and Now / Which is a continued delight'. But it is, we are told, for 'the future man', for the young, not for the poet. Elsewhere the poems seem strongly aware of their attenuation and lack, of their failings; and it is these moments which are captivating:

These pedantic evasions
Are symbols of real guilt
At our terrible failings,

Of our retreat to podiums
Of self-esteem, to pillows
Of sobbing disgust.

This is a moment of genuine insight. We might point out, however, that there's nothing more evasive than recognizing an evasion, then proceeding to carry on the same way as before.

It's difficult not to read lines as lax and boring as these –

What has always been said is also
True: you can't take it with you.
[...]
Thank God for Nature when supplies
Fail us. I can write by sunlight
Though it will not bring me Handel.

– without the hackles, and the heckles, rising: Why am I being addressed like this? What do you want from me? Am I allowed to refuse to 'thank God'? The poems are full of uses of 'we', 'you', and 'us', whose gestures of inclusion are evasive as well as coercive.

There's a question of tact here. Fuller is, by all accounts, a generous, meticulous and inspiring teacher, and he has written at least one brilliant book, *Flying to Nowhere*. Does he really deserve a drubbing from some kid who's never played chess, or even listened to Handel? I want to suggest that, yes, he does. There's something wrong with a literary culture which rewards a writer who, despite his obvious and genuine talents, produces ever-less energetic and vigorous work in a style established forty years ago. Perhaps Fuller, and the people who give him his laurels, should take more seriously his warning: 'Of our retreat to podiums / Of self-esteem'.

© Matthew Sperling, 2004
John Fuller, *Ghosts*, Chatto & Windus, 2004.
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OLIVIA COLE

Alan Jenkins, *A Shorter Life*

April 2005

A Shorter Life, Alan Jenkins' fifth collection and his first since 2000, finds him as 'rudderless' as in his much admired, elegiac volume, *The Drift*. 'Too late, all the dead in the river are my friends' – poems about lost friends and lovers, and the poet's late mother, movingly people this new volume with the characters that even the most cack-handed 'life' writer would pick out as significant.

Sometimes brutal, sometimes comic and consistently arresting, the chapters offered deploy a harsh aesthetic regret – at misjudgements and mistakes, 'the different women differently let down,/the rewind of your life you see before you drown –'. Over all this is the shadowy question of whether his own go at life justifies the luck in not dying – like friends – far ahead of his time. 'Cousins' finds the poet at home in the garden, a warm twilit moment, his mother calling him back from the morbid guilt that wonders uneasily at 'the rewards of not dying young'. The writer's life is pitted against the solid colour and domesticity of his parents' lives and is constantly shown as a force of disruption, carelessness, misery. 'Galatea' sees the speaker cursed by a lover, casting him off, in his little boat, 'in your little craft of wood,/Your little craft of words.'

The poems about childhood, full of warmth and affection, for all the sickly queasiness of adult loss, paint a far happier scene than each of

the unfinished conversations of 'yet another almost-love affair'. It is these poems that are the collection's most troubled and troubling poems – unresolved, bereft and burnished with facts which though the poet might wish to change, he does not balk from revealing, however wretched the details being dragged into the light. An unanswerable frankness proves the best tone for questions for which there are no answers, as in 'As if',

The scents of cedar, maple and pitch-pine
through the open window brought her back,
I spun the car off the US 101, the slightly curved spine
between Hopland and Cloverdale, no turning back
and climbed out and started clawing at the earth
with my bare hands, as if . . .

However colloquial or crude, there's a contained, often almost painfully uncluttered lucidness – a frankness that always seems to find its honest, loving voice far too late: 'And once she said, out of the blue/if we couldn't talk, if all we could share/was time, there wasn't any point in going on' (Heritage).

A love life, though, is only a part of a life and only a half-baked 'life writer' might seek to suggest otherwise. Conscience-troubled remembrances of 'almost love affairs' might make for coruscating 'almost love' poems but an 'almost' life divorced from living is not the story told by the humanity of so many of *A Shorter Life's* elegies and memories, whether about family or friends.

The poems about Jenkins's mother are difficult to read – the same disinclination to edit that gives the recollections of past lovers their frankness and immediacy, makes for an almost unbearably raw sequence of elegies. Similarly, the powerful (and aptly unembellished) 'Rotisserie (The Wait)' and '(The Return)', about the late Ian Hamilton, are not so much elegies as flinching evocations of a state of grief: 'These nights, I

have to keep going back/To meet you, though it's still only me there' . . . Stood up by circumstance beyond anyone's control, he cannot stand the thought of his friend 'prevented . . . /From joining me, from getting up and going,/To the phone, out to the tall night, anywhere.' The poem's second part, '(The Return)', is a dream of the same city, the same table, the same horribly lit restaurant all too believable a stage set, empty of 'you' to light it up, 'feign an interest in the menu, fail to choose/And blind our waitress with a smile, a show of shrugs.'

While Jenkins knows how and when to send up his world (see the definitive from *A Shorter Literary Life*: 'in the taxi back to my hotel . . . "Do you like Neruda?" "Who doesn't?" (Do I hell.)'), so too can he explain the appeal, never with more uncompromising equipoise than in 'Ex-Poet'. Writer lovers learn how 'life can break free of loneliness and fear/To be this richer, riskier thing, like theirs/Who searched for the beautiful and true . . .'

What's worth more – their love or their receptiveness to visions? Or can the two be un-teased? 'Beauty', demythologised, in one of the collection's loveliest and wisest lines, turns out to be 'how all things ache/To be expressed'. It's a house of cards of a poem that, like *A Shorter Life* as a whole, won't quite collapse either in favour of its hopefulness or its grim, emphatic last words: 'He loved then, light that burned his northern eyes . . . what was made/And made well, no-one could unmake./The girl's long gone. What he wrote were lies.' A 'richer riskier thing' turns out to be a description as apt for the poetry written and the kinds of love that last, as for the lives that might have been.

© Olivia Cole, 2005

Alan Jenkins, *A Shorter Life*, Chatto & Windus, 2005.

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ALAN GILLIS

David Herd, *Mandelson! Mandelson! A Memoir*

May 2005

We learn of other potential titles for this book in a poem called: 'In which the Poet, Trying to Come up with a Title for the book he is Writing, becomes Anecdotal; and his Loyal Companion of Several Years Standing Helps Out by Throwing a Log on the Fire'. Among these other titles, we are given:

Captain Correlli's Mandolin,
Naïve and Sentimental Music,
My Captain, My Captain,
The Peter Mandelson Years,
Sun Rising in the Absence of Trees,
I Alone Escaped to Tell Thee,
My Spirit so High it was all over the Heavens,
Southend, at Dead of Night,
My Spirit so High I nearly Crashed the Car,
On the Road,
On the Buses,
Dial 4 to Change your Personal Options,
We Campaign in Poetry, Govern in Prose ...

Suffice to say, this isn't a memoir of Peter Mandelson. Or, if it is, it certainly isn't an authorized version:

For instance, I have colleagues,
Good, sweet colleagues,
Unaware that on vacation
I am the assistant ambassador chief

To the young republic of Kazakhstan;
And friends, friends I have sung and danced with
Friends I have stepped to the brink and back with
In all the years we have known and wept

Have only met one of my wives.

The blurb at the back of the book tells us that, rather than a memoir, this is actually 'a story of life in the age of Mandelson'. Suffice to say, however, we don't really get a story. Instead, we get a dizzy and disorienting chain of teasing, clever, breezy challenging, ingratiating, and infuriating poems.

David Herd has written a book of criticism called *John Ashbery and American Poetry*. While many other contemporary writers in Britain and Ireland register Ashbery's influence to some degree, few do so with the all-encompassing fervor of Herd. Ashbery's poetry ranges from disjunctive opacity to fulgent lyricism to knockabout comedy. He's known for his verbal games, collages, and for the way his tone constantly shifts, often abruptly veering from parody to elegiac pathos (sometimes it's hard to know where one ends and the other begins). Also, his verse notably betrays a sense that each poem is 'the chronicle of the creative act that produces it', as Ashbery has said about the work of his friend, Frank O'Hara.

Herd seems to base his poetry on this latter idea (this also provided

the focus for his critical book), so that almost everything in *Mandelson!* is written in a jaunty, open-minded present tense – sometimes confused, sometimes reflective, sometimes poignant, and often funny – creating a vivid sense of ‘live action’ and process:

One man, stripped to the waist, tattoos depicting life at sea,
Throws bricks – two at a time – to another man standing on the
scaffold.
Often, as the bricks reach the top of their trajectory, they part and
this would be
impossible to handle,
If the man receiving, leaning from the scaffold, his bulk dependent,
on load-bearing bars
Didn't catch them at the moment of downward momentum, as the
weight shifts.
There, he dropped one.

As these quotations hopefully show, the levity of Herd's wit, speed of thought-shift, and deft rhetorical playfulness make his poetry, in full flight, a thing of buoyant ebullience. The book begins with a ‘Disclaimer’, a remarkable prose piece, which begins: ‘The question is: “Are you happy?”’, and which pours forth into a tide of further questions, spinning into one another, bouncing off one another, interjecting, side-stepping, self-circling, expanding, and contradicting one another in a happily head-twisting flood.

As such, the book's opening reveals much about what will follow. Its present tense, processual style creates a light, fluid, free-ranging momentum that is capable of jumping registers and switching emphasis in a beat (and it does so, wantonly). This happens within poems, but also between them, so that the collection strives to open us out to a multitudinous unpredictability. This reaches its peak as the book unexpectedly throws up a very funny Noh play called ‘Peter! Peter!’, and

then abruptly launches into a stunning and quite profound prose piece describing the biological process of breathing. However, on the down side, Herd is often too whimsical, at times, and abruptly obscure at others. The sense of flight and fun ultimately falters, or, at least, remains unfortunately slight. I'm quite sure this slightness and aloofness is intentional; but, to my mind, Herd misplays his hand too often.

If we return to the idea of the book as a memoir of Mandelson, we can cut to the heart of the collection. That this isn't a memoir of Mandelson is part of a clever joke – the punch-line being that nobody knows who Mandelson is (or New Labour, or the people running the country and invading others). If Mandelson is the architect of New Labour and the archetypal spin doctor, then it is entirely pertinent that the book's poetic style is all surface and no substance. That Mandy is given wives adds to the joke – the sense in which all language tends to say one thing when the reality is something other. Indeed, the point is, no doubt, that reality and truth have themselves become irretrievably lost, and that there is no such thing as politics, as we conventionally think of them, any more. That the book is not about Mandy or politics at all is, most likely, entirely the point.

John Ashbery and the ‘New York’ poets developed Herd's kind of style in the late 1940s and early 1950s. We're often told that they're called ‘postmodern’ rather than ‘modern’ because they respond to the disempowerments of the twentieth century with wit, irreverence, comedy, and the illusion of accessibility, rather than with po-faced complexity, seriousness, and overt despair. Whether the age of Mandelson has called forth a renaissance of the ‘New York’ style, or whether Mandy-politics are simply a symptom of wider historical contexts that have been building for decades, and for which something like the ‘New York’ style is an almost perfect aesthetic, is a moot question (one which Herd's book implicitly asks). But the fact that Herd ultimately lets his clearly considerable talent froth into a seemingly self-satisfied aesthetic is disappointing. As the book proceeds, it falls back upon a narcissistic poetic

trickery that goes nowhere, and which thus reflects rather than parodies the world of Mandy. Of course, this is also quite possibly intentional – a fatalistic but serious point rendered as a latent and arch ironic joke.

In conclusion, then, this is a flawed but fresh and welcome book, and David Herd is a poet worth paying close attention to. My gripes mostly stem from the fact that I like my poems a little bit less ‘open’, a little bit more centripetally magnetized, than these, and that I think such wit, play, invention and irreverence can and should be used as more direct weapons than this book manages. But, for all that, there are many poems here that will put a spring in your step, and make your mind dance, and these are most welcome indeed.

© Alan Gillis, 2005

David Herd, *Mandelson! Mandelson! A Memoir*. Carcanet Press, 2005.

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FRANCES LEVISTON

Lucy Newlyn, *Ginnel*

May 2005

Lucy Newlyn’s first book of poetry, *Ginnel*, for Carcanet’s Oxford Poets series, is a collection in the truest sense, drawing its subject matter almost exclusively from remembrances of the civic and social topography of 1960s Leeds, where the poet grew up. The title comes from a dialectal word for the paths and shortcuts that run between buildings; in these secret spaces truants loiter, neighbourhood lines are crossed, games are played, and time is, momentarily, collapsed, allowing the poet to revisit a place she seems never quite to have left behind.

Newlyn’s is a consciousness deeply alive to sound, shape, smell, mapping the sensory territories first, relishing the Anglo-Saxon vocabulary in which she works: ‘Mounds of pink gruntlings / grubbed in the swill or nuzzled the sows’ / dugs: six at a time and wriggling’ (‘Pig-pen at Meanwood’); ‘A lopsided grin creases half the girth / of his neck and sinks into the bulk / of his warted body’ (‘Toad’). All ordinary activity, whether that of animals, people, water, light, is worthy of documentation, preservation. The poet carries her memories down the ginnel of the years like a jar of frogspawn ‘carefully / so as not to spill them / sideways’ (‘Snicket’); and, read back to back, these memories gather weight from one another, from the gaps and connexions running between, like ginnels behind houses, acquiring shadow and resonance.

Take the triumvirate of 'Juan taught me', 'Comfortable box' and 'Across the street', for example. The first lists how the speaker was taught by a neighbourhood lad 'to wish I was a boy and working class'; the second is a paean to the grocery box from Grocock's delivered each Friday ('Every packet, carton, tin and jar / pronouncing regularity and order'); and the third is a painful moment of realisation as the speaker sees Juan's mother bringing in her 'Co-op shopping' and 'can hear the latch on her gate / clicking as it swings shut' – shut against the speaker, who is from a different, Grocock's-fed world. These are separate poems that convene on mutual territory to powerful effect. Similarly, the love of language that informs the collection's opening poem, 'Ginnel', an etymological exploration of the word's settlement in Yorkshire, follows through to poems like 'Walls' ('I love the curt sounds of the vowels') and the meditation on Keith Waterhouse's prose in 'Prosaic', but acquires a more sinister note in 'Playin' out', as the speaker's acute sensitivity to language leaves her all-too aware of the social differences denoted by it: 'the gaps, the embarrassing / thresholds, the voices slipping.' You could not call *Ginnel* ambitious, and yet something impressive has been achieved: the depiction, piece by piece, of a whole childhood, neighbourhood, vanishing way of life.

The downside to this cumulative effect, of course, is a dissatisfaction with many of the poems as artifacts in and of themselves. However evocative the sound and fury of Newlyn's descriptions, you occasionally wish that they were driven harder, further, towards a more difficult and seemingly elusive conclusion; you long for the insight that a different species of attention might have brought to such material as trout-tickling ('Ginneling') or the 'Rag and bone man'. Lines of real promise – 'all our tomorrows are a hooked tunnel / of bummelkites' ('Brambling') – are left strangely unexplored. The best poems here are those which manage to create their own self-contained effects even as they speak to the work surrounding them: the sheer pleasure of 'Washing Day', generated by its tongue-thickening sonics and the way its own images are brought

so perfectly and circularly into balance, or the understated sadness of 'Town Hall lions', their recently-scoured surfaces 'pale and crumbling', augmented (not overwhelmed) by an epigraph from Milton's *Areopagitica*. 'Transposed', perhaps the least integrated and ironically the most successful of the pieces here, draws a delicate comparison between bird-mimicry, growing-up and art, without fudging the particularities of each, and closes finely with the confession that 'I blow / for the sound's sake, it's lone / witchery. Expecting no answer.' Newlyn's is a careful, humble poetry that does not overreach nor shrilly demand its readers' attention; perhaps for this reason more than any other, it ought to receive it.

© Frances Leviston, 2005

Lucy Newlyn, *Ginnel*, Carcanet Press, 2005.

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FIONA SAMPSON

U.A. Fanthorpe, *Collected Poems 1978–2003*

June 2005

I have to declare an interest. When I bought U.A. Fanthorpe's earlier *Selected Poems* (Penguin 1986), after the last Albert Hall Poetry International, it was the first poetry collection I'd ever owned. Avid of fiction, I knew little about contemporary poetry, of which there was next to nothing in the local library. Yet I found myself memorising large chunks from *Side Effects* (1978), Fanthorpe's first collection; much of which is set in the NHS unit where she worked as a receptionist for several years after leaving a distinguished teaching career.

A non-specialist, my old (young) self fell immediately for Fanthorpe's wit, her compassion and the deftness with which she completes each miniature characterisation: 'The quarrelling lovers/Rained on, in the car, by dashboard-light./He pitched the tent alone; they left at dawn.' ('Campsite: Maentwrog', p.38). In a Fanthorpe poem, characterisation and narrative are inextricable. We can tell what people are by what they do: what they do is entailed by who they are. And here in her first book, the poet's characteristic map of the human (its key largely 'the modest apparatus/Of suburb life' (ibid), though relieved by virtuoso anthology set-pieces) is already in place.

In *Side Effects*, these set-pieces include 'Not my Best Side', in which all three protagonists of Uccello's *George and the Dragon* have their say ('I

have diplomas in Dragon/Management and Virgin Reclamation' (p.43)), and the first, and in some ways the most comprehensive, of her 'England' poems, 'Earthed', which ends its list of what holds her in place with:

[..] gardens,
Loved more than children,

Bright with resourcefulness and smelling
Of rain. This narrow island charged with echoes
And whispers snares me.

As in all Fanthorpe's best poems there's a note of self-knowledge here, a wry intelligent reflection which resists the cosy; which makes her the heir less of Betjeman than of Hardy.

In *Standing To*, the incipient note of elegy becomes actual. There are poems of loss both metamorphosed into myth (the 'Stations Underground' sequence) and as simple reminiscence ('Father in the Railway Buffet'). With the sense of a project getting into its stride, we come across the first Christmas occasional poems, and the first 'Eng. Lit.' personae poems. 'Only Here for the Bier' is a well-known, but nevertheless transgressive, set of perspectives on *Macbeth* retold by four (women) witnesses 'having a chat with some usual female confidante, like a hairdresser, or a telephone', as the poet's own artful note has it (p.94).

Voices Off (1984) seems, in retrospect, like the consolidation of Fanthorpe's commitment to certain themes. A sequence of telling vignettes from college and seminar room includes 'Seminar: Felicity and Mr Frost', a piece of lightly-handled inter-textuality. There are also flirtations with a role as women's writer: 'Women Laughing' ('Wives gleaming sleekly in public at/Husbandly jokes' (p. 153)), 'Growing Up', 'High Table', and 'From the Third Storey'.

These themes are taken up in *A Watching Brief*, for example in the

choric 'Three Women Wordsworths'. What distinguishes these poems is, as ever, their clear-eyed acceptance of human conditions:

[...] cards from brilliant girls,
A little less incisive every year,
Reported comings, goings: another Hannah,
Another Jamie; another husband going off [...]

('Teacher's Christmas', p. 221).

Like all good books, U.A.Fanthorpe's *Collected* seems to gather momentum as it goes on. Somewhere around *Neck-Verse*, whose title nods to its transitional status, the language changes, losing some kind of musical 'shadow'. At the opening of 'Haunting', the first poem (p.291) in the next collection, *Safe as Houses*, 'The ancestors. The shadow people' have stepped back a pace or two. This is not to say that Fanthorpe's diction ever slips into the mannered, or that her poetries place themselves in the study and away from the world of human experience. But, in the chamber music of the heart, she is among a select and easily-traceable group of poets who manage to compress human motivation into lyric poetry of great formal clarity. Like Hardy, she is also able to seat these human behaviours in the wide sweep of history.

In a suite of WWII poems, detective novels offer a 'rare little world,/ Imagined to gentle the English through war' ('Reading Between). 'The Unprofessionals' are those who 'come sheepishly, sit with you, holding hands/ from tea to tea' when 'the worst thing happens'. The poems here are denser; thick doorsteps of thought and evocation to fuel the reader onwards. Their shape betrays their thickening seriousness as we move on, into the 'History Plays' of *Consequences*.

A characteristic Fanthorpe trope is the list, opening from initial half-line statement through developing enjambments into the wide sweep and opinionatedness of the whole picture: 'Vocabulary of earth, names//

Touch and diehard as crypts,/ Cathedrals perched on their shoulders.// No committee okayed them.' ('Strong Language in Gloucestershire' p. 369); 'Artists are wrong about light. They strew it/ Tastefully across landscapes, let it focus/ Thoughtfully on a forehead or a cabbage,/ Self-consciously walk down a reach of water.' ('Post-op' p. 397). It's a form of seduction, of course; by the time we've finished assenting to the observations, we've assented to the conclusion too. It also lends a rhythmic homogeneity to Fanthorpe's work. *Queueing for the Sun* (2003), the final collection in this remarkably homogenous book, brings us poems on retirement, on Mallory on Everest, and on 'Libraries at War', whose central importance is that 'When the last book's returned, there is nothing but the dark' (p.468).

To read U.A.Fanthorpe is always to enter into a gathering sense of the seriousness of poetry, of its project of recording human meaning, and, above all, of the importance of affection. 'Love is so persistent, it survives/With no one's help', as one of her earliest poems ('The Watcher', p.23) points out.

© Fiona Sampson

U.A.Fanthorpe, *Collected Poems 1978–2003*, Peterloo Poets, Calstock, 2005.

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MISHTOONI BOSE

Helen Farish, *Intimates*

September 2005

Helen Farish's first collection provokes much thought about the relationship between intimacy and formality. The least confessional of these poems are the strongest. A number of them have been published separately, and it's not hard to see why: 'Treasures', for example, has evident integrity and makes it clear where raw, untranslated confessional ends and a poem – a solid, independent verbal artifact, with definite boundaries, a haughty autonomy, and the courage to be enigmatic – begins. Farish coolly lays out for us a miscellany, including 'the old coach road on a heat-haze night', 'the Ellers' lonning', 'how unremarkable today was', over three stanzas and then reels us in with the last:

These are my treasures, and you
wanted only one of them: me
pulling my dress up, poorer
than I've ever been.

The same assurance that cuts us off here, and leaves us to find out the meaning of the dialect word 'lonning' for ourselves, enables Farish to end the poem just before we're ready to let it go. We are left filling out and finishing the thought, the scenario, with the words still spinning inside us.

The same confidence is at work in 'Auto-Reply', in which Farish

updates St Matthew's reflections on responding to Christ's curt summons. This is another poem that knows how to end:

Looking back it's clear
something had risen to the top.
You walked by, skimmed it off.

The poem solicits nothing from us, and is thus exemplary of a collection in which the best give their readers the least.

The giving or withholding of oneself, and the costs of such decisions, are at the centre of this collection. One traces and retraces what the strongest poems here – 'The White Gate', 'Feathered Coyote', 'Mount Mirtagh and Back' – have begun. 'Mount Mirtagh' looms particularly strongly in this collection as it is here that Farish leaves behind the English landscape familiar to her and works harder at translating her life into quite other terms ('The Emperor Quianlong was obsessed with jade'...).

'Write what you know' isn't always good advice. As 'Mount Mirtagh' shows, apparent estrangement from one's subject matter can release fresher intimacies. There's nothing about 'Look at These' ('Seeing you makes me want to lift up my top,/breathe in and say *Look! Look at these!*') that couldn't happen outside a poem, and that is also true of 'The Cheapest Flowers', 'Surgery' and 'Familiar Walk'. In 'July', a poem about the days and hours leading up to her father's death, the weight of poetic ambition leads to portentousness, asks the reader too hard, and too blatantly, to share in its sense of the pathos of things. It's instructive to compare the effects of this poem, in which content prevails over form, with what Farish achieves more economically in 'Ten to Midnight', a poem that similarly meditates on the death of 'my Dad, the sailor'; and although Farish can't resist repeating that phrase, not quite trusting her reader to get its point, the poem ripens into something beyond quotidian grief, as form takes over:

...while God's compass
fixed above a hotel bed on a rocky
Italian coastline made me pull away
from my lover crying. Ten to midnight
the crucifix said, ten to midnight.

Again the strength of the poem is in the ending. The desire for intimacy notwithstanding, therefore, Farish is most successful when she has the courage to treat us mean.

© Mishtooni Bose, 2005
Helen Farish, *Intimates*, Jonathan Cape, 2005.
£9.00. 978-0-224072-79-3

FRANCES LEVISTON

Carol Ann Duffy, *Rapture*

December 2005

Duffy's seventh collection is something of a departure for the poet regularly hailed as Britain's 'best-loved'. Gone is the sharp sense of history, the wry snap of modern life, the distinct yet palatable feminism; all those competing stories she delighted in telling have dissolved, it seems, in the single most important story of all, that of the human love affair. These poems are intent as an obsessed lover upon their subject, returning to the same sacred images, waxing and waning through all the stages of infatuation from the disbelieving first flush of the opening poem, 'You', to 'the death of love' in the closing poem, 'Over'. Stand *Rapture* against some of the most strenuously contemporary of her peers – John Stammers, say – and it becomes even clearer that Duffy is operating on a different plane, ahistorical, archetypal, where 'moon' and 'rose' and 'kiss' come clear of the abuses of tradition to be restored to the poet's lexicon, as the things of the world are restored to the lover.

The book's cherry-red boards, inlaid with a gilt depiction of the poems' key motifs, look at first glance like a volume of Hans Christian Andersen (very Christmassy, some cynics might say), and indeed we find plenty of folktale material inside: the forest as *locus amoenus*, talismans such as 'the gold weight of your head / on my numb arm' ('Treasure'), and repeating structures such as the tasks set by the beloved in 'Give': 'Give

me the river, / you asked the next night, then I'll love you forever.' But these are not the post-modern reworkings of *The World's Wife*; nothing so self-conscious. They are simply the default, universal forms of the oldest story there is.

The fluent sonnet 'Hour' explores this peculiarly elastic sense of time: 'For thousands of seconds we kiss'. It's not so long, objectively, but its expression, those 'thousands', shows the poet at work, as love is, eking out what's most precious, 'backhanding the night'. Elsewhere 'Time falls and falls through endless space, to when we are' (New Year'), and in 'Night Marriage' it is both 'the long hours / I spend in your dreams' and the 'small hours' that 'join us, / face to face as we sleep and dream'.

A few pointed references seem to threaten this dreamy timelessness. 'Text', for example, opens, 'I tend the mobile now / like an injured bird' – it seems the phone has become so central to the conduction of love affairs that to leave it out would be unthinkable. Instead the simile throws the focus on to the bird, absorbing the element of modern technology into a natural order; and in 'Quickdraw' the two phones are 'like guns' in a smart, though not especially subtle, extended Western conceit.

There is a danger, in replicating love's single-mindedness, of replicating also the boredom felt by those who do not share the rhapsodist's feelings, and *Rapture* accordingly can seem to beg too much indulgence of the reader, relying on its rhythms and a sense of recognition to carry it through. The weakest poems are smoothly bland, unmemorable, like 'Tea', where the intimacy of the tea-making ritual is insisted upon rather than invoked. 'Give', as with a couple of the other more schematic pieces, suffers from a lack of the ingenuity necessary for such repetitions to work.

But, like a brilliant general with mixed troops, Duffy marshals her material so well that one can almost forget its occasional tiredness. A cliché is swiftly followed by something far more interesting, as in 'I burned for you day and night; / got bits of your body wrong, bits of it

right, / in the huge mouth of the dark, in the bite of the light' ('Rain'), so that the familiar phrase, by keeping better company than itself, is somehow ennobled. The rediscovery of things lost or undervalued is one of the book's principal themes, and a nod, perhaps, to the foolhardiness of undertaking love poems in English. 'Syntax' declares 'I want to call you thou'; words are rubbed at 'till they gleamed in my palm / – I love you, I love you, I love you – / as though they were new' ('Finding the Words'). No Donne, then (just one of the many giants in this arena); but *Rapture* is nevertheless a fresh and skilful supplement to the tradition.

© Frances Leviston, 2005

Carol Ann Duffy, *Rapture*, Picador, 2005.

£9.99. 978-0-330433-91-4

APRIL WARMAN

Geoffrey Hill, *Without Title*

March 2006

The back cover of *Without Title* quotes the *Daily Telegraph's* praise for Geoffrey Hill's recent work: 'Trumpets should be blown, garlands made ... he has never been more loquacious, playful, wildly comic or poignant. His greatness is as certain as that of the poets he invokes.' It seems, then, that the critical incomprehension and/or distaste, with which Hill's later work was initially greeted, is lifting.

But I'm not sure that this new mood of embrace and acceptance, this celebration of his ability to appear as human as the next person, is any more realistic in the version of Hill it proffers. There is always a temptation when approaching the notoriously difficult Hill to pick out the bits that seem to mean something, and hope that the rest is as missable as it is (at first sight) opaque. His late work's introduction of a (loquacious, playful, comic, poignant) persona, who seems more or less identifiable with the poet himself, has heightened this temptation: the immediate gratification of, for example, finding the magisterial Hill appearing to address us confidently, admitting to his own self-indulgences (as in the tenth of the 'Pindarics: *after Cesare Pavese*' that make up the middle section of this book: 'It feels good / raising the question that can sound at once / heroic and perplexed') can disincline us to deal with the intractable, less dramatised material that surrounds it (the tenth

pindaric ends inscrutably: 'Can't go further / unless to claim I found such plenitude / one of the dark moon's non-existent seas.') When the reader feels continually wrong-footed by the poetry's cramped, disjointed syntax, and sudden swerves into new, and apparently unrelated, subject matter, the temptation to read for the plain-speaking, humanised moments is strong.

It is not always wrong. 'The Jumping Boy' is, I think, likely to become one of the most popular poems from *Without Title*, precisely because of its consistent simplicity. In its grave appreciation of the self-sufficient absorption of childhood ('He leaps because he has serious / joy in leaping'), in its playfulness (the image, and the enjambement, of 'Hermes' winged / plimsolls'), its sedate comedy (the naïve tone present in 'This may be levitation. I / could do that'), its poignancy (the wistful certainties of memory: 'the tall house, its blind / gable end, the trees – I know this place'), it is hugely attractive. It ends, perhaps unprecedentedly for Hill, in what can only be called affirmation: 'Jump away, jumping boy; the boy I was / shouts go.' This is a feel-good poem, and a good one.

But it is an exception. Much of the volume gives little away, and meaning has to be worked hard for, unaided by the prompts of a recognisable 'voice'. The total absence of such a voice can, in fact, be all to the good: the twentieth pindaric, taking its cue from Pavese's comment, '*But the real, tremendous truth is this: suffering serves no purpose whatever*', returns to a perennial theme of Hill's, and treats it with impressive, exemplary gravity and unself-consciousness. A characteristic play on syntax is deployed to present co-existent, yet incompatible, versions of how the significance of human suffering can be understood: the last lines of the first two sections differ only (but entirely) by a comma: 'Other than the story this tells[,] nothing'. But much of the book remains, on first sight at least, simply obscure – whether or not the further, closer attention that it will inevitably draw will reveal hidden richness, remains to be seen.

At times, however, Hill's 'difficulty' and his 'humanity' can seem not mutually exclusive, but mutually enhancing. *Without Title* excites me

most in a short sequence, 'In the Valley of the Arrow', which, like 'The Jumping Boy', coheres through its speaker, but which lacks the earlier poem's potential cosiness, because this voice is not one with which it is easy to identify; its disconcerting turns of mood, its insistence on canvassing disturbing subject matter, render discomfiting even the impulse to identify it with the respected figure of the poet.

The sequence begins in a posture very familiar as late Hill: 'artificial', 'concocted' 'first flowers' are deprecated, with pointed enjambement: 'Crocus for starters soon looks pretty / much washed out.' (It is worth noting that an early, uncollected poem of Hill's is called 'I see the crocus armies spread...'.) Set up for praise against such mannered invention is the crude energy of the gorse, 'bristling with static', an 'inclement challenge', a 'spicy orator'. Parallels with the poet's career and late self-positioning are clear.

The second and third poems enact a similarly familiar procedure, a brusque, ironic self-undermining. Set on facing pages, each poem ends with a single, italicised line. The second poem's superb landscape evocation ('the singing iron footbridges, tight weirs / pebble-dashed with bright water' – another classic feature of late Hill) reaches its climax with the high cultural and spiritual claims of the phrase '*beata l'alma*'. Opposite, concluding a far bumpier, less forthcoming poem ('Dying's no let-up, an atrocious / means of existence') stands the comment, '*Smug bastard*'.

This much is unsurprising to a follower of Hill's career so far. The insistence on the realities and privations of decrepitude (which continues into the fourth poem: 'Heart-stab memento giving a side-glimpse / of feared eternity') is not comfortable, but nor is it deniable. We could all come to this. But the fifth and last poem goes further. Critics have for some time been airily pointing out Hill's preoccupation with 'the persistence ... of desire into old age' (Nicholas Lezard in the *Guardian*); the fifth poem ends in a scenario that savages the decorum implicit in the prim designation 'desire':

Unzipped and found addressing the smeared walls
of an underpass, crying not my
address, no more unnamed accusers,

self-dubbed natural thespian enacts
age, incapacity – judge the witnesses –
brings himself off to video'd provocation.

Pardon my breathing.

In its uncompromising unpleasantness, this is truly difficult stuff. It is the culmination of a progression of stances, all of which, up to this moment, have been identifiable with Hill. Its positioning invites us to assimilate this further aspect to our conception of the writer, but the crudity, and especially the unflinching joylessness, of the depiction of ageing sexuality makes such assimilation extremely unsettling. In this sequence, Hill tests the limits of our desire to discover the person behind the poem, to connect with another human being through verse. Human beings are not just loquacious, playful, comic or poignant. How much humanity can we take?

© April Warman, 2006

Geoffrey Hill, *Without Title*, Penguin, 2006.

£9.99. 0-141020-25-3

STEPHEN BURT

Seamus Heaney, *District and Circle*

April 2006

It's tempting to say that a poet of Seamus Heaney's powers, with his reputation, at this stage of his career, can do anything he wants to do. But no poet can do everything he, or she, wants to do: poets receive only what the Muse can broadcast. For a while, during the 1990s, Seamus Heaney's Muse broadcast a sort of 24-hour Epiphany Channel: there were strong pages, and plenty of strong phrases, in *Seeing Things*, in *The Spirit Level*, but there were also gleams and glows and airy auroras all over, a sometimes too-easy self-confidence in transcendence, available in any subject at all. By comparison, Heaney's new book seems down-to-earth in every sense – it's less ambitious, less unified, quieter, with more, and smaller-scale, subjects and scenes. If you don't mind (and I don't) its insistently humble nostalgia, it could strike you as his most appealing work in a while.

Much of the book takes up childhood memories: the butcher shop, the barber, primary school friends, farm implements. Some of the memories arrive not in verse but in pages of attractive prose. A poem addressed to Auden remembers how, in youth, Heaney had 'loved a lifter made of stainless steel,/ The way its stub claw found its clink-fast hold.' The lyricism is serious, as is the lyricism about turnip-snedders, sledge-hammers, horse-collars, garden equipment, and other domestic

or agricultural bric-a-brac. One of Heaney's least noticed projects – newly evident here – has been to find ways to make memories of apparent inconsequence (especially, but not only, pleasant ones) aesthetically interesting; he does so, often, through poems that juxtapose the thing-as-it-seemed-then to its meaning now. So many poems here (some in prose) remember weightless, apparently insignificant bits of childhood sights, or pursue stray mnemonic associations: 'Fiddlehead ferns are a delicacy where? Japan? Estonia? Ireland long ago?'

Other memories carry more serious burdens. In 'Anahorish 1944', the speaker (quote marks enclose the whole poem) remembers American soldiers stationed in Ireland but bound for Normandy, 'Two lines of them, guns on their shoulders, marching.' The tableau reverses, with elegant irony, the binary of innocence and experience, or innocence and guilt, which we might expect: 'We were killing pigs when the Americans arrived,' while the soldiers were 'standing there like youngsters/ As they tossed us gum and tubes of coloured sweets.' If the Heaney of *North* implied that guilt lay everywhere, the Heaney of *District and Circle* says that innocence and helplessness are everywhere too. The current 'war on terror' informs a smart translation from Horace and a sketch about 'a donkey on the TV news last night—/ Loosed from a cart that had loosed five mortar shells/ In the bazaar district, wandering out of sight,' away from the conflict, like Balaam's ass in reverse.

When *District and Circle* does not consider Heaney's childhood, it often reconsiders his earlier poems. 'Moyulla' returns to the dinnseanchas genre (poems about Irish place names) in which Heaney worked decades ago. 'The Blackbird of Glanmore' appears to rewrite 'Mid-Term Break'. Another sonnet sequence, 'The Tollund Man in Springtime', resurrects that celebrated Bog Person for (at least) a third time. Where 'The Haw Lantern' imagined an inner Diogenes testing and failing each reader, and the celebrated sequence 'Station Island' held encounters with serial ghosts, the first sonnet in the new volume's title sequence has a London busker and a poet-commuter 'eye' each other, recognise the impossibility

of mutual judgment, and simply 'nod'. Here Heaney seems altogether more forgiving – of himself and of us – than he once was. Of course, being Heaney, he writes further sonnets full of second thoughts about his second thoughts: 'Had I betrayed or not, myself or him?/ Always new to me, always familiar/ This unrepentant, now repentant turn.' The busker (to whom he almost gives, but does not give, a coin) has become a Tube-stop Orpheus, the musical spirit in Heaney's work, to whom the citizenly, responsible poet feels he ought to pay more heed . . . or is it vice versa? About the responsibilities of a poet (to himself, to his art, to community, to the language), Heaney seems content to keep himself guessing: not the guesses, but the second-guesses, produce his most characteristic poems.

They do not do so unaided. Equally Heaneyesque, equally individual, are the unparalleled melodic gifts, the unusually broad vocabulary and singing pentameters which can make musical any subject at all. Here is the poet simply boarding a Tube train:

Stepping on to it across the gap,
On to the carriage metal, I reached to grab
The stubby black roof-wort and take my stand.
From planted ball of heel to heel of hand
A sweet traction and heavy down-slump stayed me.

Here is his first, childhood, taste of chewing tobacco: 'The roof of my mouth is thatch set fire to/ At the burning-out of a neighbour, I want to lick/ Bran from a bucket, grit off the coping-stone.' (They are lines good enough for another poet to build an entire lyric around them; Heaney simply moves on.) Here is a stable: 'Horses' collars lined with sweat-veined ticking,/ Old cobwebbed reins and hames and eye-patched winkers,/ The tackle of the mighty, simple dead.'

Heaney seems to feel that whatever else poetry could or should do, its first task is to make eloquent the five senses in the remembered world:

his own verse makes the best case for that task. We might say of these low-key, often beautiful poems, and of the people and objects they present, what Heaney says (in one of his prose pages) about the wandering people he saw in his childhood, then called 'gypsies', now called travellers: 'Even though you encountered them in broad daylight, going about their usual business, there was always a feeling they were coming towards you out of storytime.' No one will mistake 'District and Circle' for 'Station Island', nor *District and Circle* for *Field Work*; but anyone who isn't impressed isn't listening.

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Seamus Heaney, *District and Circle*, Faber and Faber, 2006.

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PETER McDONALD

Simon Armitage,
Tyrannosaurus Rex versus The Corduroy Kid

September 2006

Every now and again, critics wonder what has become of public poetry. In the very crudest of senses, poetry in Britain actually doesn't have a public to speak of, so writing poetry that sets out to exercise a 'public' voice is the kind of futility that may never pay artistic dividends. And yet, good poetry that has a sense of public engagement can and does get written, the many, many failures in that mode notwithstanding. It seems to be in the nature of this kind of writing to be hit-or-miss, and some poets are strikingly uneven in their performances; but Simon Armitage has a surer sense of pitch than most, and his new volume, *Tyrannosaurus Rex versus The Corduroy Kid* is a very good collection, containing poems of real – and I think quite important – public resonance.

It's probably the dullest of truisms to say that Armitage writes well, with formal accomplishment and clarity. But this is no mean – or indeed common – achievement in British poetry today, and in fact it forms the *sine qua non* for verse that can address its contemporary world with subtlety, force, and authority. The new book shows Armitage at his best: here is a poet with a fine ear, who can control both rhythm and sound unobtrusively but exactly, and with a firm sense of the power of rhyme. To say this is also to say that Armitage, like any good poet, goes

with the flow of formal energy in English poetry: he is 'traditional', if you like, even perhaps 'mainstream' – though he also knows that poetry is the kind of stream in which, as the Greek philosopher Heraclitus quipped, you cannot stand in the same water twice. In poetry, what you inherit, you also change: but the inheritance is real, and has to be earned.

The new Armitage is a very grown-up volume, thoughtful, deeply-informed, able to be in two minds about things without fudging or faking responses, and capable, therefore, of speaking intelligently to an intelligent readership. Little of this is, or should be, at all comfortable. The book opens with a deliberately flat poem, 'Hand-Washing Technique – Government Guidelines' which gives a six-point list of how to wash your hands of something, where the initial simplicity ('1. Palm to palm') gets more complicated ('4. Backs of fingers to opposing palms with fingers interlocked') and, as it becomes more elaborate, feels more desperate ('6. Rotational rubbing, backwards and forwards with clasped fingers of right hand in left palm and vice versa'). The poem carries the dedication '*i.m.* Dr David Kelly', Occupying a prominent position in the volume, in many ways this poem sets the tone for what is to come: it knows the strength in keeping clear of the explicitly 'political' (imagine what would happen to the poem if Tony Blair were to be compared directly here with Lady Macbeth), and also keys in, powerfully, with our modern receptiveness to instruction in times of public danger, our willingness to put up with (as it were) six-point plans for everything from handwashing to surviving the War on Terror. And in that context, the muted '*i.m.*' (in memoriam, to the memory of) perhaps starts to bite: washed away to two letters of abbreviation, the memory is already yesterday's news, something which many politicians besides Blair want us to move on from. Armitage's poem subtly but definitely refuses to move on, and lodges awkwardly in the memory, so that the book begins with a difficulty, a public embarrassment that refuses to go away.

The public life is more than just what we call 'politics', and Armitage's poetry is keenly aware of this. At the centre of the new book,

a series of five poems, each with the title 'Sympathy', approaches specific incidents, of the kind that come and go quickly through the pages of the press, by way of a six line description, followed by twenty-one lines of monologue from a protagonist. These are all amongst the best poems Armitage has written yet, where tight form and absolute, seemingly unforced fluency are in step. In one, the voice of a hit-and-run driver's victim describes his punishment, after 'e walked. No jail. 'E strolls out of court scot free':

*Instead, 'es put on some kind of parole. A joke,
'cept there's this one condition: twenny-four seven
'e carries that wallet. It's brown and it's leather
and opens out, gatefold-like, like a birthday card,
with two little windows inside for family snaps.
So whenever 'e shells out we're right in 'is face;
on one side a photo of me, me 'air tied up
in a bun, thick mascara, bit of lippy on,
laid in t'coffin, dead as a statue, clock cold;
in t'other mi unborn babe in a tight ball,*

sonogram scan, black and white, twenny-eight weeks old.

Like the other four poems, this does something with, and something to, our instincts for 'Sympathy'. The driver's punishment is to be a kind of enforced sympathy – 'sympathy', literally suffering along with someone else – while our engagement as readers is partly with the victim whose dead voice we hear, but partly, too, with the perpetrator of the crime, for the poem presents us with exactly the pictures he must bear (in both senses) for the rest of his life. All five poems make our sense of sympathy more complicated, more messy, and possibly more hurtful (hurting, that is, and also hurt); as poems, they are marvellously clear, and marvellously complicated and complicating.

This is the fractured and cluttered personal space in which, as Armitage knows, our sense of the broader public life is born. If sympathy, for example, is helplessly complicated and contradictory in its operations in and on our own lives, it cannot be simplified into a buzzword for politicians to brandish. Things are always, these poems prove, more complicated than they appear, but also than we really want them to be. In a version of part of Homer's *Odyssey*, Armitage covers the brutal (but exciting) episode of Odysseus's escape from the Cyclops. The account is spirited and gory, true in that to its original, but it follows its hero past the point of apparent victory, and gives him second thoughts:

*And if we'd have known
the chain of events we'd set in place, the cruelty
and agony that stretched ahead, year after year,
the horror and terror and sadness and loss still to come – who knows,
perhaps we'd have chosen to die right there, in the black cave,
out of sight of heaven and without sound.*

These are bleak words, tempered by more than just Homer's text, and they reveal Armitage's ability to match his poetic voice to the sound of contemporary regret and uncertainty. In our case, it's hard to keep Iraq far from the mind, with Saddam perhaps as the Cyclops, and the world we have created in his place one of 'horror and terror and sadness and loss'. Armitage insists on none of this, and he doesn't have to; moreover, the poetry lets his voice carry beyond the specificities we bring to it.

Any poet has to face the challenge of language's debasement, and real poets do something about that debasement: in this sense, all good poetry is a public act. Armitage knows how to absorb the decay of meaning in much of what constitutes actual public speech (in the media, and then in our private mimicking of the kinds of thing the media tells us we are saying) by applying the special pressures and ironies only possible in poems. 'The Six Comeuppances', in which a speaker

progresses from urban sophisticate to escapist, to drop-out 'penning neat one-liners and platitudes', and finally to being a monkey ('I pick and eat my fleas./sleep in a bald tyre swung from an old beam') ends with italicized warnings:

For every learning curve, a plateau phase.

For every dish of the day, a sell-by date.

A backlash to every latest craze.

A riptide to every seventh wave.

For every moment of truth, an afterthought.

For every miracle cure, an antidote.

This is poetry as pure style, perhaps: it is also, however, poetry engaging directly, in the very medium of its language, with the time in which it is written. Style, as Armitage proves here, is engagement, not retreat.

Tyrannosaurus Rex versus The Corduroy Kid is not without its comparatively weak poems: I could do without some of Armitage's lengthier pieces, such as 'You're Beautiful' (a submerged homage to James Blunt?), which deals too freely and loosely with the 'Men are from Mars Women are from Venus' cliché, or 'Poem on His Birthday', which succumbs to a slight laziness, and presumes too much on a reader's sympathy for someone turning forty. But there is much – very much – to counter-balance all this. I doubt, for example, if a more beautiful, or fully achieved poem than the closing piece, 'The Final Straw' will be published this year, with its initial view of 'Corn, like the tide coming in', and its description of harvesting, 'spiralling home/ over undulations of common land/ till nothing remained but a hub of stalks/ where the spirit of life was said to lurk'. In a three-line vignette, 'childless couples' are 'invited to pocket the seed/ the women to plait dolls from the last sheaf'. So far, so good – and so touching, so tempting for a sympathetic reading, which would perhaps prefer to leave things there. But something happens:

But a Spix's macaw flapped from the blade,
that singular bird of the new world, one
of a kind. A rare sight. And a sign, being
tail feathers tapering out of view, being

blueness lost in the sun, being gone.

Surprise is hard to carry off in poetry; so often, it is represented only by willed epiphany, an insistence on meaning where none can really be declared. But here, Armitage goes on from the 'sign' to its loss, managing to be elegiac without either self-regard or sentimentality. It is a triumph, though a sobering one. It is also, in its way, like so much else in this excellent book, a truly public form of words.

© Peter McDonald, 2006

Simon Armitage, *Tyrannosaurus Rex versus The Corduroy Kid*, Faber and Faber, 2006.

£12.99. 0-571233-25-2

JEREMY NOEL-TOD

Paul Farley, *Tramp in Flames*

September 2006

Philip Larkin's unique success as a poet was to make an original blend of influences, from Yeats to Betjeman, seem native British tradition: poetic breakfast tea. The average semi-ambitious poetry collection is still modelled on the mix that Larkin popularised for a post-war readership: thirty or so poems, largely in regular stanzas, with the odd formal experiment or piece of free verse to show the poet's inventive side, and a pair of longer meditations to show his responsible one (the poets who most solemnly conform to this template tend, for whatever reason, to be male).

Larkin's voices in fact developed coherently from lyrical experiment in *The Less Deceived* (1955) to monumental statement, pastoral and satire in *High Windows* (1974), via one collection embodying this happy medium: *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964). But the *Collected Poems* easily blurs into one long volume in which similar proportions obtain, thanks to two constants: an everyman lyric persona and scrupulous quality control.

Unfortunately, most latter-day Larkins imitate only the former. Paul Farley, born one year (or possibly, nine months) after *The Whitsun Weddings*, is already onto his third collection in a decade with *Tramp in Flames*. 'Automatic Doors' finds him bemoaning the electrification of the public entrance with an echo of Larkin's 'High Windows' ('When I see

a couple of kids / And I guess he's fucking her and she's / Taking pills or wearing a diaphragm / I know this is paradise // Everyone old has dreamed of all their lives –):

When I see some kids springing the gallery doors
I lament the great revolvers.

But while Larkin's still-shocking opening modulates into a mute vision of 'sun-comprehending glass', Farley's goes down the long slide of nostalgia: 'we were time travellers / fast-forwarding ourselves into the future / before we were thrown out, into an era / of never even having to lift a finger.' All 'High Windows' sharp complexity about youth and age, real and ideal, is collapsed into a sepia vignette of lost innocence.

Farley has found a niche as the poet of a generation whose common culture is childhood and its trivia. *Tramp in Flames'* title poem is calculated both to shock and appeal to such readers:

Some similes act like heat shield for re-entry
to reality: a tramp in flames on the floor.
We can say *Flame on!* to invoke the Human Torch
from the Fantastic Four.

The response is deliberately inadequate. However, the simile finally found to re-enter the human 'reality' of the scene falls short of seriousness in a different way: 'a pool forms like the way he wet himself / sat on the school floor forty years before'. The story is imposed as simply and sentimentally as the social classification 'tramp': from poor wet boy to poor burnt man.

The problem with 'Tramp in Flames', and *Tramp in Flames*, is this narrow assumption of common ground. Essentially, 'we' are a collective extension of the Paul Farley persona, a working-class boy who finds himself middle-class in middle age, thanks to an interest in poetry. This

fate is described most unhappily in 'Philistines', a sestina written by someone who writes 'sestinas in Word for Windows' and wonders about the mental lives of menial labourers: 'Do they see a world we miss, squeegeeing our windows?' The ironic point seems to be that poet and reader *can* see this world, imaginatively – 'of call centres without windows / where Post-Its stick like shit to shoes' – whilst still keeping it materially on the other side of 'windows [that] hiss tight shut'. Yet the conceit is won in defeat: you have to be the reader Farley says you are in order to appreciate the insight.

Larkin's typical lyric vantage point might be criticised for its too ready transcendence of 'residents from raw estates' ('Here', *The Whitsun Weddings*). But it was also his ability to depart from the demotic that made him so widely popular ('and not just in England', as Seamus Heaney has wisely noted). At his best, Larkin is a stranger poet than his prosaic persona, drawing on deeper traditions of verse. The final line of 'Friday Night in the Royal Station Hotel', for example, recalls an Anglo-Saxon 'maxim': 'Now / Night comes on. Waves fold behind villages.'

By comparison, the only tradition a typical Paul Farley poem recalls is that of its professionally-Northern, post-Larkin peers: Armitage, Harrison, O'Brien. Even at moments of wonder, its diction clings defensively to the kind of colloquialism ('a sky brilliant with stars / a few degrees out of whack') that Larkin always balanced with unashamed high-style ('Chaldean constellations / Sparkle').

The strongest single poem in the book may be 'Brutalist', another challenge to the comfortable reader to imagine underclass life, this time in 'cellarless, unatticked' tower-blocks. Its rhyming quatrains achieve the bleak observational concentration of some of Farley's early poems (in *The Boy from the Chemist is Here to See You* (1999)) and a conclusion of real poetic compression: 'The final straw / will fill the fields beyond. Now live in it.'

But readers looking for more imaginatively complex engagements with twenty-first-century Britain should try more ambitious kinds of

volume. I recommend Simon Smith's flicker-book sequence *Mercury* (Salt: 'A white "YOU" printed across my red tee-shirt in arial'), Michael Haslam's ongoing rhyme of the post-industrial North, *A Sinner Saved by Grace* (Arc: 'Racing round the chilly warehouse lets us sweat'), and Peter Manson's tragic-comic experimental miscellany, *For the Good of Liars* (Barque: 'Solidity transit, I suck Artex').

© Jeremy Noel-Tod, 2006

Paul Farley, *Tramp in Flames*, Picador, 2006.

£8.99. 0-33044-00-7

MATTHEW SPERLING

Charles Tomlinson, *Cracks in the Universe*

November 2006

At this stage in a poetic career as long and distinguished as Charles Tomlinson's (*career*, 1a: 'The ground on which a race is run...'), it can get difficult to tell the received ideas from the new ones, for a reader, and perhaps for a writer. Difficult, that is, not to think that who this poet is, and what he's done before, and what he's doing now, haven't in some sense already determined each other. But one of the pleasures of *Cracks in the Universe* is how alert most of the poems are to the importance of starting afresh, from first principles.

The big received idea about Tomlinson is that he writes 'like a painter' – with a 'patience in looking', the blurb says – and that this derives both from his own practice as a visual artist and from his interest in Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*. The poems try to register what it is to perceive as precisely as possible in words. John Kerrigan recently placed Tomlinson's painterly work alongside that of Denise Riley and Oxford's own performance-shaman Brian Catling, combining these seams of visual artistry and phenomenological exploration. And Tomlinson's new book contains plenty of beautifully, strangely caught phenomena – I especially like the 'strong woman' of 'Santiago de Compostela', who 'wrestles a live conger / out of its tub: / we watch it snake / slippery in her grip - / she lets it writhe until / we have looked

our fill'. Which is a language perfectly plain-spoken at the same time that it's strange and complicating and inward – slippery in the grip of a descriptive master.

But along with this mastery comes a suspicion about Tomlinson, as voiced by Sean O'Brien: 'Whether his vast descriptive powers compensate for the lack of a human presence in his work is open to debate'. Ah, if he'd only spend less time on those still-lives, and more writing poems about his old man digging, or gobbing into the hearth, or giving him all the faults he had, and adding some etc... But then, nothing humans do is more 'human' than anything else, right? One of the strengths of the poems in this book is how they can range from thinking about painting or sculpture, to thinking about travel, about living in cities, about being alone with the phenomena of the non-human world, to fond recollection of being young, and all of this in a language which tries to make them real on their own terms, without lapsing into the rote categories in which we usually receive the world.

The two key-note quotes of the book refute this 'lack of human presence'. First, in the fourth of 'Four for David Smith', the American sculptor, there is this:

The ballet
of steel
beneath
a winter sky:
it was a man
made these
bare boughs.

And then the refrain of these lines, in the book's last poem, 'Eden': 'There was no Eden / in the beginning: / ...It was man / made Eden'. That sliver of difference between 'a man' and 'man' – the sliver that opens out to a vast canyon of significance – is characteristic of the precision with which

Tomlinson's poems limn their arguments. So is the powerful restraint of 'November' – another poem which does justice to 'human presence' even while it records the absence of its elegiac subject, Hugh Kenner, and takes pains to describe his achievement accurately:

The freeze sets in:
frost is returning
at three in the afternoon:
a seam of ore
opens at the valley head
under a single cloud. Kenner is dead –
the man who knew, saw, told
and clarified our seeing
privileged by his own:
requiescat in pace.

This is not to say that all the writing in the book shares this pitch of attention and surprise. There are certainly less compelling intervals. 'Westminster Bridge from the Eye' ('written to be read in the Globe Theatre', it warns us) takes in Wordsworth, Milton, the Globe, the London Eye and the city's modern-capitalist public architecture, condensing them into a sonnet's-worth of edifying cultural pabulum. It feels a little like being trapped in a lift with Alan Yentob. (True poets, of course, hate culture and are its enemies.) And when Tomlinson eases into his anecdote ("You'll never ride a bike,' my father said'), the attention of this reader, for one, starts to drift. But it would be wrong to begrudge the existence of such poems, and the charm of the delivery more or less justifies the poet loosening his belt a notch. Ron Silliman has recently suggested that Tomlinson's capacity to write with 'crystalline measure' in one poem, yet to be 'flaccid' in the next, depends on the line-length he uses and at the same time his relation to traditional English poetry. There's something in this: the reader senses a slight defla-

tion, a lowering of pressure, when Tomlinson capitalizes his lines and writes pentameters. Things become a bit literary and mealy-mouthed: 'That duty done, another must be paid / To parsimonious England craving coin...', goes 'Inheritance'. It's impossible not to have mixed feelings about this. Whose England are we talking about? But then, one version of England is flaccid and literary and mealy-mouthed and parsimonious, and Tomlinson is faithful to that.

Inseparable from these reservations, *Cracks in the Universe* remains a book of genuine depth, talent and perhaps wisdom, with a number of poems and a larger number of passages to stick by and come back to.

© Matthew Sperling, 2006
Charles Tomlinson, *Cracks in the Universe*, Carcanet Press, 2006.
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JOHN REDMOND

Marilyn Hacker, *Essays on Departure*

December 2006

Are they 'essays', then? No, it is a collection of poems, a *New and Selected* covering the period 1980 to 2005, but the word is a fair warning of the book's academic flavour. As the biographical note informs us, Hacker, who teaches at various institutions, 'divides her time between New York and Paris'. This lifestyle crack runs down many of the poems. Few readers of the book are likely to be tempted by the life of the poet-academic as she describes it: lonely, fugitive, and underpaid.

That is not to say that the collection is entirely gloomy. In her early career, Hacker specialized in the kind of frankly sexual poem which would probably earn her a place in *The Faber Book of Lust* (if such a thing existed). Somewhat in the manner of James Simmons' work, her poems made a virtue of playful crudity, although one wonders if a male poet could get away with lines like these:

O little one, this longing is the pits.
I'm horny as a timber wolf in heat.
Three times a night, I tangle up the sheet.
I seem to flirt with everything with tits.

Hacker has been associated with an American phenomenon, the New Formalists and many of the titles in this book ('Chiliastic Sapphics',

'Migraine Sonnets' and 'Ghazal: The Beloved') make the association hard to forget. Intentionally or not, this evangelical approach to form presents it as morally improving, somehow good for the soul, and challenges readers to agree or disagree.

One of Hacker's favourite forms is the epistle. It is a curious fact about modern verse-letters, that, whether written by James Fenton, Michael Longley, or W. S. Graham, they often resemble each other. Perhaps their Audenesque DNA is to blame? Derek Mahon, another fan of Auden, has praised Hacker loudly and, reading her book, epistles of his, like 'Beyond Howth Head' and 'The Sea in Winter', spring readily to mind. This is the opening, for instance, of Hacker's 'Letter to Julie in a New Decade':

I think of you in all that Irish mist
in which you're writing out your solitude
impatiently: the morning's Eucharist
is gruel, or finnan haddie; clouds intrude
on crag and moor and rain-drenched Gothic heap –
at least they do when I imagine it.
Up on the hills are huddled flocks of sheep
that leave behind them little cairns of shit.

Here we find many features of the Audenesque epistle: a stagey premise, self-conscious rhyming, rickety generalizations, alternating bursts of high and low culture, and, overall, the quality once described by Michael Hoffman as 'freeze-dried descriptiveness'. The use of 'impatiently' shows the structural strain. Is the adverb intended to modify (a) the description of the speaker's thinking or (b) that of the addressee's writing. Is this syntactic blur intentional or lazy? The most interesting moment comes in the sixth line, where the writer, deliberately, informally, draws attention to her limitations of technique or vision. This is a typical example of epistolary self-correction. One thinks of Auden's 'There is no other

rhyme except anoint' in 'Letter to Lord Byron' or of W. S. Graham's anxious questioning in 'Dear Bryan Wynter': ('... am/ I greedy to make you up/ Again out of memory?/Are you there at all?') While the willingness to admit imperfection may be attractive, it can also give rise to the kind of meandering informality favoured by some poets in mid-career. In the end, one reacts negatively to the way the poems seem to declare: 'Yes, I'm casually constructed — but, don't you see? — *that's the point*. And I'm using rhyme too (in case you think I can't.)'

Hacker's poems are anxious to be labeled. The reader keeps tripping over statements of identity rather than striking lines — 'I'm still alive, an unimportant Jew/ who lives in exile ...' or 'Among Americans/ my polyglot persona disappears,/ another Jewish Lesbian in France.' One feels that these identifications are of a piece with her self-conscious formalism. The referencing fills the work with proper names — friends and acquaintances, writers living and dead, places visited — which give the excerpts from Hacker's life much-needed texture. In particular, her portraits of New York in the 1960s, have a documentary interest.

The problem with Hacker's formalism is that it is formulaic. In a typical poem of hers, mention of time and place is swiftly followed by a few lines of local description, then an intimate shift to the poet's personal life, followed by an identity-statement which establishes her in relation to some larger historical pattern, before the poem concludes in wise-sounding generalizations. 'Dusk: July', for example, closely follows this pattern. The poem starts with a description of the season ('Late afternoon rain of a postponed summer'), makes a sketch of the neighbourhood, moves to sudden personal revelation ('I would love my love, but my love is elsewhere'), then links her personal circumstances to the horrors of the twentieth century (AIDS, the Holocaust) and ends portentously:

I just want to wake up beside my love who
wakes beside me. One of us will die sooner;

one of us is going to outlive the other,
but we're alive now.

Of course, Hacker did not invent this set-piece formula — one thinks of 'September 1, 1939' and 'Skunk Hour' as other examples, but even these poems are only saved from starchiness by interesting twists of psychology and sharp phrasing. Some poems succeed despite their form, not because of it.

Auden and Lowell — the dominant poets of Hacker's youth — seem appropriate points of reference for her mid-Atlantic, mid-century style. Adrienne Rich, who has similar influences, does it better. As in the concluding lines of 'Hayden Carruth', one closes this book admiring Hacker's enthusiasm, her devotion to the provisional life of the poet, without feeling that she has described it memorably:

... there's a stack of student endeavours that
I've got to read, and write some encouraging
words on. Five hours of class tomorrow;
Tuesday, a dawn flight to California.

© John Redmond, 2006

Marilyn Hacker, *Essays on Departure*, Carcanet Press, 2006.

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FRAN BREARTON

Paul Muldoon, *Horse Latitudes*

January 2007

Is this the book where Muldoon has finally ‘gone native’ in America? *Horse Latitudes*, his tenth collection, looks like an American wolf in Faber & Faber clothing, with its (FSG?) cover design of nose-to-tail horses doubtless shifting from foot to foot around the book, and its fortunate exemption from the rather too interesting blues, browns, greens, reds or yellows of other recent Faber productions. (The spelling in the book is American too.) The cover painting, by Stubbs, is entitled ‘Mares and Foals without a Background’, a caution, perhaps, for those who relentlessly try to bring Muldoon back home to Ulster. Of course, it’s equally tempting to see a free-floating, perpetual circling as the only stable place for a poet who seems as restless as his poems, only really at home within them. (Muldoon’s carbon hoofprints must be extensive.) Yet to fall ‘between two stones’ – be they ‘Armagh or Tyrone’ (‘The Outlier’), Ireland or America, one side of the street or the other – relies, in this book as in its predecessor, *Moy Sand and Gravel*, on the tension of a double anchoring that keeps the poet from freefall, from precipitation into a postmodern void whose ‘provisional’ qualities could themselves begin to look remarkably fixed. Never ‘without a background’ to his foreground, or a foreground to his background, it’s as if Muldoon habitually copes with having been born an only twin. The speaker in ‘Eggs’ pecks his way

through a crack in present-day America back to ‘a freshly whitewashed / scullery in Cullenramer’ and into the ‘new-laid eggs’ of the past ‘from any one of which’, he writes, ‘I might yet poke / my little beak’. The ‘country toward which I’ve been rowing / for fifty years’, in ‘It Is What It Is’, is also that landscape of the past, ‘the fifty years I’ve spent trying to put it together’.

It’s now twenty years since Muldoon left ‘The Old Country’ (as one of the poems in this collection has it) for pastures new, and even more than that since an hallucinogenic stroll with Ciaran Carson through the green fields of home transformed his head into the ‘head of a horse’ with a ‘dirty-fair mane’. It was probably only a matter of time before horses, in one form or another, earned a place in a book title, given their ubiquity in Muldoon’s oeuvre – from Moy’s horse fairs to the Wild West – and unsurprisingly, the horse trail in this book has all the elusiveness we’ve come to expect from the poet. The ‘horse latitudes’, the blurb helpfully tells us, ‘designate an area north and south of the equator in which ships tend to be becalmed, in which stasis if not stagnation is the order of the day, and where sailors traditionally threw horses overboard to conserve food and water’. That’s one handy fact through which to ‘interpret’ this book, of which more anon. Another strategy might be to pick up various horsey links in a chain, to jog along an intertextual and self-referential ‘inside track’: there are ‘clay horses’, cobs, war horses, stallions, pack mules and asses. There’s a pair of ‘rain-bleached horses’ (compare ‘Gathering Mushrooms’) who stand ‘head to tail’ (compare ‘Why Brownlee Left’). There are moments of Frostian rhythmical canters: ‘whereof ... whereof...whereof’; ‘whereat ... whereat ... whereat’. And horses become, inevitably, hobbyhorses – one of Muldoon’s being the urge to squeeze signification dry: so there’s a ‘half-assed attempt to untangle / the ghastly from the price of gasoline’; his former lover is put ‘through her paces’, although she kicks ‘against the traces’. Even more obliquely, the seemingly all-American poem, ‘Soccer Moms’, a double villanelle and paean to 1960s America, with ‘Gene Chandler ... winning

their hearts, Mavis and Merle', borrows from Walter Scott's 'The Lady of the Lake': 'Merry it is in good greenwood / When the mavis and merle are singing... When the deer sweeps by and the hounds are in cry, / And the hunter's horn is ringing.' Even without a hoof in sight, it thereby earns itself a fugitive link to the hunting imagery elsewhere in the book.

This is all fun to do, and to read a Muldoon book is to learn lots of new things. Since he is technically brilliant – perhaps more so than any other poet of recent decades – there is, as always, a delight in stylistic accomplishment for its own sake. This is an outrageously virtuoso performance, a triumphant canter round the ring. According to Michael Ferber, (*Dictionary of Literary Symbols*), 'in America many say ... "Whoa!" who have never ridden a horse'. To my knowledge, Muldoon hasn't ridden a horse either, but throughout *Horse Latitudes*, we're reminded that he's wielding, (witness the odd 'whoah', or 'clippety-clop'), an 'equestrienne's whip' with consummate skill. Muldoon is a poet who can pull the stylistic reins tight, loop them, or seemingly let them run free, who can keep 'Four in Hand', who won't 'lose a stirrup' or 'come a cropper'.

'Part of writing', Muldoon tells us, 'is about manipulation – leaving [people] high and dry, in some corner at a terrible party, where I've nipped out through the bathroom window'. In a sense, what once looked 'difficult' in Muldoon, what left many readers 'high and dry', and what provided plenty of fodder for the academic, has been transformed by the internet. What might once have entailed weeks of research now requires little more than an afternoon with Google. The great virtue of that change is not the ease with which Muldoon is now 'elucidated'; rather, we can now shortcut to a recognition that such elucidations and explications (through which the dedicated Muldoonian sleuth once held his or her own readers captive) don't really help that much at all. Always alert to what critics are up to, Muldoon surely knows that changing technologies can change the way he is read. That being the case, we might do well to suspect that something underhand is afoot when the tricky Muldoon gives easy answers. 'Riddle', for instance,

seems to parody the kind of academic pedantry that tried to 'work out' Muldoon ('My first may be found ... in grime / but not in rime' etc). The answer – griddle – is only another version of 'riddle' anyway (a wire-bottomed sieve) which takes us once more round the hamster wheel and back to where we began. It is, in other words, an empty quest.

But there must be more to it than that, and perhaps this is a book about rather different kinds of 'riddles', one that proposes 'riddles' in as much as it confronts, and seeks to express, the difficult, or insoluble problem. That expression is embedded in the form and structure of the poems, as much as in the surface difficulty of what they say. Always drawn to repetition, Muldoon has taken it, surely, as far as it can formally and thematically go, notably in the sonnet-sequence 'The Old Country'. Here, as elsewhere, Muldoon is fascinated by envelope patterns, enclosing the whole sequence with 'every town was a tidy town', and plaiting each poem into the next through one step forward, two steps back repetitions – a slow, slow quick movement that is to appear in reverse in the final poem of the book, 'Sillyhow Stride'. In 'The Old Country', the final line of each sonnet is the first line of the next. This suggests repetition as a cumulative building of detail, as is the case in 'The Outlier', and as is familiar from Eliot's 'Ash Wednesday'. But in 'The Old Country', Muldoon complicates the forward narrative since the repetitions double back on themselves. (If each repeated line were to be numbered, from 1 to 9, the pattern of repetition runs: 1223; 3224; 2445; 5446; 6776 and so on to conclude 9881.) The form captures the stagnation and insularity ('Every track was an inside track / and every job an inside job') of a society renowned for a certain 'no surrender' mentality: 'Every point was a point of no return / for those who had signed the Covenant in blood'. To parody a mentality the poem simultaneously critiques is a risky strategy, since the poem might all too easily become its detractors. Yet Muldoon does carry it off – just – capturing both the sense of apocalypse ('every ditch was a last ditch) and tedium ('every boat was, again, a burned boat') that leave the 'old country'

(temptingly, though not necessarily, Northern Ireland) caught in the repetition of its own failed strategies. Like his peers, in Northern Ireland and elsewhere, Muldoon does not presume to offer a solution to the riddle, only to expose the conundrum through the play of form.

Horse Latitudes, for all its 'play', is therefore also a deeply political book. It is also, one senses at times, an angry book, whose forms are bound up with its sense of personal trauma and historical crisis. To go back to horses briefly: the superb 'Medley for Morin Khur' takes us seamlessly from the horse-headed Mongolian violin to a 'body-strewn central square...in which they'll heap the horses' heads / by the heaps of horse skin'. Glaucus, in the poem of that title, is 'eaten now by his own mares'. Yeats's 'Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen', (a poem quoted by Muldoon in 'The Old Country') with its 'Violence upon the roads: violence of horses' who, 'weariest running round and round in their courses / All break and vanish', lurks behind the scenes, as does *Macbeth*, in which Duncan's horses – 'beauteous and swift' – devour each other. For all the circularity and repetition of this book, for all its repetitive running round its courses, it too is underpinned by what will 'break and vanish', by injustice and evil.

Horses thus begin to look rather like Swiftian rational beings, the victims of a bestial and violent human history on display in the sequence of 19 sonnets, 'Horse Latitudes', that opens the collection. The sonnets are all about battles beginning with 'B', some familiar (Bannockburn, Bosworth Field, Boyne, Bull Run), others less so (Bronkhorstspruit, Beersheba). The sequence is a version of the 'horse latitudes' writ large across human history. Taking us chronologically from the 12th to the 21st century, it encompasses the Wars of the Roses, the American War of Independence, the Boer War, the Great War, and so on. Yet at the same time it cannot move forward, always returning to the default 'B' setting, 'stasis if not stagnation ... the order of the day'. The more recent 'War on Terror', is evoked more than once, rendering Baghdad present through its absence: in 'Blaye', the 14th century French are 'still

struggling to prime / their weapons of mass destruction'; in 'Blackwater Fort', Bush will 'come clean' on the 'gross / imports of crude oil ... only when the Tigris comes clean' – a sinister hint of purging there. The present stains the past as much as vice versa, just as 'Carlotta's' cancer, another strand to the sequence, is a 'tumor ... on dark ground', contaminating memory, denying a future. The attrition of this sequence thus sends depressing signals to the present, more particularly to Bush's America: this is a history in which there are, quite evidently, no winners, however many battles are fought, whatever their names.

If the lesson learned, or more depressingly unlearned here, is that war is a no-win situation, it's unsurprising that Muldoon allows himself, in Milton's phrase, to 'give the reins to grief', in the elegy for Warren Zevon, 'Sillyhow Stride', at the end of book: 'you knew the mesotheliomata // on both lungs meant the situation was lose-lose'. Whatever journeys through space and time have been going on in *Horse Latitudes*, it is always here, with the inevitability of repetition, that they have been taking us: as he puts it in 'It Is What It Is', 'My mother. Shipping out for good. For good this time.' The collection is haunted by cancer victims: his former lover, Mary Farl Powers, his mother Brigid, the musician Warren Zevon, and his sister Maureen Muldoon, in whose memory the book is dedicated. This is elegiac ground Muldoon has trodden before – in 'Incantata', and in 'Yarrow' – but here something sounds different. One of the repeated motifs of 'Sillyhow Stride' is 'yeah right' ('to enter in these bonds / is to be free, yeah right'). This is a more cynical music than the 'all would be swept away' of 'Yarrow', and in writing of his sister's death, Muldoon, far from nipping out of the bathroom window, is extraordinarily present in the poem:

I knelt beside my sister's bed, Warren, the valleys and the peaks
of the EKGs, the crepuscine X-rays,
the out-of-date blisterpacks

If metre, rhyme and diction instantly identify such lines as Muldoon's, the voice is perhaps tonally less familiar: angry, bitter, even helpless in the face of the 'quick, quick, slow', 'lose lose' dance unto death (a movement that the book itself structurally performs) not merely of his loved ones, but of society as a whole. *Horse Latitudes* is, as we would expect, a brilliant performance; it also offers an unusually direct insight into some of the passions with which this supposedly detached and manipulative poet burns.

© Fran Brearton, 2007

Paul Muldoon, *Horse Latitudes*, Faber and Faber, 2006.

£14.99. 978-0-571-23234-5

STEPHEN BURT

Louise Glück, *Averno*

January 2007

Averno is Louise Glück's best book in at least ten years, perhaps her best since *The Wild Iris* (1992). Like almost all her books, it mixes curt fragments of autobiography, apothegmatic claims about disappointment and unfulfillment in human life generally, and analogies from familiar myth: in this case, the myth of Persephone, whose descent into Hades, and consequent winter (Italian 'averno'), the poet sets against (a) her own midlife fears about death, (b) her thoughts on the tenacious, frightening bonds between mothers and daughters, and (c) the story of a modern girl, an anti-Persephone of sorts, who – through carelessness or arson – burns a wheat field to ash.

These deflated lyric utterances possess the starkness of her other recent books (such as 1999's *Vita Nova*) but almost none of their self-pity, and none of their risky, apparently thin consolation. 'I thought my life was over,' *Vita Nova* concluded, 'then I moved to Cambridge,' that is, Cambridge, Massachusetts. No wonder Americans pay such high rent to live there.

Such responses, provoked whenever a poet does not quite transform her life into art, should not arise from *Averno*, which provokes astonishment, and perhaps a little fear, instead. In this book, when a life is over, it is truly over: 'these things we depend on,' the first poem says, 'they

disappear.// What will the soul do for solace then? . . . Maybe just not being is simply enough,/ hard as that is to imagine.'

Averno, like many retellings of Persephone's story, considers how hard we find it to leave any prior world (childhood, say, or youth, or parenthood) behind. Glück's retelling stands out for the nearly impersonal harshness with which she examines the actors, and especially Demeter, the grieving mother. 'The goddess of the earth/ punishes the earth—this is/ consistent with what we know of human behavior,' she concludes. Another poem advises: 'the tale of Persephone . . . should be read/ as an argument between the mother and the lover—/ the daughter is just meat.' The closer we get, Glück suspects, to the primal attachments – mother-daughter, wife-husband, lover-beloved – the less humane we are to one another, the more we cease to care what our 'partners' want.

Nor is that her only chilling claim. 'I remember the word for chair,/ I want to say—I'm just not interested anymore.' So the title poem states: few poets save Plath have sounded so alienated, so depressed, so often, and rendered that alienation aesthetically interesting. Glück's self-editing, her care that each line add (or subtract) something from the line before, sets her above her bevy of imitators. As with Alberto Giacometti, her closest analogue in the visual arts, Glück's technique seems to have evolved out of her bleak, subtractive moods. Her happiest claims, her most attractive images, come in for grim treatment as soon as they appear. Look what she does to the agreeable melancholy in this succession of images: 'My childhood, closed to me forever,/ turned gold like an autumn garden' (here it comes) 'mulched with a thick layer of salt marsh hay.'

Such effects notwithstanding, Glück's usual sources of surprise and variety are not images but syntax, line shape, and tone: poems shift from vaunting defiance to curdled self-hate in the space of a single phrase. Glück can also stake everything on the truth of her abstract utterances: 'It is true there is not enough beauty in the world./ It is also true that I

am not competent to restore it./ Neither is there candor, and here I may be of some use.'

That candor about owes something to Glück's early and serious psychoanalysis, which (as she explained in an essay, collected in 1994's *Proofs & Theories*) served her almost as other writers have been served by universities. The psychoanalytic situation, of course, asks the analyst to say, without rehearsal, whatever seems most important, and identifies importance with hiddenness, shock, aggression, unfairness, with whatever emotions we usually conceal.

So does Glück. What psychoanalysis does not do, what Glück has used her lyric concision to do, is to judge those unfair, 'inappropriate', self-revelations, and in doing so to give them shape, or shapes: as in the psychoanalytic series of sessions, organized into episodes and groups, Glück's verse-paragraphs comprise sets and series, poems and groups of poems, sets within sets, such as the six-part, eleven-page poem 'October', each part and no part apparently final.

These bleak sequences include an equally bleak view of the life course. Lives in most art works have, in Yeats' phrase, 'character isolated by a deed,' but lives in Glück have no deeds, no moments of decision, only a remembered 'before' and a startled, stripped down 'after', with 'the field parched, dry,/ the deadness in place already.' In a poem called 'The Myth of Innocence', Persephone realizes that neither an account in which she says "I was abducted", nor an account in which she says "I offered myself . . . I willed this", fits: the name for her life, for all lives, is neither victimhood nor heroic choice, but impersonal fate, which we can resent indefinitely, or else resign ourselves to living out.

Glück's bracing transitions and her scary omissions, her sudden claims and terse rejoinders, will not please every reader, but what could? She has rejected most of the effects by which other poets depict life's attractions, or its distractions: 'Someone like me,' Glück says, 'doesn't escape'. Even the oldest tradition of seasonal lyric contains, for her, misleading consolation: 'Spring will return, a dream/ based on a

falsehood:/ that the dead return.' Is such an account of life incomplete?
It is: it is also beautiful in itself, and it makes a startling corrective to
the hopes embodied by almost everything else we are likely to read.

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Louise Glück, *Averno*, Carcanet Press, 2006.
£9.95. 978-1857548372

TIM KENDALL

David Wheatley, *Mocker*

March 2007

'City', the opening poem of David Wheatley's excellent third collection, starts without enticement: 'I seem to have found my level: / flat, all is flat'. Wheatley is ostensibly describing the environment in and around his adopted city of Hull, where 'nothing rises' or 'will rise', where avenues 'fall away under your feet', and where things are literally heading down the drain – down 'speluncular drains', no less. But this lowering of sights allows for a perfect marriage of landscape and poetic voice, because *Mocker* is scarred with a self-loathing verging on the suicidal. 'I'd decided I liked me less and less', 'My Back Pages' admits, before offering a helpful suggestion to discarded friends: 'Get rid of me and you're all welcome back'. Wheatley presents himself as his own biggest problem, and the solution he advocates is dissolution.

Thankfully, *Mocker* has other – albeit less conspicuous – stories to tell. Even 'City' shakes off its dirge long enough for a final image of transcendence, as the speaker and his companion climb the stairs of his house to stand 'on top of the world'. That 'world' may be easy to surmount, but it refutes the argument that 'nothing will rise'. In its patterning of ups and downs, 'City' serves as an appropriate frontispiece for a book which is obsessed with trajectories. Two poems later, 'Riptide' reports how a Hawk jet came down in the Humber, its pilot 'shot free

like a champagne cork'. Scarcely a poem goes by without some dizzy-ing – and usually concluding – shift of perspective, whether by 'com[ing] in to land', 'drowning', 'fall[ing]' and 'run[ning] to ground', or by watching swallows 'haul their way up' or imagining an eagle's talons 'punctur[ing] and carry[ing] ... off' a page of poetry. Birds inevitably become an important emblem, playing along the vertical axis: *Mocker* constitutes an aviary of pigeons, gulls, owls, macaws, puffins, doves, eagles, geese, roosters, swallows and hawks (although there are as many mammals and – this being Hull – quite a few fish).

Earth, air and water remain Wheatley's elemental staples; he creates some meagre heat in 'Chemical Plant' ('our pale flame') and 'I burn' ('I burn with a flame that's all my own'), but it is all rather half-hearted and fails to persuade anyone, himself included, that fire is dangerous. 'I burn and freeze like ice', complained Thomas Wyatt; Wheatley may burn with his own flame, but he is more typically found to 'freeze / when I see this brutal life and see it whole'. The nature of his poetic gift ensures that he works best at low temperatures, with one possible exception: a devotee of Beckett and Cioran, Wheatley is attracted to the idea that life is a blemish on perfection, and that apocalypse would clean the human stain. The Blitz is therefore recalled with fondness, both in 'City' where 'the people [were] never happier' as everything turned to 'rubble / and death', and in the Neronic desire of 'Nostalgia':

Blacktoft docks bombed!, Lord Haw Haw crackled over
the airwaves six decades ago. Let more bombs
fall tonight: I give it all up, river,
jetty, me staggering from the pub, to the flames

if in return they grant me an azure-and-pink-
against-pitch-black sunset streaking the sky
behind the Ouse while the geese sleep on the wing
and one man and his dog walk lazily by.

Yet even this dilettante's prayer peters out into the mundane with its descent from the dramatic sky to the man and dog, and from the edgy off-rhymes to the reassuring completeness of 'sky/by'. With the word 'lazily', the poem has moved in several lines from high-energy combustion to somnambulance.

Wheatley is not, on the whole, a recorder of voices. 'The Gas Mask' has an archetypal taxi-driver sounding off about terrorism, but except for its rhymes the poem contains nothing that you couldn't find in *Private Eye*. Wheatley's subject is himself, but not egotistically so – himself as seen and understood through the prism of other lives (especially animal lives) and landscapes. This gift allows his achievement to be measured alongside the strongest poets of his generation. Take 'Axolotl', an anthology poem in waiting, which begins with the line 'All the blood has drained from my face' before giving its full attention to those salamanders who hang in the water like 'dangling mobiles':

And at night,
hoisted on their pudding hind legs
they rattle the locked conservatory door
for as long as their held breath lasts
and slouch back to their tank to weigh it all up:
the evolving or dying, the dying or surviving,
the evolving or dying or staying the same –
decisions, decisions – these millions of years.

If Wheatley's animal poems occasionally put the reader in mind of Ted Hughes, it is only because the poets share an important predecessor in Marianne Moore. 'Axolotl' provides the antithesis of Ted Hughes's vision of nature. Hughes favoured predators, and his living fossils were pike, evolved to be unthinking killers; Wheatley's is the harmlessly absurd and pudgy axolotl, who turns out to be rather a philosopher. As the poet studies the axolotl, does he himself want to evolve or die or stay the same? Decisions, decisions.

© Tim Kendall, 2007
David Wheatley, *Mocker*, The Gallery Press, 2006.
£9.95. 978-1-85235-02-2

APRIL WARMAN

John Burnside, *Gift Songs*

March 2007

To judge by *Gift Songs*, his tenth collection, John Burnside has ambitions towards philosophical, even theological, poetry. This is signalled explicitly through the titles to some of the sequences that make up the book: 'Responses to Augustine of Hippo', 'Varieties of Religious Experience', and, most daringly, 'Four Quartets'. Within the poetry, such ambition can come across rather crudely, as the drive to philosophical formulation swamps the verse's subtleties: the collection shows an appealing fascination with colours, as abstract qualities: 'aconite; meltwater; cinnabar; Prussian blue', 'cadmium yellow ... damson blue *ad infinitum*'. It is a disappointment when the reasoning behind this suggestive intensity of attraction is flatly spelled out in 'Retractationes': 'as if those colours were those perfect forms / he always wanted: blithe Platonic blues / and reds, not the accidents of light'.

The ambition seems more achieved, more constructive than congestive, in places where the urge to definition and proposition is combined with Burnside's gift for the fluidly evocative image or idea. 'Nocturne' retains the desire to make fine, even abstruse, distinctions, in such lines as 'and something, not quite light, but like // a narrative of light', but the concept of a 'narrative of light' is not just *recherché*, but also poetically suggestive. The poem's drive to haziness and nebulosity, which it shares

with many others in the collection, is dramatically grounded in its evocation of gradually fading light: 'the last mauve of the evening / burning out // along the horizon: nightfall; endlessness.'

Such evocative, almost wistful, language is also seen in 'De Libero Arbitrio', which begins,

– something that comes
from the dark
(not
self or not-self)

but something between the two
like the shimmering line
where one form defines another
yet fails to end;

The sinuous, dreamily interminable syntax provides a perfect analogue for the indeterminacy of what is evoked; the front flap tells us that the book aims to place faith 'in the indefinable', and this poetry certainly works toward such a state of unknowing. Read sympathetically, it could be seen as bravely, yet humbly, refusing certainties in favour of an exploration of the limits of the knowable.

However, Burnside's attraction to the indefinable frustrates at least as often as it appeals: it can leave the reader aching for substance. Later in the poem, we are asked to imagine 'the shapes we mistake/ for ourselves' as 'turning a moment / then slipping away to a depth / that never existed'. To say that a 'shape', the only definition of which we are given is explicitly 'mistaken', disappears into a place that, the enjambement cruelly announces, doesn't actually exist, leaves the reader floundering in the wake of an image that, rather than creating meaning, appears to have swallowed itself. Such rug-pulling manoeuvres abound in the collection: 'something I lost / returned in another form, and was barely

remembered'; 'something else // that looks like you, or would, if you were there'.

An announced suspicion of language in 'Peninsula' may be intended to provide justification for this tortuous lack of reference: 'I know what it is we are losing, moment by moment / in how the names perpetuate the myth / of all they have replaced', but the explicit exposition of this theory does not ameliorate its effects on the reading experience. Along with another repeated device, definition by negation ('not / self or not-self'), the poems' constant evasion of statement is as likely to create distrust and weariness as acceptance of the transcendent limits of language and awareness. In reading poetry, we expect to have to deal with 'the names', rather than 'all they have replaced': this is, in fact, where much of its pleasure lies. Ninety-three closely printed pages experimenting with indefiniteness as a substitute for such linguistic displacement, ask a lot of a reader.

As can be seen in many places above, Burnside's skill in holding a line can do a great deal to rescue the vacuity of his content. A single couplet from the last poem of the book shows a beautifully controlled density of sound-patterning that is a gift in itself:

*Though nothing I see is ever seen enough,
nothing is heard for certain, even the rain*

With such unobtrusive chiasmus (noth/see/seen/nough), with the assonance of 'heard' and 'certain', and the predominance of 'n' sounds, gently echoing the negations expressed, it hardly matters that here is, yet again, a discussion of things not as they are, but as they are not.

But even this skilfulness can become tiresome. The last stanza of 'The Body as Metaphor' displays Burnside's usual supple syntax, working properly in tension with the pentameter that, openly or disguised by odd line-breaks, is the basic unit underlying much of his work:

or something not quite visible, but quick
as birchseed, or the threading of a wire
through sleep and rapture, gathering the hand
that reaches for the light, to close, or open.

Here, however, the suppleness seems automatic, and the pentameter is not strong enough to prevent the phrases clotting into a monotonous succession of two-stress units: ‘the thréading of a wíre / through sléep and rápture / gáthering the hánd / that réaches for the líght / to clóse or ópen.’

Burnside’s embrace of unknowing, his serious attempt to address in poetry fundamental philosophical and theological concerns, is a welcome contrast to the shallow kinds of knowingness displayed by much poetry that appears, and is fêted, today. But there is a danger that his work prioritises such content (appearing generally as a conspicuous withholding of content) to the extent that it loses sight of its responsibilities to its readers; and of its status as poetry, which, if wise, will stimulate, please or provoke, before it attempts to instruct.

© April Warman, 2007
John Burnside, *Gift Songs*, Jonathan Cape, 2006.
£9.00. 978-0-224079-97-6

MISHTOONI BOSE

Ian Duhig, *The Speed of Dark*

April 2007

In his latest collection, Ian Duhig draws inspiration from the medieval satirical compilation *Le Roman de Fauvel*, situating himself in a lineage of French literary remanieurs, and specifically Chaillou de Pesstain, whose 1317 version of the *Roman* came soon after the *Premier Livre* (1310), compiled by an anonymous author, and the *Secont Livre* by Gervès de Bus (1314). Notes to *The Speed of Light* contextualize *Fauvel* itself and its role as the structural and imaginative catalyst for the modern collection. *The Speed of Dark* is, in Duhig’s words, an ‘updating’, drawing its satiric animus from the original’s concern with the corruption of medieval institutions, and notably the Knights Templar, suppressed, as Duhig notes, for supposed idolatry. The epigraph to his collection comes from Thomas Arnold, who proclaims that ‘the spirit of chivalry’ is the ‘spirit of evil’ that ‘predominantly deserved the name of Antichrist’. The etymological thread linking *cheval* and *chivalry*, extending in Duhig’s mind to ‘the US cavalry’ and the ‘Trojan horse’ of UK politics provides this collection with its thematic coherence no less than ‘Islam’s one-eyed Antichrist Dajjal’, whom he finds associated with ‘Templars and George Bush’ on assorted websites. The presiding genius of *The Speed of Dark* is Fauvel himself – ‘your man-stroke-horse-stroke King Fauvel’ – a hybrid man-beast fawned on by popes, cardinals and others. His transgressive image litters BN fr. 146, a manuscript of

the *Roman* that exemplifies what Michael Camille calls an ‘aesthetics of hybridity’ despite its censorious attitude towards (in Duhig’s words) ‘distinctions dissolved, things becoming what they should not.’ Horses of all kinds similarly fill Duhig’s collection, most notably in ‘Behoof’, where the horse anatomized by Gradgrind stables with Pegasus, Rosinante and the ‘ritual bride for Celtic kings.’ Duhig ends his notes with the hope that his own collection will participate in the viral transmission initiated by the medieval *Roman* so that, ‘like the cursed videotape in Hideo Nakata’s *Ring*, even copies and other versions can restart the cycle’. So it was that, fresh (if that’s the right word) from watching *Ring*, I embarked on reading this collection which, it can fairly be said, removes us quite some way from the flatlands of the unmediated confession that is the natural terrain of much modern poetry.

Men have become beasts (‘hommes sont devenuz bestes’). Crusading is a Bad Thing. Virtus moritur. Vivit vicium. The task of satirical poetry is to avoid aestheticizing its subject and anaesthetizing its audience. (The neutering of of BN fr. 146, transformed by its longevity into an objet d’amour for modern medievalists, is a salutary warning). But satire flattens: one way, for example, to avoid being bludgeoned by the self-satisfied ironies of the ‘General Prologue’ to Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* is to read it as a satire on satire itself. Hybridity at least keeps things in motion and as such is an irresistible lure for the imagination, where satire would have things in black and white. Duhig knows the risks: they’re encoded here in another epigraph from Blake (‘But thou read’st black where I read white’) no less than in the portraits d’encre that balance the colours of BN fr. 146 with their moralizing monochrome. Duhig’s poetry strenuously resists the flattening effect, embracing and proffering knowledge or, at least, facts. Thus, even while it exposes a hapless teacher, the poem ‘Moshibboleth’ educates its readers in the relationship between *Fauvel* and one of its antecedents, *Le Roman de Renart*. Some of the poems here draw on goliardic energy which is most clearly in evidence in the rhyming octosyllables of ‘Fauvel’s Prologue

and ‘Dame Fortuna’s Antilogue’. In the ‘Prologue’, the updated anti-hero flies in from Charles de Gaulle and launches a virtuoso piece, linguistically and conceptually agile, with Duhig deftly stitching together imagery from the *Roman* and his own political preoccupations. The momentum compels admiration, but the commitment to producing a verbal equivalent not only for the visual richness of BN fr. 146 but also for its portraits d’encre regularly takes its toll:

Right now, America’s our Rome,
my rival stable – God’s new home –
you ruled the waves: she rules the air
(and riding airs is work I share)
but now your naval empire’s wrecked,
your tongue one Yankee dialect,
your politics a Trojan horse
or fig-leaf for her naked force.
If ‘cheval’ bore our chivalry,
our heirs the US cavalry
ride helicopters to a fight
to show their Saracens what’s right ...

Elsewhere, in ‘Civilization’, George Bush’s ‘Press Room echoes like a minaret’. Crusading is a Bad Thing, remember. But such moments remind us that satire is as likely to make us stop thinking as its orgulous, egregious and, frankly, easy targets would like to do.

At several other points in the collection, Duhig succumbs to the easy satisfactions of etymology. ‘Out of Context’ is spellbound by it (“Ink” leads back to “encaustic”, so to “holocaust”). Etymologies, one wants to cry, aren’t hidden clues to the Meaning of Things. They’re conceptual footprints telling us what those before us have made of the world. There are different kinds of rough music elsewhere, such as the riffs on *refrain/bridle/burden* in the poem ‘love me little’, the heavy-handed punning in ‘Eye Service’ (‘each lyric “Je” sans frontières/in every town

the only game'), the unambitious reportage of 'Communion' and "The Art of White" at the Lowry', a poem that hurls barely-mediated cultural baggage at its readers.

Etymology is a false guru. Ask me not where a word comes from; ask me where it is headed. The weaker poems in this collection show that someone sufficiently pumped up with anger and armed with a stash of dictionaries can write. The stronger poems here put the dictionaries to one side and get on with the infinitely harder task of thoroughly alchemizing imagination, thought, language, personal and cultural memories. Duhig has the courage of a more introverted muse in the dignified 'Wallflowers at Beverly' with which the collection opens, in 'Mencken Sonnet' (Buñuel, lifting an image from St. Thomas Aquinas/for the mechanics of the Immaculate Conception,/talked of a ray of light falling through Noilly Prat/onto the ardent base spirit of the gin in its glass'), and in 'Coda', a meditation on the fishing-net:

Electrospun, invisible,
a knotless mesh, this matchless shift
will cast no shadow but a spell
to check and catch the breath of fish.

'Do only that which is uniquely yours', Alan Garner once memorably counselled in an interview. The most rewarding moments in this collection occur when Duhig breaks free from Fauvel, revered as a 'beste autentique' by shop-soiled medieval popes, and writes entirely on his own terms.

© Mishtooni Bose, 2007
Ian Duhig, *The Speed of Dark*, Picador, 2007.
£8.99. 978-0-330446-55-6

MATTHEW SPERLING

Fiona Sampson, *Common Prayer*

November 2007

The poems in *Common Prayer* give evidence of a sensibility faced in several unlikely-seeming directions at once: erotic and philosophical, internationalist and Christian, bookish and compulsively image-making. If there's sometimes a sense that the longer pieces in the book summon these parts together in a way that doesn't quite add up, at the same time, their combination makes Fiona Sampson a writer of unique vividness and intellectual curiosity.

One of the most productive forms of this curiosity is the capacity to be so taken by an object or a set of terms that the poem is moved to redescribe them, and redescribe again. Lots of images, lots of metaphors: as in the poetry of Charles Tomlinson, the task of attending faithfully to an object becomes not just an ethical imperative but also a feat of moral stamina. 'She is / the stretched line of attention holding itself, / breath stilled', goes the ending of 'A Sacrament of Watering', where 'she' is a wren. Sampson's lines are always impressively stretchy, holding steady under the weight of so much repeated attentiveness. 'Attitudes of Prayer' summons up Beethoven's 'One hundred and thirty-one approaches / to the problem of God', but in the process clearly addresses one of Sampson's own poetic procedures:

Imagine it:
over and over
rehearsing what you don't know,
soundlessly.
Letting yourself transcribe
what no one's said before

While the poems are awake to their own repetitions, they don't always manage to hold back from lapsing or rising into a sort of histrionic attentiveness ('over and over' indeed). This compulsion to the prayerful and the metaphorical brings to mind the earnest questingness of recent Jorie Graham poems (a mode that I believe North American readers know as 'Big Hair Poetry'). It's never less than well done, and the mode suits Sampson, but it might not suit the patience and inclination of every reader.

Along with Graham and John Burnside, who gives a generous blurb to this book, Sampson seems to form part of what's almost becoming a late twentieth-century school of philosophical poetry. But the level at which a poet engages with philosophy presents certain problems to do with diction. In an interview, Roy Fisher has self-effacingly described the manner in which his poems front up to perceptual problems: 'It's rather like setting myself the task of punching my way out of a paper bag. Quite easy but rewardingly noisy. I never get in to the plastic ones.' Against this stands the intensity of Geoffrey Hill's self-projection as a latter-day Jacob wrestling with the Angel. One of the questions, then, for the poet engaged with the matter of philosophy, is how to avoid getting into arguments you know you're going to win, where the poem becomes a sort of victory-parade. In Sampson's poem 'The Looking Glass', we get two sections of phenomenological odds and ends recorded with remarkable precision, where syntax and line-breaks are as finely calibrated as 'the oscillograph's / fluttering wing'. But then the third section opens with a question that is, as the saying goes, 'rhetorical':

Or does this in fact have to do with language?

The problem is, when the poet who asks this question has previously written a book called *Writing: Self and Reflexivity* and 'has a PhD in the philosophy of language', as the biography tells us, all bets are off as to what the answer might be. Sure enough, it turns out this *does* in fact 'have to do' with language: 'The way it hooks, draws in, / every name / a displacement...' But the gears of philosophical discourse have been so guilelessly cranked into motion now that the poem has a lot of work to do to get back what it was good at in the first place.

In among these extended worryings at the denotable world come shorter lyrics and sonnets, often concerned with our bodily or erotic life. The sex that seems to go on in these poems is probably not the sex that most people would want to be having: there's a 'nipple raised to Upper Case - / that taps your palate' in 'Take, Eat', a 'sticky martyrdom' in 'Body Mass', then a slow death that seems to aspire to the condition of an orgasm in 'The Plunge':

Even as I tighten my hold
you're disappearing.
You telescope into your own black centre.

Is this it?
All the love-feast
this salty
drip-feed?

Sometimes Sampson's fragmenting bodies are held together with end-rhymes and tetrameters; but these poems seem to me less successful than Sampson's irregular lines, their word-orders often forced into a maladroitness, approximating clippedness: 'Its sip and gulp, its search for

why / he's on his knees before it, performs / a kind of private liturgy / for itself', goes 'Body Mass', where 'it' is desire – but what 'kind' of liturgy exactly, and do we really need 'sip' and 'gulp' except to fill in the metrical cross-stitch, and why is it 'performs' when that verb evidently has a plural subject, except that it has to rhyme with 'bones' three lines later?

One of the pleasures of this book comes in the visual composition of the poems; Sampson makes use of the page attractively, and usually with good effect, to point the measure of the verse, with broken-backed or stepped lines (again recalling the recent books of John Burnside), carefully irregularized paragraphs keyed in to tonal variations, and frequent studdings of italic type. In 'A Sacrament of Watering', quoted earlier, we even get three sets of back-to-front brackets, again in a Jorie Grahamish vein, to notate the entrance of the Eliotic bird ('*quick quick said the bird*', another poem here says; and Burnside has written a poem called 'Four Quartets'; enough is enough, surely):

)White snap of wings(
...
wide open)light(O
...
)movement of transformation(
...
)

Some readers may be unconvinced that the fiddliness of this last effect is worth the trouble, but as with all the other visual aspects of the book, the meaningfulness of the page design is clear. In fact, you could make a capsule version of *Common Prayer* comprising only those parts of the poems set in italics, and it would give a good idea of what the book is about: 'Make a joyful noise / unto the Lord... Abandon hope... joy... I'm yours alone... my praying mouth vouches for me... why... we... glas... nature mort (sic?)... love... Listen... Imagine the lotus... further, further... look... look... gemütlich... semblable, frère...', and so on. A psalm, Dante's Hell, some French and German, some Baudelaire via Eliot, some Buddhism via Eliot, some

intimate whispers which are also imperatives to look, look closer: all these things and more snag the imagination, and make *Common Prayer* a book worth returning to.

© Matthew Sperling, 2007

Fiona Sampson, *Common Prayer*. Carcanet Press, 2007.

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ALAN GILLIS

Nick Laird, *On Purpose*

November 2007

The first poem of Nick Laird's debut collection was called 'Cuttings'. *On Purpose*, his second collection, includes a piece called 'His Scissors'. Perhaps unsurprisingly, cutting and scissoring are key to his style. In *On Purpose*, the list of 'The Search Engine' creates a cut-and-paste montage effect (splendidly). But mostly his cuts and shifts are less overt. Most poems are continuous wholes riven by gaps and lacunae, strange overlaps and layerings; many turn on the juxtaposition of images and registers. Often the shifts and ellipses are swift and furtive: modulated feints and slips of connotation. There's a snip-snip-snip of intercutting sound and sense within a snaking syntax. Sometimes dramatically, sometimes slyly, Laird's poems are continuous wholes with a hole at their heart.

For example, 'Holiday of a Lifetime' opens matter-of-factly:

Your ex transferred
a photo
to a jigsaw. Years later,
underneath a shelf,
you find a centre piece.

Laird uses the second-person often and deftly: as a mode of speaking to oneself, to a specific other, or to the reader. At some level, all three are always implicated. The tone of address in these poems runs from the intimate to the formal, from the declarative to the qualitative. At his best, Laird can shift mid-poem with fluent guile.

Here, one presumes the photo was of a 'Holiday of a Lifetime', yet we immediately cut to a scene of writing (Sit at the desk. It's mid- | November'). We are told of cigarette smoke, and a study's walls 'strung with hoops of light | thrown by a glass | of water'. It appears we are in this study to attempt to capture the moment:

How close will you get?
Introduce it
as a mood composed of pauses,
water, glass and light,
the sound of distant

traffic passing and someone
burning leaves
somewhere, close by,
smoke shrugging
over fences, hedges,

as if to say that everything is
temporary,
as if you might have momentarily
forgotten,
you with ash on the sleeve
of your best blue jumper.

The moment to be captured would seem to be the present moment of writing, but could also be the moment of the photo. Immediately, the

poem scissors back to the jigsaw piece with which it began:

The jigsaw piece
is also blue, as an eye,
one of yours,
though what you will do

for the rest of your years
is to try,
repeatedly, to identify
that blue as sea,
maybe, or sky.

The present moment and the memory converge through the effort to capture them; and these, in turn, converge with a sense of self, since the jigsaw piece of the photo-portrait is your eye—your 'I' (or, at least, one of them).

But what's notable is how the repeating imagery of water, glass, light, smoke and blueness swirl and sift through the poem's various frames. Syntactic fluidity over the long / short line stanzas creates a spiral in which past, present, and self partake of one another, in a manner both natural and uncanny. There's a duality of poise and precariousness: the final dissolution into the elements is both fragile and expansive. Hanging over the ending is that other eye ('I'), which implicitly belongs to another centre. The poem thus gives us finality and indeterminacy, depth and range through the economy of eight crisp stanzas. Some might demur that the Eliotic ash on sleeve is misplaced; but this poem displays formal skill, sharp intelligence and emotive intuition, easefully fusing in a probing lyricism.

Throughout *On Purpose*, interior worlds and the exterior are equally discombobulated. The excellent opener, 'Conversation', tells us: 'I'd point out what we talk about we talk about || because we speak in code of what

we love. | Here.' The idea of speaking in code of 'what we love' provides another keynote of Laird's poetic: a mixture of pride and vulnerability pitched perfectly in-between emotional articulacy and its opposite. But the 'Here' that is spoken of 'in code' swiftly segues from natural beauty and local bustle to terror, so that 'what we love' turns inexorably to

How someone ... was nailed to a fence.
How they gutted a man like a suckling pig
and beat him to death with sewer rods.

Malevolent historical reality erupts into the 'Here' that we love, or home. But also, this gives a sense that home simply contains violence and negation as a matter of fact. Intriguingly, this also lightly chimes with the troubling insight of Mahon's 'Ecclesiastes': 'God, you could grow to love it ...'.

In any case, home, here, and self are always troubled in Laird's poetic: the *terra firma* is fault-lined. And from such shaken foundations he writes a poetry of mid-flight and exile. Hotel rooms, comings and goings, moments before and just after: these are the scenarios, cast in-between a fierce individualism and a fierce longing, from which Laird's poems deliver a bracing dose of melancholy, transience, guilt, disempowerment and anxiety – all poised against subtle intimations of, and hope for, the embrace of benevolence and grace. As such, Laird's Northern Irishness is almost by-the-bye (almost, but not quite): he is an authentic poet of the contemporary, more broadly.

At their most distinctive, these poems are moulded with craft to deliver a sting in the tail; or else they turn to a more amorphous but redemptive apprehension of the nowhere of now. Alongside the two already mentioned, 'Statue of an Alderman in Devon', 'The Garden', 'Light Pollution', 'Lipstick', 'The Underwood No. 4', the first and last sections of '*from The Art of War*', and 'The Hall of Medium Harmony' are particularly excellent. More generally, there is a greater consistency

throughout than in his first collection: more freight and more buoyancy.

Laird's reception elsewhere provides a troubling snapshot of a crisis in the state of poetry reviewing. With honourable exceptions, he's either been dismissed out of hand or else buttered-up with hyperbole, with minimum attention to his poems. One common fallacy is an automatic assumption that it's a bad thing to bear the influence of Heaney and Muldoon. But in *On Purpose* these two aren't undue influences: there's probably more George Herbert than Heaney; and there's as much Marvell and MacNeice as Muldoon. But more importantly, the narrow-minded, block-eared and *tasteless* option would be for Laird to avoid their influence in the first place. Of course, there's the problem of being swallowed whole by them and producing mimicry. But to accuse Laird of that would be ludicrous. One hopes and expects his poetry will expand and develop. Critics might argue *On Purpose* remains a little poker-faced; that it could do with more meat on the bone. But through the sparseness and compression, Laird generates a haunting trove of subtle and enriching tonal orchestrations. There's no doubt a beguiling, compelling voice is sounding itself out, and the best poems in this book are the business.

© Alan Gillis, 2007

Nick Laird, *On Purpose*, Faber and Faber, 2007.

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PETER McDONALD

Alan Gillis, *Hawks and Doves*

November 2007

How often have you been excited by a new poem? Excited enough, that is, to pick up the phone and tell people about what you've just discovered? Like me, perhaps, you would answer well, no, not all that often. We all find different poems exciting for different reasons, of course; and the last two poems that had this particular effect on me were in the same book by the same author: in Alan Gillis's debut collection *Somebody, Somewhere* (Gallery Press, 2004). On the first page of that book, out of nowhere so to speak, is a poem with the designedly unpromising title of 'The Ulster Way', which opens 'This is not about burns or hedges./ There will be no gorse.' In context – the context of poetry from Northern Ireland, that is, with all its baggage of themes, achievements, and personality over the last forty years – this struck me as a perfectly-pitched bit of impertinence, which the rest of the poems were actually able to rise to, and carry off faultlessly. (As someone who had himself just published a book called *Pastorals*, I felt properly chastised by all this too.) Now, there was actually a good deal of gorse in Gillis's book – which offers its own kind of amusement. But the poem was not a joke, funny though its jokes were, and ended:

For this is not about horizons, or their curving
limitations. This is not about the rhythm
of a songline. There are other paths to follow.
Everything is about you. Now listen.

I was certainly listening by now. Another poem in that book, 'Progress' struck me immediately as one of the very best poems to have come out of (if that's the phrase) the Troubles in Northern Ireland, a poem adequate to the conditions of peace in more adult, subtle and profound ways than some much-lauded (and much-quoted) material from poets many years Gillis's senior. The poem still strikes me that way, and is only getting better with time.

Two poems like this are more than can be reasonably asked of any first volume and, if the rest of *Somebody, Somewhere* was perhaps more in keeping with a debut collection (stylistic and thematic debts too much on display, good writing slipping off the track and turning into the occasional bout of showing off), then it was also fresh, inventive, clever, and alert. Much better, in other words, than a great deal of contemporary poetry that goes its predictable way in Britain, glumly accepting praises and awards as the done deals they usually are.

With his new collection, *Hawks and Doves*, Gillis has moved up a gear, and produced a very substantial, haunting, and troubling book. Although he now lives and works in Scotland, Gillis has written a volume which puts into poetry a new Belfast – one which is partly 'the new Belfast' of contemporary perception – in such a way as to change the literary map. The strong precursor for Gillis is Ciaran Carson (too strong, at times, in his first book), whose poetry gave the city of Belfast an extraordinary (and often menacing) literary life; now, Gillis has moved on decisively, and has become secure in a voice that is all his own. Belfast also, of course, has been moving on in the meantime – into the life of a modern city, with all the good (and the bad) things that life generally entails. In the long poem which ends *Hawks and Doves*, 'Laganside',

Gillis provides a wonderful panorama of the commercially regenerating city (regenerating now on the basis of a 27/7 service industry of fast food and drink), and its potentially unregenerate inhabitants:

Closer to the riverside, terraced doors keep
their mouths shut and children are clamped
in by barricade from this steep fall of river-
bank and clean public walkway, though buttered
faces size me up from behind a useless wall,
cursing the river's limitations, my trespass,
this tourist sprawl. But then, moving onward,
by a cream call centre, a sunbed-skinned sales team
have finished their shift and stream through
the fence-gate to traipse toward happy hour
promotions, black power retro-nights, their navel
studs and highlights sparked by waterlight.

This may seem a far cry from the lines of workers tramping home from the shipyards, but Gillis's focus on Belfast is not in any simple way an ironic one. Indeed, this poem includes the armies of cranes that preside over the Belfast skyline, 'looking towards their unused elders hung/ in sorrow in the dockyards to the east', adding to this little conceit only 'whether/ in sympathy or saying up yours, I'm not sure.'

Gillis's great skill, which in this new book has reached its impressive maturity, lies in the extended sweep of description, and the panorama seems in many ways his natural mode. In this kind of writing, the central problem is how to combine momentum with detail – and there have been many failures over the years. Time and again, Gillis has startling success, as in his poem 'Driving Home', where a strong narrative (of striking a dog in the road, then driving on) is carried along with an extraordinary eye (and ear) for particulars, like 'the sky churning/ buttermilk, lobster, apricot and kale': the painterly brilliance here

simultaneously churns up a kind of subliminal queasiness, entirely in keeping with the distaste in the story being told. All through the book, Gillis gives evidence of his ability to accumulate detail in ways that are telling, rather than random. In this, Gillis is heir to the Louis MacNeice of great urban poems like 'Birmingham', and there is much in *Hawks and Doves* that recalls – and brilliantly revivifies – MacNeice's earlier manner.

But Gillis's book is more than a series of accomplished performances; the volume has a coherence and a depth which many older poets would (or should) envy. Those old chestnuts, the public and the private, are put at odds in original ways in Gillis's poetry; and here it is the completely convincing grasp of the particular, in time and place, which grounds his complex and dark intimations of the world's troubles, and the self's helplessness in the face of these. An additional strength is Gillis's emergence as a poet of personal material, delivered with utter assurance and lack of affectation. Some poems, like the three-part 'Harvest', bring together the personal and the public very memorably: in writing about his own parents, and himself as a parent, Gillis can find unforced room for the discordant matter of 'Trigger-happy tomcats and hornets' with 'their motherloads dead set/ on the clay-baked cities of Iraq'. The poem's conclusion, which thinks about a son's future, the parents' past, and a jittery present, is perfectly judged:

Someday I might return and tell him this
is near where they met, where thy might have been
married, as the rain batters remorseless
on watchtowers, their camouflaged polytetrafluoroethylene,
as I lead him down the road of falling
hazels and vetch, finger to finger
until he lets go and leaves me by a reed-slushing
brook under the sky's orange plumes,
the fallout winds and elder
stealing kisses on the road to Killymoon.

Hawks and Doves will be seen, I think, as a decisive volume in the developing story of poetry from Northern Ireland, full of independence, imaginative strength, and a confidence that is fully justified. It is also entertaining, gripping and moving by turns, as Gillis follows a path that is impressively his own.

© Peter McDonald, 2007

Alan Gillis, *Hawks and Doves*, Gallery Press.

€11.95. 978-1-852354-17-6

JANE GRIFFITHS

Frances Leviston, *Public Dream*

January 2008

The poems of Frances Leviston's first collection are studies in suspension. She excels at exact description, finding the precise verbal equivalent for the scene or image she has in mind, and yet the sum of these exactnesses is a shifting and uncertain world. What is not said is at least as important as what is said; what is not quite seen may be more important than what is clearly apparent. 'The Gaps' – a poem that can really only be quoted in its entirety – addresses this habitual mode of perception directly:

And then they revealed that solids were not solid
That a wall was not solid
That it consisted of molecules fixed and vibrating
Some distance apart, as did the flesh

That solidity was really the likelihood
Of stuff not falling
Between two chairs, down the gaps

And that walking through the wall was not impossible
That it could be like

Slipping between pine trunks into a forest
Which had looked from the road impermeable
But was where something lived

And that one could peer back from the gloom towards the light
A different creature
With tender eyes, with an ear for water.

The sense that the stuff of everyday life is permeable and (at best) provisional is key to Leviston's writing. So too is the way in which that realisation enforces a change of perspective – something that Leviston frequently enforces on the reader too. She is expert at providing a shock of surprise at the end of a poem that might appear to be going somewhere altogether more predictable. 'Humbles', for example, shifts suddenly from the conscience-stricken anatomical examination of a road-kill deer to a wholly unlooked-for comparison:

the burst bowel fouling the meat
exposed for what it is, found out – as Judas,
ripped from groin to gizzard, was found
at dawn, on the elder tree, still tethered to earth
by all the ropes and anchors of his life.

The comparison is extraordinary. At first it seems to work entirely on a physical level, and perhaps rather troublingly *not* to work in any other way: what point of contact could there possibly be between a deer and the archetypal traitor? But even as this doubt arises, it is resolved by the last two lines, which take an entirely new direction, linking Judas and the deer by their mortality, and by the traces of their lives that continue (like the deer's beating heart) long after the technical moment of death. Their lingering sense of 'I am' recognised – perhaps even shared – by the poet too.

This shape-shifting level of subtlety isn't quite sustained throughout, but the lapses are rare. Leviston's habitual mode is a highly idiosyncratic and tough-minded reworking of a set of images or ideas. Grevel Lindop once suggested that poets work from a combination of a 'medium' (which he defines as 'a kind of soup or stew of preoccupations, thoughts, feelings') and the 'crystal' (a word, a phrase, or a line) which serves as a focus or conductor. In Leviston's work, the process of focusing is attractively on the surface; as we read her, we can almost see the connections being made.

While this makes for demanding poetry, it is also extremely rewarding – in no small part because Leviston makes high demands of herself as well. These are not obviously formal poems, but they exhibit a consummate understanding of how sentence structure can be set to work against line breaks so as to create a complex rhythm that draws the reader into mimicking the poet's thought processes (or believing that she does). The effect is to create a further kind of suspension, one that exists in the structure of the poem rather than in its content. At best, the two fall together, as they do at the end of 'Scandinavia', the poem that provides the title for this collection. Imagining a life where the self would be as indeterminate as the northern snowscape, the speaker suggests that she:

... could sit, lie, settle down, the white
of one idea entirely lost upon another, as rain is lost

in the shift of the sea, as a single consecrated face
drowns in the swell of the Saturday host, and the notion of loving
that one critically more than any other flake in a flurry
melts, flows back to folly's pool, the lucid public dream.

The way the snow flakes, the faces and the poet's own thought processes become indistinguishably exact equivalents for one another is matched

by the brilliant linebreak after 'loving', which for a long moment leaves unresolved what it is that might be loved, showing just how arbitrary such apparently defining connections are. For Leviston, too much certainty or too confident a sense of identity may both be impositions. Her poems provide an alternative and much less stable viewpoint. This is an original and compelling first collection: the work of a poet who has found her subject and is in command of her medium.

© Jane Griffiths, 2007
Frances Leviston, *Public Dream*, Picador, 2007.
£8.99. 978-0-330440-54-7

ANNA LEWIS

Ciaran Carson, *For All We Know*

May 2008

Throughout Ciaran Carson's latest collection, certain images recur almost obsessively: a tolling bell, a patchwork quilt, an unanswered telephone. Each time that these images resurface, the reader is reminded of their appearance in previous poems, just as in 'Zungzwang', the final poem,

... the words of the song when remembered each time around
remind us of other occasions at different times.

For All We Know is a remarkable sequence of seventy inter-connected poems, narrated by an Irish man named Gabriel, as he looks back on his relationship with Nina, a French woman whom he met in Belfast in the 1970s. Although the poems jump back and forwards through time, the full impact of the sequence only comes across when it is read in order. As each poem adds a little more detail to the couple's story, the reader gradually discovers two young people who are each rather on the edge of the story they share. Gabriel and Nina spend much time apart, and when they are together, they speak to one another in second languages. Both characters are used to this dualistic state of affairs, as Nina explains in the second of two poems called 'Treaty':

I grew up between languages, not knowing which came first.
My mother spoke one tongue to me, my father another.

This is an echo of the previous poem, the second called 'On the
Contrary':

It's because we were brought up to lead double lives, I said.
Yes, you said, because of the language thing it was one thing

with my father, another with my mother. Father tongue
and mother tongue, all the more so when they separated

irrevocably.

A sense of separation runs through the collection, emphasised by the division of the book into two parts, with the titles of the poems in Part Two repeating the titles of the poems in Part One, in the same order. In the constant repetition of images, phrases and titles, the reader encounters Gabriel's preoccupations over and over again. Gabriel's narration swings between past and present, between dream and reality, between his memories of himself and his memories of Nina, so that he frequently seems to be in two places at once. Against a backdrop of the conflict in Northern Ireland, the double agent is another recurrent motif. Comforting Nina after a nightmare, in the first 'Collaboration', Gabriel reflects:

When you wake I hold you tight, saying, It's only a dream,
the language of dream has nothing to do with that of life.

And as eventually you sink back into the deep well
of sleep, I wonder if by my words I have betrayed you.

For All We Know is an intricately constructed collection and, while it is inevitable in a sequence of this length that some of the poems do not stand very strongly on their own (the second 'Zungzwang' functions as a conclusion, reiterating images from previous poems), each of the poems is essential to the overall coherence of the sequence. Carson's sense of rhythm never falters, carrying each poem easily to the next, and the occasional rhymes are excellent and startling, as at the ending of the first 'L'Air du Temps':

I can see the house where I was raised, and my mother's house.
I am in her boudoir looking at her in the mirror

as she, pouting, not looking, puts on L'Air du Temps, a spurt
of perfume on each wrist before she puts her wristwatch on.

The delicacy and precision with which images are repeated from poem to poem very rarely seems laboured or artificial; every image retains its freshness, and gains significance with each reoccurrence. Nonetheless, as a collection of poems in which a young couple get to know one another, and form a romantic relationship, the tone of *For All We Know* is sometimes a little heavy in significance: every word the characters utter is portentous, lacking any innocence or humour. The characters may have seemed a little warmer if, once in a while, the reader was able to hear them bickering about whose turn it was to do the washing up. Given the intellectual intensity of the relationship, the portrayal of sex is strangely coy, the only moment of real physical immediacy arriving at the end of the second 'The Anniversary', when Gabriel and Nina buy oysters:

You opened one with a dab twist. When you gave me the knife
to try my hand slipped and I gashed the knuckle of my thumb.

Before I could protest you put your mouth to the deep cut.
When you raised your head I kissed my blood on your open lips.

For All We Know is not, however, a sequence about a man falling in love, but about a man remembering falling in love. In Gabriel's mind, one memory of Nina's patchwork quilt sparks another memory, and another, and as the images and conversations that obsess him build up into layers, each word is required to carry the weight of all the words that went before.

In the second 'Prelude and Fugue', Nina describes church bells tolling "as if keeping to a score / of harmony and dissonance". The collection as a whole echoes this balance. From the compulsions and confusions of Gabriel's memory, from its layers and repetitions, Carson allows a coherent and memorable story to emerge.

© Anna Lewis, 2008

Ciaran Carson, *For All We Know* (Gallery Press, £10.95)

SIMON POMERY

Michael Hofmann, *Selected Poems*

May 2008

Drawn from four books, and including seven new pieces, the *Selected Poems* of Michael Hofmann are an affront to the reader. From the beginning of his career he has sought to write poetry with ‘the shape and texture of bricks’. In 1999, the same year as his most recent collection, *Approximately Nowhere*, he spoke to *Thumbscrew*, the late, great poetry magazine, and compared his work to that of fellow New Generation poets: ‘My things looked dense, uncompromising, undifferentiated. The “brick” was to suggest utility, interchangeability, compactness, aggressiveness even. I began by despising most poetry for being archaic and mindless and ornamental and unnecessary. Of course, a lot of it still is.’ In line with such artistic insight, his own poetry validates the truth in melancholy and the melancholy in truth.

A series of ‘father-poems’ inspired by, and sometimes addressed to, his father, the novelist Gert Hofmann (whose novels he has translated), provides a large part of *Selected Poems*. ‘Family Holiday’, from *Nights in the Iron Hotel* (1983), shows the pull of family drama on the young poet: ‘Every day I swam further out of my depth,/ but always, miserably, crawled back to safety’. But the father-poems properly begin with his second collection, *Acrimony* (1986). The title itself is a concept central to his work: animosity, bitterness among people, with a sense of the

acrid and sinister. The affectionately-named ‘Bärli’, a German petname meaning ‘little bear’, opens out the drama from innocence to experience:

‘Your salami breath tyrannised the bedroom
where you slept on the left, my mother, tidily,
on the right. I could cut the atmosphere with a knife:

the enthusiasm for spice, rawness, vigour,
in the choppy air. It was like your signature,
a rapid scrawl from the side of your pen –

individual, overwhelming, impossible –
a black Greek energy that cramped itself into
affectionate diminutives, *Dein Vati*, or *Papi*.

Timing so perfect as that ‘black Greek energy’ made me think of Robert Lowell, an influential writer for Hofmann – *Life-Studies* casts its shadow, but Hofmann’s voice remains his own. That ‘energy’ can be ‘cramped’ unifies the abstract with the concrete. This extremity of feeling reverberates through the whole work.

Some critics groan whenever Hofmann-senior appears, but their gripe, that poets should not write many poems on the same subject, exposes their failure to acknowledge how literature is made. From the *Upanishads* to Rilke’s *Letters to a Young Poet* to V. S. Naipaul’s *South Bank Show* interview (‘Ignore your contemporaries. Take your life seriously’ etc.) it is taught that to look outside and not within yourself (principally, into your *essence*, where the real poem and its only possible author is found) is darkness. Hofmann has plunged very deeply into himself and found his own personal mythology: a kind of Telemachus-Odysseus complex, with the young poet-warrior never fully knowing who or where his father is, living in the shadow of unfathomable imaginative adventures:

'The point of tears is an hour away. You want to talk.
'He says, "I've done better with my life than you.
I've won many prizes, what have you got to show?"
We are competing tombstones, *he puts me in the shadow*' (my italics).

As in this unselected poem from *Acrimony* ('And the Teeth of the Children are Set on Edge'), the father is often the manifestation of Hofmann's worst fears, but in the drama across the *Selected Poems* this is balanced against the hope of freedom offered by his own writing life.

He is as successful in the father-poems as in poems significant in terms of social history. 'Changes' is a portrait of a lady in the time of Thatcher, comparable to the fearless but hopeless Marlene of Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls*. It illustrates how the ideology of an age impacts upon the individual. Here is a tercet:

'Hard to take you in your new professional pride –
a salary, place of work, colleagues, corporate spirit –
your new *femme d'affaires* haircut, hard as nails.'

Satire leaks through the use of plosives. There is a latent invective spit in those clipped p's, the world of fast tracks and grad schemes, of 'corporate' 'colleagues', is exposed as worthless, the invective articulated through cussing c's. The phrase 'corporate spirit' draws attention to the genius below the surface of the quotidian: its Latinate prefix, 'cor-', means *heart*, 'corporate spirit' is oxymoronic, and the heartlessness of the beloved's Thatcherite uniform is exposed for what it is: on the surface she looks 'hard as nails', but beneath it her heart has shrunk to nothing. Hofmann's final lyrical query 'What became of you/ bright sparrow, featherhead?', laments the road taken to the office, to profit for its own sake.

The tone is often satirical or ironical, but problems of selection in the *Selected Poems* appear if you compare the more occasional pieces with

what has been left out. That is not to say occasional is bad: in 'On the Beach at Thorpeness', from *Corona, Corona* (1993), the crunch of shingle stimulates a stream of thoughts overshadowed by the British military presence:

'Roaring waves of fighters headed back to Bentwaters.
The tide advanced in blunt cod's-head curves,
ebbed through the chattering teeth of the pebbles.
Jaw jaw. War war.'

Taken from *Approximately Nowhere*, 'Malvern Road' seems less finished. It hinges on the phrase 'do you remember', and is followed by a two-page sentence of ephemeral thoughts and images, missing its final question mark. We could have had a shorter poem like 'Is It Decided', which is still autobiographical, but its language is as packed and plangent as Michael Hamburger's Paul Celan, 'The sweet creep of green this English summer./ Trees addled by carbon monoxide'; its conclusion as revelatory as a James Wright turn: 'I'm in mourning for my life – or ours; or ours?'

These problems fade when faced with the rewards of reading the work closely. Michael Hofmann is a cold and passionate artist whose *Selected Poems* is unlike anything else in contemporary British and Irish poetry.

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Michael Hofmann, *Selected Poems* (Faber, £12.99)

JOHN LYON

Mick Imlah, *The Lost Leader* and
Robert Crawford, *Full Volume*

September 2008

In *The Lost Leader* Mick Imlah has produced an extraordinary full volume of exuberant poems, where the technicalities of verse – poetic forms, rhythm and rhyme – are handled with a seemingly casual effortlessness which signals a poetic talent rare, true and substantial. It is a legitimate part of reviewing to express wonder and delight but the reviewer is always tempted, too, to seek for explanation. Here Imlah triumphantly answers Edwin Muir's proscription of all the most tired Scottish stories and histories, revivifying even the most clichéd: the Scottish Tourist Board would do well to ask what Imlah can do for shortbread and the kilt, though it is likely that the Board would find the answers somewhat disconcerting. One wonders whether Imlah can write in the way he does because his adult life – as a student in Oxford and then a journalist in London – has left him free of the pressures of the Disneyfied, eco-kailyard which Scotland, too full of itself for its own good, has become. Ironically, Imlah is able to write of things Scottish without having any agenda to be a Scottish poet.

Scottish history back to 'the year dot' is reviewed in an anachronistic colloquial idiom, full of linguistic play, irreverent and at times irrelevant, a highly entertaining load of muck, in fact. The first poem 'Muck' is a

wonderful, fishy story of a Christian mission, ridding itself of 'the Ulster roof-/and-cake mentality' to arrive mistakenly on Muck rather than Mull, where a slow St Kevin is determined to identify Christian significance – "That's one/ of our symbols"... – in the fishy art and workmen's and tourists' leavings to be found there. In the end, though 'our code forbids' its expression, they are relieved to get back in their boat, hailing the pagan goddess Astarte redefined, with dogged literalism, as 'mother of false starts'. The reader is left wondering whether Father Ted, and, more particularly, Dougal, were not members of the expedition. The prophetic St Columba, the dragon-slaying Fergus of Galloway, the Medieval mathematician and astrologer, Michael Scot (with a dunce's peaked cap borrowed from his namesake and subsequently transformed into a conical loudhailer), a slew of Balliol grandees reaching back to the College's Scottish founder, William Wallace and Robert the Bruce, are all treated to diversely inventive but similarly revivifying humour.

A master of poetic conventions, Imlah is unconstrained by any other conventions, including those of literary politics. Yes, he treats of Scottish matters, but that doesn't prevent him treating of other things too. So, for example, a wonderful poetic sequence on Tennyson sits adjacent to an equally wonderful sequence on James ('B.V.') Thomson. Personal experiences, historical figures, literary antecedents, races, nationalities, rugby, religions are all mixed up and all shaken up. Imlah's exuberance spills beyond the poems themselves to his use of epigraphs, as in the wonderfully sardonic juxtaposition which prefaces 'The Queen's Maries':

There was Mary Seaton and Mary Beaton
Mary Carmichael and me.
– ANON.

Ye are na Mary Morison.
– BURNS.

(Another epigraph has Tennyson not allowing the poet's son Oscar Browning to be 'Browning'.) Such an effect is typical of the collection. Things are never what they seem nor what readers might expect them to be. The unifying theme of this collection is diversion – diversion as entertainment, but also diversion in the sense of repeatedly taking readers down the road never previously taken, the provocation of going astray. So just as those missionaries arrived on Muck rather than Mull, the brave heart of Robert the Bruce, en route to Jerusalem, gets lost amidst a Moorish battle in Spain. At a local textual level, this is to be heard in the way that the most familiar of phrases – the 'red rag', the notion of 'being history', 'the royal infirmary', the 'urgent business of the heart' for example – mean something entirely different when Imlah deploys them. Above all, perhaps, there is Imlah's wayward way with rhyme. So 'Othello' rhymes with 'Portobello', 'Kathleen Jamie' with 'pay me', 'Ishiguro' with 'o'er the moor, O' and so on ... The modish word to use of such rhyming is 'transgressive'; the more straightforward one 'outrageous'.

Yet *The Lost Leader* is as remote from Muldoonian free-association – to which it might appear to bear an initial and superficial similarity – as it is possible to get. Imlah's startling effects and associations, his imaginative twistings and turnings, always have point or edge and might often leave readers feeling edgy. One brief poem must illustrate such a claim:

I don't know to what breed you refer
– *Brief Encounter*

Empty Tumbler

I met in the saloon bar
A colonel, rheumy eyed,
Shouting at the batman
No longer by his side.

Mars without his war-toys
Was not so choleric
As that pensioned officer
Missing his 'Merrick!' –

This poem is disconcerting and a number of things take a tumble here. How much damage does this do to Hugh MacDiarmid? Can MacDiarmid ever recover? What is Scottish poetry, so much of which is at present lost in rural rheumy eyed musings on the post-colonial '*from Unst to Luss*' (as Robert Crawford has it) to do with this rude reminder that Scotland is mired in Empire? Glasgow was, after all, the British (Scottish?) Empire's second city and the reference to Merrick here is presumably not to the Elephant Man but to the working-class Merrick of *The Jewel in the Crown*. The reviews of *The Lost Leader* have been rightly and univocally admiring but many also seem a little lost, diverted from the well-trodden roads of poetry criticism, not knowing quite what to make of it. That in itself is evidence that *The Lost Leader* is triumphantly doing its work.

Like other poets in 2008, Robert Crawford is unlucky in coinciding with Imlah's collection. The juxtaposition brings what have always been the limitations of Crawford's poetry more fully into relief. Crawford's verse tries too hard and thus can prove trying. Aiming for either wit or wisdom, too often it finds whimsy. Technically, Crawford is too fond of the short line and the short stanza as a mechanical means to claim 'significance': gnomic utterances are usually best left to gnomes. Crawford's Scotland is unrelievedly devoid of the urban and too often reads like an application for an EU subsidy. Even when out of Scotland, writing 'postcard poetry', he studiously avoids the cities, and poems like 'Wyoming' are so predictably politically correct as to provoke the reader to pick a fight. Here the poet celebrates his daughter dancing in a two-hundred year old tepee ring and thus celebrates an implicit kinship with her Native American sisters. But what about some other child, one wonders, who might as easily be playing in a cowboy hat and

slinging his toy gun? And what about present day Native Americans, stuck on their reservation, some considerable distance down a dirt track from this touristic tepee attraction, with only a liquor store for consolation?

Another poem, 'Cooled Britannia', a dramatic monologue purporting to be Tony Blair's farewell speech to his native land, leaves this reader completely baffled:

The hour approaches. Check your fly.
It's almost time to do or die.
All Scotland knows England expects
No independence. Sacred texts
Are trotted out: *Neighbours*, *Macbeth*,
Our glorious canon. [...
.]
Forget those loans, forget Iraq –
I was the one won Scotland back!
Aye, now's the day, and now's the hour!
Vote! Vote! Remember Brown and Blair!

Is this satire or admiration? The kind of rhyming going on here is inconsistent (hour/Blair? Wouldn't 'and now's the noon!/ ... Remember Blair and Broon!' be better, at the cost (cost?) of losing 'Scots wha hae'? As it is, it's laboured, but it ain't Labour). Line-division and caesurae are working against what one assumes to be intended as tub-thumping couplets. Moreover, it is impossible to get a grip on this poem because it is inconceivable that Blair, the man in the 'too tight shoes' as another poet devastatingly has it, could ever speak in this way: even allowing for the stretch of parody or pastiche, poetic licence is overdrawn.

The most interesting poems in *Full Volume* are the poems concerned with a shift from the written word (or, better still, oral culture) to more recent technologies of communication: broadband, satnav, the laptop,

the internet chatroom, photograph, and film. Preferring the 'warm pub in St Andrews' to 'the global village' and more at home in the archives than on Facebook, Crawford is perhaps finding a distinctive voice as the grumpy old elegist of the shift from a verbal to a visual culture, enlarging more gloomily on a theme initiated by Edwin Morgan.

Crawford's will-to-Scottish-poetry appears most clearly in his translations from the Gaelic. Having no Gaelic, this reader is not qualified to comment on the quality of these poems. Perhaps, however, some of Crawford's own comments are illuminating: '... which I found in Alexander Carmichael's parallel text ...'; 'I am grateful to Meg Bateman who read the poem aloud to me and discussed it.' Is Crawford implicitly advocating emulation of the bilingualism of Wales here – welshing on his native land, seriously imagining a situation – say twenty years hence – when a Falkirk housewife will turn to a Falkirk househusband at the nursery gates and ask 'Ur yoo sendin' yir wee Senga and Brittney tae the Gaelic-speaking school?' At least, however, the reader can have the glorious consolation of trying to imagine what a Mick Imlah poem on the subject would sound like.

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Robert Crawford, *Full Volume*, Jonathan Cape, 2008.

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VIDYAN RAVINTHIRAN

Colette Bryce, *Self-Portrait in the Dark*

September 2008

Colette Bryce's new collection begins with a short lyric about a spider trapped beneath a wineglass – an image of entrapment which reflects the cramped poem itself, and re-appears, either in form or content, throughout *Self-Portrait in the Dark*. The poet uses rhyme to provide closure:

I meant to let him go
but still he taps against the glass
all Marcel Marceau
in the wall that is there but not there,
a circumstance I know.

The effect of this kind of poem is definite and exciting – but it only works once, a single blow, a thrown-off, bitty epiphany. Like Wittgenstein's speaker trapped in his linguistic fly bottle, Bryce seems to feel trapped by language, cautious of its blurriness, moving tactfully from sound to sound, line to line with a demanding economy. In 'On Highgate Hill', a poem about Coleridge's funeral, her depiction of the cortege takes this style to its limit:

It filters through the gates of Highgate Church.

It narrows through the doorway's solemn arch.

What else?

Selected words are said.

A box is lowered into earth.

Mourners gradually disperse

like images on the surface of a stream

into which a stone is cast.

The taut slant rhymes on church and arch, else and disperse structure these lines firmly – we feel not only a familiar lyric transitoriness, but also the way in which the particularly 'selected words' we use to try and hold down experience are themselves a means of its dispersal. Occasionally Bryce's rigorous scepticism about the possibilities of language becomes wearisome, a shade too glum, as when in 'Nature Walk' she modulates into a kind of Chaucerian occupatio:

If only my bag had been large enough,
I would have brought the lonely men in parked cars
by the river. I would have brought the woman
dabbing kohl tears with the heel
of her hand.

Regardless of the actual bag, which turns out to contain only 'some bark, and a couple of conkers, / one still half-encased in its skin like an eye', it's clear that Bryce's prosodic bag of tricks – her own subtle and meticulous eye – is far more capacious, and one wishes her attractive lyric voice sometimes placed more confidence in its own abilities. One wants less of the Hamlet-style despair of 'Sin Musica' – 'I rearrange this useless clutter / of words, words' – and more of those adventurously

descriptive poems where she decides to stretch her wings and take a risk with a more generous poetic line.

The excerpt from 'Nature Walk', for example, with its hint of urban despair imperfectly smoothed over, holds little weight when compared to the award-winning 'Self-Portrait in a Broken Wing-Mirror', where the speaker notes of her shattered reflection that she has 'make-up on,'

a smudging of pencil, brushed black lashes.
I'd swear the face looks younger than before,
the skin sheer, the fine wires of laughter
disappeared without the animation.
The lips are slack, pink, segmented;
a slight gravitational pull towards the earth

gives the upper one a sort of Elvis curl.

This is the contemporary lyric at its most carefully poised and balanced, and it demonstrates Bryce's significant, if self-deprecating intelligence – here, her words do succeed in going out into the world and bringing something genuine back. The same could be said of the traipsing three-line stanza of interestingly varied line-length which she uses in 'Twelve' –

There was mud on the ground and trees on either side and a mess
of undergrowth. A waist-high broken branch
where a strand of hair

had snagged, was pointed out. A clearing where a vehicle,
conceivably, could have turned round.

As the line-breaks send a roving spotlight across the prose-rhythm, its details stand out with a terrible clarity, developing that almost morbid specificity of attention which Bryce takes even further in her accom-

plished sestina 'The Harm', which follows Heaney and Muldoon in using the form to develop an atmosphere of obliquely impending violence:

On the walk to school you have stopped
at the one significant lamppost, just to be sure
(if you're late where's the harm?),
and are tracing the cut of the maker's name in raised print
and yes, you are certain it is still ticking,
softly ticking where it stands on the corner

opposite McCaul's corner-
shop. Not that you had expected it to stop.
At worst, all you'll get from the teacher is a good ticking
off. When it goes off, and you are sure
it will be soon, this metal panel with its neat square print
will buckle like the lid of Pandora's tin . . .

Bryce strains the form deliberately like Muldoon, 'ticking / off' the requisite line-endings almost ploddingly sometimes, but there's also something original and vivid in her handling of the sestina, the way she catches the rhythms of Irish speech and plays them skilfully against the demands of the rhyme –

'For God's sake stay on the pavement out of harm's
way!' the woman who grabs you says. 'Sure
haven't you been taught how to cross a road?

The colloquial clumsiness of that second line – 'the woman who grabs you says' – is nicely offset by the vernacular 'sure', whose enjambment seamlessly fulfils the sestina form while also preserving what Robert Frost would call a distinctive sentence-sound, the active excitement of speech. As a result, a type of poem which risks becoming overwrought,

brittle and unreal actually goes the other way – it's as sharp and clear as the child's encounter in cold air.

That sense of the real thing happening clearly as the verse records it also makes for one of the most absorbing poems in the volume, 'Belfast Waking, 6 a.m', which picks up, in a sense, where 'The Harm' left off. The central figure of this anti-aubade is a telephone box maintenance man whose eerie outline accrues more and more solidity as the poem moves determinedly onwards, as

he wrinkles his nose at the tang of urine,
furrows his brow at a broken syringe
then finally turns to the stoical machine,

the dangling receiver's plaintive refrain
please replace the handset
and try again,

unclogs the coin-choked gullet with a tool
and a little force
like a shoulder to a wheel
or an act of necessary violence.

This sensuous, free-form style is immediately exciting, as Bryce allows her talent for sheer evocation more free-range than usual – her lopped, skeptical verse-line is capable of so much more than merely protesting its own supposed inadequacies.

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MIRIAM GAMBLE

Samantha Wynne-Rhydderch, *Not in These Shoes*

September 2008

Not in These Shoes, the second collection from Welsh poet Samantha Wynne-Rhydderch, charts a variety of issues, from the imminent disappearance of a beloved local community to the empowerment of (Manolo Blahnik wearing) 'modern woman.' Wynne-Rhydderch writes predominantly in free verse and, whilst some poems display considerable technical skill, others fall embarrassingly short, displaying little logic in their choice of line and stanza breaks. Louis MacNeice describes free verse as something which, in order not to be 'dead', 'must be conforming to some order which we do not immediately notice': when, on a third reading, such an order has still failed to reveal itself, one might well conclude that it simply isn't there. The poems oscillate between short, sassy sentences and long meandering clauses, neither of which displays much feel for the 'necessary tension' between freedom and shape constitutive of the energised poem. Additionally, even the best pieces are often lessened by the inclusion of banal or throwaway turns of phrase: I'm no enemy to the conversational in poetry, but there's a knack to it, and Wynne-Rhydderch has yet to master its nuances.

The blurb to *Not in These Shoes* introduces its author as a notable poet of 'voice,' capable of assuming any number of different personae, and it's true the collection displays considerable imaginative range. From

the confession of a gay photographer snapping his male subject to the narrative journey of a ship's figurehead, the choice of speakers confirms Wynne-Rhydderch as a writer with an eye to the interesting perspective. Her execution of monologue is, however, more often than not disappointing: in 'Matador,' a well-achieved octave is let down by a sestet that fails to deepen or develop imaginative empathy with the photographer's silenced passion. And in the sequence 'The Naming of the Storm' (the monologue of the figurehead 'Anna-Louise'), the poems are beset by a disappointing tendency to substitute sass for substance and significance – leaving aside the fact that the sequence ends with the inadvisable move of quoting a Bob Dylan lyric (and thus appears to be asking the wind to come and shelter from, well, the wind), there is little within this series of four poems to stimulate or grasp the reader's imagination. We spend more time being pouted at by the eponymous heroine than we do, for example, finding out what it's like to spend a hundred years on the sea floor or to be nailed to the front of a ship, or what the world looks like from either of these positions.

It is not the case that Wynne-Rhydderch lacks the imaginative equipment to engage convincingly with otherness. The sonnet 'Shaved,' which takes as subject matter the brutal murder of the Romanov children in the wake of the Russian revolution, is a perfectly achieved commingling of delicate pathos and relentless bureau-speak, image and statement: interweaving extracts from Anastasia Romanov's diaries with the 'bald facts' in 'The Executive Archive for that year' it captures simply and concisely the precise quality of horror contained within this crash between historical event and private history. Understatement serves her well here, as it does in the lovely elegy 'Brighton West Pier' which, with shades of W. G. Sebald, mourns the 'reclaiming by sea of our/ tentative steps.' Placing its focus on 'a telephone receiver' swinging 'from the tangled guts of the bar,' the speaker of the poem traces her own disappearing youth with syntax as 'precarious' and fragile as the 'staggering' pier itself:

... this reclaiming by sea of our
tentative steps leaves me

precarious: those Saturday nights
when I would catch my breath outside
its stuccoed façade, stilettoed,

tiptoeing between strips of sea foaming
below, a note from a saxophone
thrown to the wind, hearing his voice

on the line half a century ago,

still swaying there.

(This, incidentally, is free verse as it should be, with the structure displaying coincidence with the subject.) Rather, it seems that Wynne-Rhydderch has been poisoned or led astray by the very thing for which she has been most lauded: that obsession with 'voice'. In the introduction to the American published *New British Poetry* (2004), Don Paterson is right to describe 'voice', 'that absurd passport we are obliged to carry through the insecurity of our age' as 'an extraliterary issue'. As the monologues are afflicted by a tendency to posture rather than relate or imply, so too many of the poems in Wynne-Rhydderch's own voice lean heavily towards the over-demonstrative verbal gesture. Usually delivered in conjunction with an unlikely self-presentation as 'great artist' (as against the failure-man-artist to whom this poem is addressed), these appear both unappealing and irrelevant:

Your words
interrupt the lines in my head, bisecting a life
of art ...

me ground down,
sitting by the phone, dusted with tragedy ...
Not likely. Ten years ago you stayed at home

weaving your stagnant tale whilst I travelled the world
with my pen eloping from island to island ...

all the lies unwritten at your feet, whilst I, accurate

as the clock, move my hands in time to the verses you
have untapped from my tongue by this one act of arrival

and departure. Take that word you can't articulate
away with you. I'll keep the rest. I paid for them.

Has the time not come and gone for power women in poetry (and was there ever a time when power women who blustered in poems about how good they were at poetry were desirable, never mind necessary)? This brand of self-preening *femme fatale*-ness does its wearer few favours – no more so, in fact, than the equally pervasive strain of self-pitying damsel-in-distress-ness to which it is, somewhat curiously, hitched. Other poems present Wynne-Rhydderch as, contrastingly, the little girl to whom Madeira is fed by a doting partner – Lawrentian lover watching her big strong man from the upstairs window – and again (and most offensively to this particular woman) a present-day Cinderella, brandishing a Manolo Blahnik and waiting for her prince to arrive. Either I don't care or I'm not convinced – possibly both. In this day and age, women shouldn't (and don't) need to bounce off men baring their teeth in order to write poetry. A little decorum, please!

In fact, Wynne-Rhydderch is at her best when she takes a step back from all this vocal puff and palaver: whilst the sequence 'Ar Werth – For Sale' also falls victim to polemical slabber (this time on the subject of

holiday homes in her native New Quay), as elegist for the disappearing communities of the Welsh sea-board she displays a painterly exactitude comparable to that of Michael Longley, and capable of a similarly hard-hitting, brittle beauty. Sharing Longley's taste for (and ability to handle) the mnemonic 'trace' – the pegged long-johns in Cook's bunker, the mother's 'sequined gloves/ in love with each other in a pool of light' – she evokes with exquisite delicacy that which has departed or faces imminent demise, providing, in the latter case, vital if painful documentary of a world on the verge of immolation. Her knowledge of this world is intimate – the sea, and the dangers of sea life (and life threatened by the sea), loom large in a collection which charts with journalistic relentlessness the encroaching forces of erosion and unemployment: although the poem 'You Can't Get Away From It All' asserts that 'There is always an edge/ to the land that you cannot go beyond,' that line seems blurred in poems where boats are living spaces, and gardens the playground of a tide which 'now greets us with its frothy laugh/ at the front gate.' Depictions of interiors are also striking: Wynne-Rhydderch is an impressive mistress of domestic space, and it allows her to produce the kind of poem in which the narrative is embedded in the details rather than brandished up front. Whilst 'A Pair of Antlers' and 'Stately Home' concern themselves with houses which have already been left – have fallen into the past tense – 'The Sea Painter's House' focuses on one which, like the community itself, teeters on the brink of disappearance: a kind of fossil or preservation in aspic, home to a fox who 'walks rigid in his display case' and outside of which the water waits, 'locked out/... its rough tongue whitening the chairs.' The brushstrokes are perfectly incremented here, each individual image part of a larger picture which is both familial and public; which speaks volumes without having to say a word about its underlying thrust. Wynne-Rhydderch also achieves this on a larger scale: even to an Ulster reader, the (almost) haiku 'Titanic' strikes with poignancy and assurance on a subject on which it might be thought there couldn't be anything left to say:

Cadences

before water filled the open lung
of the baby grand.

As her painterly affinities suggest (paint being the medium in which things are consigned to stasis, and also in which they best maintain the illusion of being preserved), Samantha Wynne-Rhydderch's imagination prefers living in the past to the present, stilled to kinetic scenarios. A risky choice, perhaps, but it's this reader's opinion that she ought to let it stay there if it wants to: there's room for anything in poetry, fashionable or otherwise, so long as you have the requisite skills to pull it off. If you don't, fashion-consciousness seems somewhat beside the point.

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NICHOLAS PIERPAN

Mark Doty, *Theories and Apparitions*

January 2009

How language affects perception is an eternally urgent subject; while Wallace Stevens wrote that 'poetry is the supreme fiction' through which imagination transforms reality, at the other extreme is the hypnotising spectacle of 'tatworld' and today's popular media. Rather than moving the mind towards more expansive awareness, its language seeks to reduce: utterance is turned into a manoeuvrable sound-bite, identities squeezed into cartoonish pigeonholes and the only reality worth experiencing seems to be that of our current celebrities. Much has been written about the slow fade of poetry behind this increasing media clamour, but Mark Doty's new volume, *Theories and Apparitions*, makes an immediate and subtle case for poetry in today's world. Its tightly-controlled poems explore the interplay between language and perception, and why poetry is still of paramount importance to human experience.

The deadened mind is present in 'Apparition (Favourite Poem)' which fears for the loss of literary history, simply because so few people engage with it anymore:

The old words are dying,
everyone forgets them,
pages falling into sleep and dust,

dust and sleep,
burning so slowly
you wouldn't even know there's a fire.

The poet then witnesses a fourteen year-old boy reciting at a bookstore: he is a blank slate, 'his loping East Texas vowels threaten / to escape the fence of pentameter' but as his voice stays true to the verse, the boy becomes 'a vessel / for its reluctance to disappear'. He gains

...the look of someone
repeating a crucial instruction
that must be delivered, word for word,
as he has learned it:

*My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings,
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair.*

These final two lines make the poem – Shelley's famous sonnet is a testament to art's endurance and the futility of political power; but the meaning of these lines is less certain in Doty's poem. Are Ozymandias' forgotten 'works' meant to be those of an endangered literary history (which include Shelley's sonnet)? Or is the poetic mind now being held up triumphantly against the 'mighty' ignorant of today? The poem's ending expresses both fatalism and defiance, leaving a strangely powerful echo in its wake. There is hope as well: the recited lines indicate redemption through the language of poetry, if it is learned 'without irony / but not self-important either' (an obvious rarity).

Such a genuine education is essential, for in Doty's world there is little difference between the inscribed word and corporeal reality. Our constant negotiations with language, and how they shape us, are presented in various ways: a woman on public transport is defined by her relation to the book she is reading; a street vendor can't pronounce

the name of the toy he is selling (with unsettling results); Doty's friend has a mysterious 'love' symbol tattooed on his shoulder; a cab driver speaks of nothing but the eight novels he's written, until Doty's friend gets out of the cab and vomits (whether he is carsick or nauseous from the driver's narratives remains comically unclear). Why this focus on words themselves, and why is it worth such an extended sequence of self-conscious poems? Because Doty is acutely conscious of how the dynamics of language mirror the dynamics of reality – just as language consists of manifold combinations between letters and words, so reality is perceived on the same terms: 'beauty resides not within / individual objects but in the nearly / unimaginable richness of their relation'. This intimacy is nowhere more apparent than in the short poem 'Theory of Beauty (Pompeii)', where Doty witnesses a little girl at a café 'holding her book open, / pointing to the words and saying them half-aloud / while her mother attends to ordering breakfast',

she's reading POMPEII ... *Buried Alive!* with evident delight.
Pleasure with a little shiver inside it.

And that evening, I thought I was no longer afraid
of the death's head beneath the face of the man beneath me.

This strange intersection of imagery unites those most primal of concerns, sex and death, with the act of reading. The logic of this (ultimately reassuring) arrangement is clear but not studiously unpacked by Doty, and its power feels preserved as a result.

This is not always the case in *Theories and Apparitions*, where the act of writing is elevated to an almost divine level and sometimes dramatised in highly self-reflexive meta-poems. For example, the volume opens with Doty and his friend Charles trying to turn experience into verse:

His music, Charles writes,
Makes us avoidable.
I write: emissary of evening.

We're writing poems about last night's bat.
Charles has stripped the scene to lyric,
While I'm filling in the tale
(‘Pipistrelle’)

Such moments are spread throughout the volume, where the poet wrestles with word choices or walks the reader through his own writing process, and these are not always successful. In ‘Pipistrelle’, for example, the reader follows Doty on his search for words, ‘I could hear the tender cry of a bat – cry won’t do’ before he acknowledges a moment of near-solipsism: ‘Is it because I am an American I think the bat came / especially to address me, who have the particular gift / of hearing him?’ As he goes on to wonder ‘Is this material necessary or helpful to my poem’ the verse becomes deflated; it feels as if we are entering the self-enclosed world of a creative writing instructor, for whom writing about writing is more than just a professional necessity, but a hall of mirrors from which it can be difficult to escape. Doty finds a way out of this in ‘Citizens’, where he tells of almost getting hit by a car in New York City and his consequent anger at the driver, an anger still with the poet after he boards the subway:

...If he's one of those people miserable for lack
of what is found in poetry, fine.

It's not him I'm sorry for.
It's every person on this train burrowing deeper uptown
as if it were screwing further down into the bedrock.

Heavy hands on the knees,
weary heads nodding toward the floor or settling
against the glass. When did I ever set anything down?

If the poem had ended after the first two lines of this passage, a self-indulgent tone may have prevailed, but Doty goes on to describe the subway passengers around him and, in six lines, captures a feeling of deadness and group futility that is familiar to any urban commuter. Doty's implication is that these ‘weary’ urbanites lack what poetry can provide, but rather than an outward statement it is his actual poetic description of them that makes the moment convincing.

This is where the volume really succeeds: beyond exploring valuable ‘theories’ of poetry and poetic relation, Doty's gift seems best employed when it engages and wrestles with the world itself and his own conflicts within it. One of the volume's finest moments is in ‘To Joan Mitchell’:

In the flashpoint summer of 2002
it was possible to feel where we were headed,

sun screwing its titanium compress down
on human foreheads in the parking lots,

thin tamarisks on the margin shimmering a little
as if seen through fumes of gasoline,

and I was in the absolute darkness of Fresno,
past the middle of my life. As if I've been colonized

by the long swathes of car lots, flapping pennants
stunned under the mercury lamps,

will and inwardness thinned
like a chemical haze over the lettuce fields,

smokes risen from torn-up vineyards,
weary vines heaped for burning...

Doty's voice – controlled, quietly eloquent, precise – is able to lift the banal into poetry. Rather than speaking directly of his literary relationship with Walt Whitman (as happens in 'Pipistrelle' and an 'Apparition' poem), the connection is here demonstrated through Doty's poetic description of a very American landscape. Likewise, in other 'Apparition' poems Doty witnesses the ghosts of John Berryman and Alan Dugan, but these are engaging only insofar as the quality of the actual writing, rather than the slightly heavy references. Doty's description of Alan Dugan's spectre is brief and powerful: 'Bitter wind off a metal harbor / and here's Alan Dugan crossing 15th Street / as if he owns it, sharp new jacket / just the shade of that riffled steel'.

At such moments the poems stay on the right side of the volume's self-conscious pursuit, and overall Doty succeeds in mixing the poetic with the meta-poetic. His attention to the electric, sometimes sublime, exchange between language and consciousness is careful, considered and ultimately engaging.

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Mark Doty, *Theories and Apparitions*, Jonathan Cape, 2008.
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FRAN BREARTON

Leontia Flynn, *Drives*

January 2009

The dedication in Paul Muldoon's first collection, *New Weather* (1973) reads: 'for my Fathers and Mothers'. It's a typically mischievous phrase which acknowledges not only his real father and mother, but also those literary forebears, precursors, mentors, and tutors, who bear some responsibility for the gestation of the poet-Muldoon – Seamus Heaney, the Longleys, Michael Allen most immediately and obviously, not to mention Robert Frost, Louis MacNeice, and others in the literary tradition through which he truffles so productively. On the one hand a gracious tribute, on the other the dedication is also a self-assertion of Muldoon as the *enfant terrible* who will, with wonderful arrogance, tell 'new weather' from 'broken bones'.

There is a precedent here for Leontia Flynn, and in more ways than one. Flynn's is one of the most strikingly original and exciting poetic voices to have emerged from Northern Ireland since the extraordinary debut by Muldoon 35 years ago. Like Muldoon, she appeared on the scene in her first collection, *These Days* (2004) as something of, as she puts it in the opening poem 'Naming It', a 'marauding child' out to discover something new, who might be 'preachy / with booklearning' but certainly won't be preached at, and whose iconoclasm (Alan Gillis has something of this quality too) is refreshing in a Northern Irish

poetic tradition at risk of taking itself as seriously as it has been taken by its critics. There is a different kind of risk, therefore, for Flynn in her debut collection too. At first glance, some of the poems seem throw-away, off-hand, brief jottings on the page rather than fully realised poetic achievement. Yet the assurance and skill required to hide those same qualities of assurance and skill is also what gives the ten-line seemingly ephemeral and anecdotal poems scattered across *These Days* their depth and originality. In a reversal of strategies adopted by one of her immediate precursors Medbh McGuckian, Flynn makes it seem easy, which, for her readers, can also make it that little bit harder to grasp what she is about.

In that sense, her second collection *Drives* is a more immediately comprehensible achievement, its formal complexities no longer playing hide and seek with the reader, but announcing themselves in full dress. Flynn compulsively writes sonnet after sonnet – sometimes conventional ones, sometimes experimental, and constituting almost half the poems in the book. (It's a compulsion characteristic of Muldoon too, a third of whose *oeuvre* to date consists of sonnets and sonnet-sequences.) They are sonnets about mothers and fathers, of the actual and literary kind. 'They fuck you up, your mum and dad', Larkin (one of Flynn's early crushes) famously wrote, a comment which is perhaps particularly prescient as regards literary mothers and fathers in the Irish tradition. Flynn is not alone among her peers in exhibiting both an admiration of, and tendency to react against, the celebrated older generations of Northern Irish poets. In her first collection, this manifests itself in the affectionate irreverence of 'When I was Sixteen I met Seamus Heaney' ('I believe' she concludes the poem, 'he signed my bus ticket, which I later lost'). There are also some side-swipes at, as well as borrowings from, a literary tradition from Chaucer to Wordsworth, Flynn's casual allusiveness free of pretension.

In *Drives* the second stanza of Larkin's 'This Be The Verse' seems to hold good too: 'But they were fucked up in their turn'. Here are just a

few of the figures who drive Flynn's sonneteering through the book: Charles Baudelaire, Dorothy Parker, F.Scott Fitzgerald, Robert Lowell, Elizabeth Bishop, Sylvia Plath. Poetically strong some of them may be; well-adjusted they are not – or certainly not as they appear in these pages. The 'Drives' of the title refer to journeys and homecomings; they are also the things which drive us, suicidal or sexual urges, compulsions (like the one to write poems perhaps) not entirely healthy and not always understood. Beckett, Baudelaire, psychoanalysis and mothers offer one variation on this theme; Howard Hughes, his mother, and obsessive-compulsive disorder (and OCD is also a preoccupation of Flynn's first collection) another. There's a knowing play on this even in Flynn's own recurrent use of the sonnet. 'I just kept repeating them', she said in an interview recently. 'I have to stop that now'. Beckett 'dreams of suffocation, / palpitations, panic attacks'; 'Olive Schriener 'will suffer from asthma'; in Elizabeth Bishop's art of losing (linked here to Plath's art of dying) 'She even loses her breath'; and in 'Marcel Proust' a 'melancholic asthma' is linked to the speaker's anhedonia – all of which obliquely tracks back to 'Acts of Faith' and the poet's 24th birthday in *These Days*, where her 'lungs close over' and her 'mother brings ... Prednisone'.

These are all, in different ways, figures who prove liberating for the poet, (influences also evident in the work of Nick Laird and Alan Gillis), and it's notable that so many are from the American tradition, an asthmatic and transatlantic breath of fresh air. It seems, too, that the problems they suffered 'in their turn' and in some cases the accompanying confessional impulses are what help to unleash Flynn's own voice. In *Drives* she treads personal, sometimes painful ground, too astute not to be aware of her own entrapment in an art *versus* life dilemma, or of her own self-absorption. 'Personality' asks what can survive the student knives 'parting the skin' on the 'practice corpse' of a poem, and the personality which 'breathes iambically' at the end ' "love me, love me, love me..." ' is reminiscent of the close of Plath's *The Bell Jar* where Esther listens to 'the old brag of my heart. I am, I am, I am'. (Plath is the single

most recurrent figure in Flynn's writings to date.) In 'Robert Lowell', Flynn writes 'imagine using those letters in his sonnets? / Using and re-using / the fact of pain – as thought pain were a poem'. But as she writes 'imagine,' she also imagines, and the poem must of necessity collude in what it seems to decry. Appropriately, 'Robert Lowell' is a double sonnet, the first, on the whole, conventionally Shakespearean, the second a mirror image, a mimicking of its own subject. Rhymed *abcd abcd efg efg* the poem, like the poet, gets two goes at it, 'revising and revising...the living details of a living life'; 'story' and 'art' chime with 'journey' and 'heart'.

Drives, as we might expect from its title, is a book of journeys. Two early poems, 'Belfast' and 'Leaving Belfast' are points of departure for a whistlestop tour of 'budget destination[s]' ('The Human Fish'): we are whisked through 'Monaco', 'Barcelona', 'Rome', Copenhagen, 'Paris', 'Berlin', 'LA', 'Washington', 'New York'. There's a mini-parable here for Flynn's reaching out from her home ground (the MacNeicean debt acknowledged in 'Belfast') to the big wide world. Fortunately, for those perhaps weary of poets journeying to interesting places for interesting cross-cultural encounters resulting (theoretically at least) in interesting poems, these individualist and quirky meanderings are short, sharp, perceptive and self-aware. Yet although they proliferate, the travel poems are not where the real discoveries of this book are found. Rather, the journey underlying the book's development is a more personal and painful one relating to the poet's father. As the pages of poems accumulate, they stand in contrast to the gradual erosion of her father's memory in 'A Head for Figures':

And where have they gone, the rest of those rustling facts?
 They have fallen from his head like cerements.
 They have slipped through his fingers,
 they have slipped from his big kind hands.

In effect, as the 'rustling facts' slip away from her father, Flynn finds her own 'art of losing'. It has its clever intertextualities, its linguistic and formal sleights-of-hand, but *Drives* goes beyond its own self-consciousness to probe the nature of loss and gain, learning and unlearning. What might seem like theoretical issues and questions about language and 'personality' are also the private emotional core of the book. In the sestina 'Drive', the word 'sign' is progressively evacuated of meaning through its end-line repetitions as words become, for her father: 'empty signs, / now one name means as little as another'. In 'Our Fathers', signs are 'braille / or a trail // of breadcrumbs / or rosary beads ... by which ... we seek to delay / them, our fathers':

thinking – heh heh – if we can trap
 them,
 then we can keep
 them,

 and if we can keep them

 we'll keep them ... forever!

But the signs don't work, the words themselves can't contain meaning, and the father figure slips through the lines of the poem. This art of losing is hard to master; and the delicate, elusive simplicity of these lines captures what it also lets go. If Flynn is wrong-footed by her father's illness, attempting the impossible, she doesn't put a foot wrong on the page:

But my father
 my father

my father holds open
the door of himself
and lets his old ghost
pass through

before him
(‘after you, after you’
he mouths): his guest,
– his old self – stealth

-ily tip
-toeing out (Shhh)...

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C. E. J. SIMONS

Alice Oswald, *Weeds and Wild Flowers*

June 2009

Alice Oswald’s previous books have demonstrated her ability to craft poems which focus intently on the rural landscape. She works in the shadow of precursors such as Hughes and Heaney, yet with an almost dogged aversion to any direct play with their work. *Weeds and Wild Flowers* meets the expectations of her style, although it aims for a broader (and perhaps younger) audience. Oswald is one of few British poets writing today whose work continues to show a strong grasp of poetic fundamentals: idea, image, form, and language. This book’s drawbacks primarily relate to weaknesses and excesses of language. On balance, however, this is a fine book that gives the reader more of what they could expect from Alice Oswald based on her past work.

Each of the book’s 24 poems personifies a flower or weed native to the southwest of England. Oswald personifies eight as male, one of indeterminate gender (but written in the first person), and the rest as female. Oswald’s characters (I will refer to them as characters to avoid the lumbering repetition of ‘personifications’) read like an eighteenth-century chapbook of marginal denizens of rural England, a list that has not changed much since Wordsworth’s *Lyrical Ballads*, Dorothy Wordsworth’s journals, and the first volumes of John Clare. Wordsworth’s rural types live on in the shadows of Oswald’s characters:

the leech-gatherer of 'Resolution and Independence' (in 'Stinking Goose-foot'); the perhaps infanticidal woman of 'The Thorn' (in 'Rambling Rose'); and Goody Blake's chill-curse (in 'Interrupted Brome'). In this tradition, Oswald's flower poems attempt to explore the psychology of rural social ills.

While the grotesqueness Oswald pursues in *Weeds and Wild Flowers* lies in humanity, not wild nature, Oswald shows a flair for connecting the two. The life-cycle of Oswald's 'Primrose', for example, begins like a nursery rhyme, mimicking the language of one of Blake's *Songs of Innocence*: 'First of April—new born gentle.' The first stanza contains strong images: 'a yellow dress that needs no fastening', and a child-flower who 'stands/ clutching for balance with both hands.' The second stanza introduces the poem's theme of a life in microcosm. By the final octet, the poem has become a *Vanitas* in progress:

April the thirteenth. Almost dead.
Face like wet paper. Hanging yellow head.
Still there. Still dying. Fourteenth of April.
Face fading out. Expression dreadful.
Fifteenth sixteenth. So on so on.
Soul being siphoned off Colour gone.
April the seventeenth. Dead. Probably.
Skull in the grass. Very light and crumbly.

Although the last two feet of the poem sabotage the stanza (and almost the poem itself – it should end with the half-line), this is one of the volume's better poems. It offers a paradigm of the book's characters: marginal or abandoned figures, usually female, lost in the rural landscape.

The book's unsettled, frequently grotesque mood demonstrates its greatest strength: its ability to find fresh material in a narrow plot of ground. Oswald's body of work to date has attracted criticism for its

persistent close focus on a local landscape – the 'safe' themes of her Devon home. Yet close reading of this collection, despite its broader 'coffee-table' approach, dispels any accusation that Oswald is playing it safe. She has gone looking for some of the wildest and ugliest flora in the garden, and she has not, as the saying goes, found their inner beauty. If anything, she has erred on the side of Brobdingnagian magnification, both in grossness of botanical (or rather, physiological) detail, and in awkwardness of feeling.

In 'Bristly Ox-tongue', for example, the collection's sense of decrepitude and physical rot escalates into the morbid image of a mute, animalistic figure, wrecked rather than made wise by age:

He stands rooted
with his white hair uncombed,
pulling it out in handfuls.
This is no good.

Long silence.
He carries this silence everywhere,
like an implement from long ago,
he carries it everywhere.

Similarly, Oswald uses occasional close-up images of the flowers' surface textures to give tangible qualities to their psychologies. Snowdrop 'shivers in a shawl/ of fine white wool'. Scarious Chickweed has 'poor wilted hands/ winding and strangling a sweetwrapper'. And Yellow Iris 'has one/ gold-webbed glove,/ one withered hand.' Throughout the book, deformity counterbalances beauty; youth means mental and physical vulnerability – and age, the same.

In their treatment of marginalized rural characters, the poems of *Weeds and Wild Flowers* show cohesion of theme and motif. Yet for the most part, the collection as a whole avoids repetitiveness. Oswald manages

to keep the succession of flower poems fresh through two principal mechanisms: variation of form, and variation of perspective.

The poems in *Weeds and Wild Flowers* employ a variety of forms, most of them unfixed, to match the personalities of the book's suffering or psychologically unstable characters. One form predominates, but is open enough to permit variation. 'Thrift', a good example of this form, begins:

Born by the sea.
Used to its no-hope moan.
Forty or thereabouts.
Lived on her own.

The form is a list of qualities, arranged in blunt statements, in variable two- or three-beat lines, end-stopped. The poems employing this form read more like notes in a botanist's or psychologist's notebook, but the form's rhythm and spare grammatical construction convey a sharp sense of character. Its short-lined, imagistic style is reminiscent of H.D.'s, though thankfully without that poet's Biblical syntax and often over-bearing first-person voice.

Other forms break up the monotone of this predominant form. 'Red-veined Dock' reads like a child's improvised rhyming:

knock knock
knock knock
dear red-veined
liver-skinned
scalpel-trained
feeler of glands
with your soap-sweet hands
and warm glass wands

Here, form suits content: an incantatory rhythm for a poem of medicine and magic, with its surgical and pharmaceutical images ('glass wands', 'blood-stained'). Unfortunately, the poem's repeated single rhymes veer away from incantation, and start to sound more like hip-hop lyrics ('I know you/ Dr Go-Slow/ with your thick black eyebrow/ and your bristly beard-shadow/ I know I know/ your noisy nose-blow') – equally skilful, but out of place. The poem's limp philosophical closing ('there is no... remedy/ for mortality/ except mortality') seems more suited to the playground or pop radio. Nevertheless, the poem's morbid imagery lingers in the reader's mind.

The feeling of variety in the volume, despite its uniformity of content, also comes from frequent changes in perspective. 'Violet', for example, gives the reader the experience of picking and smelling a flower from the flower's perspective:

her horrified mouseface, sniffed and lifted close,
let its gloom be taken and all the sugar licked off its strangeness

In 'Daisy', the first-person voice is the poet's; the flower, still personified, is the object:

I will not meet that quiet child
roughly my age but match-size
I will not kneel low enough to her lashes
to look her in her open eye...
.....
because she is more
summer-like more meek
than I am I will push my nail
inter her neck and make
a lovely necklace out of her green bones

Here there is a nice instability between flower-murder – the ‘outrage’ of Dorothy Wordsworth pulling a strawberry flower – and a more cruel jealousy.

‘Procumbet Cinquefoil’, the best poem in the volume, also uses perspective to fit its content and strengthen its personification and mood. Hidden close to the end of the book, this is the volume’s only poem in the first person. The poem begins:

That’s that.
Flat on my face forever now.

The field
fully inhaled
and folded in its wings.

I’ll tell you how it looks
without hope
at the groundfloor level of a hedgerow
lying staring at my handscape.

In the best tradition of poetic self-examination and self-deflation, this is a poem of literal prostration to the landscape. The promised description pays off:

A carcass of stalks
through whose ribs the moon falls
like water
to the creeping base of everything.

And everyone is tall
and elsewhere.

Here is a moment of vision as sharp and full as what can be found in the Imagism of Amy Lowell, Pound, and H.D., or the Chinese and Japanese poets who inspired their minimalism. (These lines bring to mind Roseki’s haiku beginning, ‘Without a friend/ discarded in the fields....’) ‘Procumbent Cinquefoil’ most successfully attains the volume’s clear goal of minimalism. Its theme is universal: the impulse to lie down in an open field, whether from delight or exhaustion.

Weeds and Wild Flowers is a confident, well-crafted book. Like any experiment in singular vision, however, it suffers from certain myopic effects. The two main problems in the book are a lack of concrete description, and unnecessary excesses of language.

In the book’s preface, Oswald anticipates the criticism that the poems which follow are not nature studies:

My hope is that the experience of reading and looking at the book will be a slightly unsettling pleasure, like walking through a garden at night, when the plants come right up to the edges of their names and then beyond them. It is not, for that reason, a reliable guide to wild flowers, though it may be a reliable record of someone’s wild or wayside selves.

This statement implies that the book is a psychological guide, and that the flowers in the poems should be read as explicitly symbolic. It is problematic, however, that Oswald’s personifications deliberately start from the flowers’ names, and not from their appearances or habitats. Given that this is ostensibly a book about weeds and wild flowers, the minimal botanic imagery throughout the book causes distancing and even disconnection between the flowers and their personifications. This results in some flat poems.

‘Bastard Toadflax’ illustrates this problem. Its human personification reaches towards a second personification, after the animal in the weed’s name; like a toad, the man ‘Pushes pudge of tongue-tip/ into bulge of

lower lip.' With a sixteenth-century sense of physiognomy, appearance matches character, as we learn that Bastard Toadflax is indeed a bastard:

Full of blotches.
Wide-mouthed, winking.
Has monstrous appetites.
Is always drinking.

Many a helpless motherly lass
smoothes down her dress,
cooks quantities of porridge.
And mentions marriage.

These are enjoyable lines. However, in personifying a weed as a man and a man as a toad, the sense of the weed vanishes. Oswald's preface says that she uses 'the names of flowers to summon up the flora of the psyche'. But here there is no working through the idea: the weed named bastard toadflax produces a poem about a man who looks like a toad and acts like a bastard. For landscape-minded readers who can conjure mental images of specific flora at will, the weed (*Comandra umbellata*) plays into the poem obliquely, in that, for a parasite, it produces attractive white flowers; and in bloom, these flowers and their buds can be 'Full of blotches.' But this is an obscure link. The reader knows from the volume's context that this is a poem about a weed; yet the poem does not bear on the weed, or the weed on the poem.

Oswald's preface heads off this criticism. But from a writer who has worked as a gardener, and demonstrated the strength of her own natural eye in past collections, many of these poems seem disconnected – not from the human heart, which would have ruined the book – but from the materials of their inspiration. They occasionally come across as poems about flowers by someone who has not bothered to look closely at flowers, an accusation which could hardly be leveled at Dickinson,

Lawrence, or Hughes – or Oswald, at her best. 'Bastard Toadflax' may be a pleasure to read, but like other poems in the book, it leaves the reader feeling that more could have been accomplished with the material.

The uneasy relationship between the poems and Greenman's etchings reinforces this problem. Oswald and Greenman have gone out of their way to prevent any alignment between the poems and the etchings. Doubtless, Oswald wished to avoid the safe, coffee-table-book experience of 'read a poem about a flower, look at a picture of the flower, and compare the two.' But instead, the reader must grapple with a book called *Weeds and Wild Flowers* in which most of the poems fall into the former category, and most of the etchings into the latter. This is a problem: while amateur naturalists might be able to conjure mental images of some of Oswald's weeds without help, many readers would probably prefer to see illustrations of 'Stinking Goose-foot', 'Bargeman's Cabbage', and 'Hairy Bittercress', rather than pictures of violets, pansies, daisies, and other common flowers. To make matters worse, among those poems which do match illustrations, not all have been laid out together. (The poems 'Violet', 'Snowdrop' and 'Primrose' are adjacent to their illustrations, but 'Daisy' is not.) This is another sign that Oswald and Greenman are attempting to foil the reader from making any comparisons between their work – a futile step in a collaborative book.

The book's other major problem is soft or careless language, which works against the *unheimlich* mood created by the best individual poems, and the book as a whole. Reading *Weeds and Wild Flowers* against Oswald's body of work shows that the new book lacks the tight control of language she has demonstrated in the past. Oswald is an accomplished crafter of formal and open-form poetry; therefore, the verbosity and looseness of phrase which pervade this book must be intentional. But if this looseness was a choice, it is difficult to see why it was made, as the poems with the loosest language do not pay off.

The facing-page poems 'Fragile Glasswort' and 'Narrow-lipped Helleborine' exemplify this problem. The poems are twins, sharing the

same form (eight couplets arranged in quatrains) and the same content (young, emotionally fragile women). Both poems employ feminine rhymes that fall short of Oswald's capabilities (although 'sleepwalks'/ 'spokes' is fine). In a book with many open-form poems, this problem might be overlooked, but Oswald raises the reader's expectations of strong off-rhyme in the book's opening poem, 'Stinking Goose-foot', with its 'biscuits'/ 'itches' and 'veins'/ 'strange'. The rhymes of these two facing poems might suit their themes, but the poetic visualization of feminine weakness could have been explored with a stronger technique.

Besides problems of rhyme, the two poems suffer from an excess of adjectival description and adjectival phrases. This flaw stalls character development. 'Helleborine', for example, begins:

I'm worried about Helleborine. So hard-worked, so discreet.
So unhappy, so accepting, so reliable and so mute.

The poem recovers from its weak opening, but these lines warn of the danger of forgetting the first lesson of good writing – show, don't tell. Other poems similarly demonstrate stunted character development due to adjectival excess. 'Pale Persicaria', for example, contains the phrase, 'Immense/ lustless listless wishfulness/ under her angle-poise heart.' Here Oswald plays up the excess, but the phrase strains the ear. An 'angle-poise heart' is an awkward synecdoche, but an original image, and the flood of consonance that precedes it diminishes its punch. 'Hairy Bittercress' shows the same mix of originality and excess in the flower's 'ardent cindery shrew-small eyes': a phrase in which three quite powerful modifiers negate each other's momentum in a pile-up. Finally, 'Slender Rush' contains the worst excesses. In the midst of an apposite personification, we get:

Too morbidly
unblinking to answer,

too trembling and hurriedly
grumbling to herself.

Too off-hand,
too unwholesome is her manner.

This is too much: seven adjectives and adverbs (including the present participles) in six lines requires a re-thinking of the way the character is presented, and the poem constructed.

Finally, one of the most curious things about the poems in *Weeds and Wild Flowers* is their lack of attachment to the *corpus* of flower lore in English poetry. The lack of allusion in the book must have been another deliberate choice, given Oswald's classical education, and the depth of local research evident in poems such as *Dart*. Allusion should never endanger a poem's clarity of image or originality of expression; but I cannot detect in these poems any play of meaning on a literary – as opposed to psychological – level. The connections between Oswald's rural subjects and the Wordsworthian characters mentioned above exist only through the reader's associations; Oswald's weeds have no visible roots in the English pastoral tradition. This seems like a lost opportunity. I cannot read 'Red-Veined Dock' without thinking of *The Tempest's* 'docks and mallows', or 'Primrose' without thinking of Milton's 'rathe primrose that forsaken dies', and Wordsworth's repeated symbolic use of this flower. Flowers and their symbolic readings constitute a fundamental current of classical and modern literature, into which all good nature poetry must tap. Much of Oswald's book is good nature poetry; yet it does not do this. Its resistance to allusion could be a mark of greatness – or a weakness.

Weeds and Wild Flowers contains many strong poems. Other poems demonstrate flashes of Oswald's keen gaze, but casual phrasing wraps their sharp ideas in cotton wool – in the same way that a morbid nursery rhyme becomes harmless through centuries of repetition. Oswald may

be aiming for ambiguity, but her chosen technique creates vagueness. As a result, despite their unsettling mood, many of these poems are too safe and too 'comfortably edgy,' and leave me wishing for more of 'the pearl's cold quality' of her earlier work.

Nevertheless, excesses of language aside, this is a fine book of poems. In its grasp of the relationship between idea, image, and form, it proves itself stronger than much of what is currently being published. The book would benefit from one of two editorial approaches – which in keeping with the book's theme, could be compared to gardening styles. Oswald could trim the excessive adjectival phrases and indecisive modifiers that rob some of her more stark creations of their nettled edges. However, as a wiser alternative, I would suggest that she let the garden grow wild. This book's subject matter calls for a change in style. Oswald should discard her careful – if skilful – minimalism, get into the mire, and let the weeds creep out of the reader's peripheral vision and into a more concretely observed, more linguistically knotty centre.

Good poets must develop three skills which, in combination, produce excellent poetry – but three skills which can undermine each other. These skills are mastery of craft, mastery of content, and mastery of perception or philosophy (skills which might correspond, on a practical level, to Pound's three 'kinds of poetry': *melopoeia*, *phanopoeia*, and *logopoeia*). Poets must master the craft of writing – the use of structure, line, and language – but like any other writer they need something to write about. Content has become the weakness of many contemporary poets: not because they lack it, but because they have it in excess. Like postmodern novelists, they can specialize themselves into the richness of a character, a landscape, or a journalistic moment – but at the risk of losing the poetic line. This is why many erudite contemporary poems read like laundry lists; the poet does not control their content through craft, or connect it to the body of living poetry through holistic reductiveness.

In general, Oswald's book avoids this pitfall and balances the three

skills in question. If at times she sacrifices one, it is the second, in that she allows the characters of the weeds and flowers to escape their literal forms to such a degree that they leave an insufficient concrete impression in the reader's mind. But at a pinch, this was the correct sacrifice to make. Based on her previous books, the attentive reader can grant Oswald some leeway in veering from an exacting description of the landscape, in exchange for her providing memorable representations of its marginal inhabitants. Oswald's poems do not address the larger social and philosophical questions of why the poor, homeless, and disturbed rural figures that populate Dorothy Wordsworth's journals persist in the modern rural landscape – but we know they do. If *Weeds and Wild Flowers* fails to draw our attention to the roots of particular social ills, it provides lingering, discomfiting portraits of what it is to live with their effects.

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Alice Oswald, *Weeds and Wild Flowers*, Faber and Faber, 2009.

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MIRIAM GAMBLE

Jane Draycott, *Over*

September 2009

The 'in-between space' has been trodden to exhaustion in contemporary poetry; it has also, though once entrepreneurial, descended into easy game. Having multiple identities, a foot in every camp, poets need not commit to anything; they need not even *say* anything (Brownlee's horses with their weight shifting from foot to foot have a lot to answer for). *Over*, the third collection from Jane Draycott, is an exploration of in-betweens; it is also, however, a breath of fresh air, in that it dares to assess limbo spaces rather than merely squatting in them.

Over aims at taking stock: it's a book of middle age, both public and personal. The opening poem, 'Sky Man', probes the gaps between expectation and reality in viewing the mirror image of the self ('Not you. You'), and aging is a recurrent theme; it is also one that Draycott finds perplexing, and in very particular ways. 'Sky Man' works by increments: the meaning or general shape is not apparent from a quick first read, after which one may go back and brood on the details. Rather, the poem proceeds by a continuous process of shifting – much like aging itself, which doesn't, after all, happen overnight. In this sense, however, 'Sky Man' is unusual: more often, the reader is confronted by a narrator beached in a static zone or 'no-place' (much like the 'Not you. You' of 'Sky Man'), but a no-place sandwiched between clearly defined

alternatives – 'where we have come' and 'Where we are going,' as 'Wayzgoose' has it:

Where we have come, summer applies
its even weight to tarmac, cornfields
and the silent lake where no ink lies.

Where we are going,, the goose has
in her eye and takes her onward flight,
nib-neck leading toward the season
of quiet work by candlelight.

The 'younger self' shimmers attractively in the margins, but so too does the fully aged self of the future – a perhaps less predictable choice of greener field. In 'Golf', the poem's speaker covets figures 'in the mirage' who are conceived as being 'adventurous', 'one step ahead', and longs for transportation into their milieu:

It felt as if
boundless and bare the morning might take us
and carry us elsewhere, somewhere ahead

which wasn't a carpet of dandelions
struck by the clock of the wind again and again
and no one to blame but yourself.

Whilst this is in part a paean to alternative lives – the roads not travelled – it isn't wholly explicable as such. Rather, Draycott is drawn to binary situations – a penchant indicated by her frequent deployment of the sonnet, and of poems fractured by a vertical crack, or gulf. Indeed, 'Golf' (a sonnet itself) morphs its own title into a 'gulf' by the end of the poem: here, that gulf lies between the current position and the desired one (which seems to be death, the being beyond time), but usually the

speakers of the poems inhabit the gulf itself, and can do little more than wait for an external rescue force. The contours of each part of the binary are visible from, but beyond the reach of, the present position.

There is something of the writerly (and of the mid-life) crisis about all this: of the need to reinvent the self and of the recognition that 'this middle stretch is bad for poets' (though in Draycott's case it certainly isn't producing bad poems). The collection, as well as sounding an elegiac note throughout (witness the translation of *Pearl*), abounds in images of cleaned slates, which are frequently employed in conjunction with a panoramic overview of the past. The title gestures in a number of directions, not least of which are the sense of things being done and dusted (or the urge to have them done and dusted) and the accompanying eagerness for instructions as to what comes next. 'Over', as well as signifying the end of one's own message, indicates, of course, the period in which one hangs on the line, waiting for a response to form itself and emerge from the crackle of static. As with Longley's *Gorse Fires* (also a collection peppered with clean sheets and new starts) it would be tempting, and tidy, to suggest that Draycott's main beef in this collection is with writing itself (and her own writing at that) – the difficult wrench from what is comfortable and characteristic into unknown territory, the pain of waiting for flyaway words to return to the roost.

Poems, however, are never divorceable from the wider context in which they have been written, and Draycott's remit stretches more ambitiously than all this would suggest. *Over* is concerned with writing, but it broadens that concern into a wider speculation both on how poems in English ought to proceed at the present time, and on England itself. As Longley's collection was, in fact, intimately tied to the socio-political atmosphere of Northern Ireland in the early 1990s (and with how poems might simultaneously figure and transcend that atmosphere), so Draycott probes the landscapes of contemporary England and of current English literature: the only problem is that what she finds there is, at best, static and, at worst, stagnating.

In 'The Funeral of Queen Victoria', one of two poems in *Over* which were commissioned as part of a BFI 'Essentially British' project, Draycott coins Victoria Station as 'the terminus where it all begins'; likewise, 'time/ like a great iron seed will be kept/ and stored in *memoriam*, bearing her name.' It may be stretching the mark to force it, but one interpretation of this statement (and it's supported by many poems in Draycott's previous collection, *The Night Tree*) would seem to be that, post the Victorian era, England has simply stopped, become a nation 'out of history' (and literary history). Draycott's way is not to hammer over the head with overt 'meaning'. However, a number of poems in *The Night Tree* dramatically inhabit prior periods of history, and, in particular, focus on the erstwhile journeying impetus of the English via river and shipping lane. They do not say so, but they are situated in what might, for want of a better word, be designated England's 'greatness' – the time of empire, of exploration and discovery, and also of the burgeoning literature born of these developments. Imaginative writing thrives on the social energies it perceives to be at work around it; in *The Night Tree* Draycott returns to a time in which these energies were rampant.

In *Over*, by contrast, the reader is more likely to encounter characters fleeing inland from the sea, 'the whole crew fighting to put/ the beach back into the thermos .../ the ocean back into the woods'; in 'The Hired Boat', the characters want 'a boat that would ferry them upstream/ away from the chaos of sea' rather than one which will launch them into it. Waterways are still, as in 'Eldorado', associated with the 'migrant gene', but it is now apparent that 'There is no gold' at the end of the pioneer's rainbow: the great age of exploration (creativity?) is 'over'. The boat in 'Eldorado' drifts in Coleridgean doldrums – 'Forty days in an open boat/ drifting in the gas-green wilderness' – reminiscent of both the desert temptation of Christ and the situation of Draycott's lyric 'I'. Both *The Night Tree* and *Over* are, however, still much concerned with the concept of utopian spaces and places – with the imaginative urge to transcend or metamorphose the conditions of the present – and at least part of what

Over is about is the attempt to find an alternative means of doing so to that offered by the now defunct blueprints of the past.

One possible answer lies in the aforementioned bid to wipe the slate clean – rather than bask inert in the shadow of the past, one should strive to be proactive, begin again (or ‘begin, begin, begin’ as the aptly titled ‘Alpha’ has it). A more positive model for Draycott than the terminus in ‘The Death of Queen Victoria’ is the Easter festival, which fuses in one clean sweep the death of the old with the birth of the new. In ‘Romeo’, a re-enactment of the crucifixion brings lovers together – grief over the loss of one life blossoms instantaneously into the commingling of others. And in ‘Pearl’, the long process of elegiac grieving finally results in new growth:

From goodness other goodness grows:
so beautiful a seed can't fail
to fruit, or spices fail to flower
fed by such a spotless pearl.

‘November’ cites ‘success’ as being able to ‘pass/ unrecognised by even your closest friends’ – ‘When challenged by strangers pretend / to have forgotten everything’ – and in ‘The Hired Boat’ the characters go so far as to desire complete purgation, in the manner of the Biblical flood:

By morning they'd vanished, their boat in the shallows
no more than a leaf or the eye of a bird

which drank at the glittering throat of the flood
where it narrowed to only a single word.

Language, however, as Hemingway noted, will always have been in other people's mouths before it has been in yours, and there are problems with the pre-Babel ethos of some of these poems – problems of which

Draycott is more than aware. In ‘November’, the character (another nomad in a no-place) can only ‘pretend/ to have forgotten’, and in fact mourns continually the ‘severance of contact/ with those you love most’ demanded by ‘life in the field.’ And in ‘The Hired Boat’, one of the names mooted for the desired vessel in which one might row ‘like a dream’ to the ‘throat of the flood’ – the unpolluted source – is *Narcissus*, naval-gazer, done to death by obsessive staring at his own perfection. This is a land, a literature, a self gone in on itself and consequently drawn to a halt; it recalls nothing so much as the slow stilling into silence of Mahon's narrators, desperate to escape the stain of history.

In such a context, the imperfect ‘You. Not you’ binary of the reflection in ‘Sky Man’ seems, while it provides no definite answers, a preferable option – one split between building on what is known and the possibility of diversification. And indeed, Draycott's main solution to the problems posed in *Over*, whether personal or bearing a wider relevance, seems to lie in this kind of hybrid incorporation of different elements – in the manner of *The Waste Land*, if on a quieter scale. The collection takes its title from a sequence of twenty-six poems based on the International Phonetic Alphabet: they range widely through space and time hosting numerous different voices and perspectives, and, although there is no clear pattern, there is a rough trajectory from stasis, through potential, to awakening (see ‘Whiskey’, where the frozen body is brought to sudden self-awareness). Draycott poses, in this sequence as in the book at large, as Eliot-esque time traveller, able to salvage from the past, and from the spatial present, workable pieces with which to move towards a functional future. In the poem ‘Technique’, she creates a pastiche response to the traditional realist's solid advice on how to conjure up a thing on which one might then write: ‘Now move through/ the rest of the house as if you were a camera.’ But of course, one is not a camera, one is a consciousness made of and invaded on a daily basis by rogue information. Draycott's kitchen (‘A house’, the learned gentlemen helpfully tell us, ‘is a good large object to

visualise’) quickly and mischievously turns into ‘a back street in a labyrinth/ of slums’: definition yields to definition, possibility to narrative possibility, as various components of the poet’s knowledge make competitive play. In ‘Technique’, Draycott rejects the clear, self-contained outline of the well-wrought urn (though the poem undoubtedly is one – she’s nothing if not meticulous) in favour of the ‘One hundred and one things’ crowding noisily around the contemporary artist. She may yearn for a time when art ‘knew nothing of trouble and its hellish/ landscape, its weight on the scales like some absurdly/ growing thing’; she is, however, more than equal to the challenges of working in one in which this isn’t the case. *Over* offers the reader beautifully crafted poems which engage searchingly with their time and genre, and which bring ‘news from another place’ to their own ‘dark age’. ‘There’s much more you could tell’ says the speaker of ‘X-ray’, and this seems both challenge and promise.

© Miriam Gamble, 2009
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JANE HOLLAND

Billy Collins, *Ballistics*

September 2009

Some poets are more-ish – the more of their poems you read, the more you want to read. Thus it is with the American poet Billy Collins. There’s a quiet, studied elegance to his poetry, and a wit that sneakily trips you up because you’ve forgotten to look for it, underpinned by an unobtrusive grasp of poetic technique. Though ‘bardic’ might be a more apposite description, since Collins is very much a public poet – in the past decade, he has held the posts of both US Poet Laureate and New York State Laureate, and his work does tend to reflect a certain brand of commissioned, reader-friendly poetry.

This new collection from Picador, *BALLISTICS*, opens with a typically whimsical, prefatory invocation of the reader in ‘August in Paris’. Here, the poet admires a painting over the shoulder of a Parisian artist; he then imagines glancing over his own shoulder to catch the reader observing the poet admiring the painting over the artist’s shoulder:

I sometimes wonder what you look like,
if you are wearing a flannel shirt
or a wraparound blue skirt held together by a pin.

There's a tongue-in-cheek, postmodernist tang to all this, compounded by the opening poem of the first section – the book is split into four sections – which is entitled 'Brightly Colored Boats Upturned on the Banks of the Charles' and begins thus: 'What is there to say about them/that has not been said in the title?' What indeed? Yet somehow the wily Collins manages not only to describe these 'sleek racing sculls' in greater detail, but goes on to envisage the rowers as the twelve apostles and himself as the cox, 'calling time through a little megaphone'.

This trademark wit – always dry, laconic, understated, a touch surreal – is what has made Billy Collins a legend on the US poetry scene. These poems are written in a drawl (and perhaps intended to be read with one) but with a constantly heightened delivery that I'm convinced would be difficult for most other poets to sustain without flagging – or not without wishing he/she could shift register and become either lyrical or serious for a change.

Not that Collins does not write 'serious' poems; everything is covered here that you might expect from a major US poet: love, death, divorce, 'The Great American Poem', 'Pornography', and even Philip Larkin, another famously laconic poet, who gets a walk-on part 'in an undertaker's coat'. Nonetheless, Collins never quite shakes off his innate desire to mock. Luckily for the reader, Billy Collins' forté happens to be whimsy and sustained self-deprecation, and so his poems work marvellously well. *Vive le rire!*

Collins himself has few worries about his poetic direction. 'So much gloom and doubt in our poetry' may be the opening lament of his poem 'Despair', but Collins swiftly turns for guidance to those 'ancient Chinese poets'

Wa-Hoo, whose delight in the smallest things
could hardly be restrained,
and to his joyous counterpart in the western provinces,
Ye-Hah.

Is it all about laughter? No indeed, for there are elegies here, albeit unconventional ones. One rather lovely poem, 'The Day Lassie Died' – Collins has a talent for transparent, memorable titles – makes Lassie, pictured on the front of the *Sentinel*, sound more like a cross between a supermodel and the Mona Lisa than a collie dog – 'there's her face, the dark eyes,/the long near-smile, and the flowing golden coat'. At this point, the poem looks and smells like satire. Yet nostalgia and sentiment drip from his lines in equal measure: 'and I'm leaning on the barn door back home/while my own collie, who looks a lot like her/lies curled outside in a sunny patch'.

One reason why the tone of individual poems is so hard to pin down may be found in Collins' restless, mercurial mind. It's not that he can't commit to a single idea, but that his mind makes unexpected connections between them. His poem 'Lost', for instance, begins with an ordinary lost coin – in the manner of these tiresome workshop poems about items you might find in your pocket – and turns into a poem about the Roman poet, Ovid, who was 'forever out of favour with Augustus'. Of course, the traditional head stamped on a coin provides a path from one to the other – 'the profile/of an emperor on one side and a palm on the other' – but there does seem to be a coin-toss pattern in his poems, beginning with one face and ending with another.

The key motive for buying a volume of Billy Collins' poetry, however, remains his wit. Deeply irreverent and satirical, yet never offensive, it serves the middle way of covertly political writing and so endears itself to a broad swathe of readers, whether they buy contemporary poetry regularly or not. It also states in plain terms what other poets might shrink from, presumably for fear of not being 'poetical' enough. For only Billy Collins, in an otherwise erudite and poker-faced poem on 'Greek and Roman Statuary' could point out with such unholy glee how beautifully sculptured arms, legs, penis and other accoutrements may have broken off over millennia, but

the mighty stone ass endures,
so smooth and fundamental, no one
hesitates to leave the group and walk behind to stare.

Whether drunkenly confiding in a Parisian canine over 'the intolerable poetry of my compatriots' or assuming the insignificant part of 'an ant inside a blue bowl/on the table of a cruel prince', Billy Collins demonstrates that, like Noel Coward, he has 'a talent to amuse'. Indeed, the title poem of this collection, 'Ballistics', show him at his most scurrilous; it describes a high-speed photograph of a bullet shooting through a book, with the incorrigible Collins eventually deciding this was a collection of poems 'by someone of whom I was not fond/and that the bullet must have passed through/his writing with little resistance.' All of which only endears Billy Collins to me further; 'light' his verse may be – simple it is not.

© Jane Holland, 2009
Billy Collins, *Ballistics*, Picador, 2009.
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WILLIAM WOOTTEN

John Ashbery, *Planisphere*

March 2010

Now that his *Collected Poems 1956–1987* are in the Library of America, John Ashbery can rejoice in having become a classic author without having had to die for the privilege. For all that, much of Ashbery's recent verse has been essential, and very enjoyable, reading, not because it already feels timeless, but because it feels contemporary. When Ashbery is on song, there is no poet better attuned to the highs and lows of American language and culture as it is now, no poet better able to be elegant and reflective amidst the daily hubbub. So, while Ashbery may have a tendency to repeat himself, and while none of the recent books quite match up to the great volumes of the seventies, his books have still had plenty in them to surprise and delight. There have been poems that are funnier, angrier and more politically pertinent than the Ashbery of old. There have been welcome new influences, most notably that of James Tate. There has too been a willingness by Ashbery to chance his arm, as in his forays away from his habitual free verse into more traditional forms. So one comes to *Planisphere* with high hopes.

The book's titles run the A–Z, 'Alcove' through to 'Zymurgy'. It's the arrangement of the dictionary, the encyclopaedia or the gazetteer, and, as one would expect, the poems have the vocabulary and range of subject matters to match. At the same time, received knowledge is merrily

subverted, and clichés are flipped – sometimes pointedly, sometimes for amusement’s sake – while idle thoughts are put to work. There are one or two novelties, such as the not-very-exciting collage of movie titles that is ‘They Knew What They Wanted’, but for the most part we have the sort of free verse trains of thought and twisty tales which are Ashbery’s stock-in-trade. The collection, though, does have a particular feel. This is partly a matter of length. The sentences go for the snappy over the sinuous. The poems have got briefer too. Most don’t make it over the page, and only ‘The Winemakes’ runs to three.

This turns out to be a mixed blessing. On the upside, the poems have a tremendous zip to them, and can travel from one register and range of reference, time or place to another at a stupendous lick. And, though it is considerably more paratactic than the Ashbery of old, the poetry doesn’t lurch you or make an unattractive clunking sound as it makes the gearchanges, it glides smoothly from one sentence and its world to the next. In the opening verse of ‘Plywood Years’, for instance, we head from the language of high Christian poetry, to a reflection on it or perhaps a showy contemporary expostulation, then to an old-fashioned colloquial endearment, and then to venerable noun with a gaudy modern referent being used as a verb. The theme appears to be reflection, narcissism, and Christmas:

Here in the open, love lies apart,
singing to its beads. How reflective is that?
Don’t be such a goose, love said.
They’ll tinsel you.
To read this sort of poetry is to move in a dazzle.

On the downside, frequently, you aren’t given enough time to step out of the bus and look around before being whisked off again. ‘Plywood Years’ immediately moves on to a language more suited to celebrity survival tales: ‘They came after me and in the end I was a sot. They said in TV it

didn’t matter. One fallen ice cube is left.’ And the pattern continues down the verses, until you come to wonder if you’ve seen everything there is without seeing anything at all. The effect is compounded in the really short poems; these seem to scoot off before they’ve even arrived.

The enjoyment in Ashbery has so often been, to use the title one of this collection’s better poems, his ‘Perplexing Ways’, following tangled, hypotactic threads, of thought or sensuous apprehension, perhaps getting lost, then being forced to come back to make more sense of the tangles. In these crewcut poems, the effect is – to switch metaphors – not that of the tangle but of an incessant channel-hopping. And, as is the way with channel-hopping, the result often feels affectless, disengaging one’s interest in or care for whatever eye-catching sights flick past. It is usually possible to construe a theme, allegory or connection that will make a sort of sense of things, but it has to fight, and will often lose to, a sense of pointlessness and disengagement, and one that is usually less satisfying than the perplexity of the truly difficult, the challenge of the surreal or the charm of Edward Lear-like nonsense.

A jaded sense of glut pervades this book – the glut of America, but also the glut in and of Ashbery’s poems. Yet this isn’t fully interrogated, doesn’t become something which itself can become a matter of strong thought, care and emotion, as it has done in Ashbery in the past. Instead, it merely provokes a switch from mild interest to mild uninterest and a more or less comfortable *anomie*. ‘River of Canoefish’ is at once deft diagnosis and symptom of the problem. It tells the history of how the canoefish (an Ashberyian invention) have proliferated since their first discovery in 1825. It is tempting to read the lines as a description of the poems themselves and the lines within them:

Today they are abundant as mackerel, as far as the eye can see,
tumbled, tumescent, tinted all the colors of the rainbow
though not in the same order,
a swelling, scumbled mass, rife with incident

and generally immune to sorrow.

Shall we gather at the river? On second thought, let's not.

Faced with so many pretty, unemotional fish, one is tempted to agree.

Ashbery has greater recourse to the tricks of the joke or the comic routine than ever. In addition to the expected wordplay and whimsy, again and again Ashbery will bait and switch between sentences or over the line break as in: 'What kind of a nuthouse is this/ Hansel wondered', 'The bad news is the ship hasn't arrived;/ the good news is it hasn't left yet'. It's a technique which can offer an instant hesitation or revaluation of a thought or hand-me-down phrase as well as the odd chuckle. But, watching old Father John continually stand on his head becomes too routine a routine. Moreover, despite the trappings, there are fewer good laughs in *Planisphere* than there have been of late. Indeed, what is intended as comic can appear simply self-indulgent, as is the case with the prattle over an old b-movie that is 'The Tower of London'.

The more successful poems in *Planisphere* tend to be those which keep the focus of attention up for longer than a line or two at a time. 'Breathlike' contemplates an idea 'like a rut/ made thousands of years ago by one of the first/ wheels as it rolled along' in a way that seems simpler than Ashbery usually is, but is beautiful and suggestive. 'Episode' successfully turns to sepia tinged memories of the 1930s from the present, with a unified contemporary perspective and musical themes. 'Planisphere' itself is a poem of three paragraphs, each of different but seemingly related views, each long and engaging enough for one to wish to construct a way of seeing all three together. In so doing, it lives up to its title: a planisphere has two disks joined by a pivot, the bottom of which has a star chart, the top of which has an elliptical hole which allows the viewer to see a portion of the night sky, as viewed from a certain time and place, never the whole.

In the end, for all there is to admire, this is a disappointing book: with even the best poems being, by Ashbery's standards, not particularly

impressive. Though some might be difficult to interpret, I don't have the sense that the poems have been, one way and another, difficult for Ashbery to write. Instead, too often they play as diverting bagatelles which make the charge of inconsequentiality, so often levelled unfairly at Ashbery's work, a harder one to answer satisfactorily. A disappointing John Ashbery book is still better than most others' triumphs, but that isn't reason enough for those who aren't already committed fans or completists to buy it. Over the last half century, Ashbery has stocked the waters with hundreds of large, beautiful fish. Go and seek them out. The minnowy canoefish of *Planisphere* can wait.

© William Wootten, 2010

John Ashbery, *Planisphere*, Carcanet Press, 2009.

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PETER McDONALD

Christopher Ricks, *True Friendship: Geoffrey Hill,
Anthony Hecht, and Robert Lowell*
Under the sign of Eliot and Pound

April 2010

Like many aphorisms, the line by William Blake which gives Christopher Ricks the title of his new book, 'Opposition is true Friendship', is more easily quoted than thought through, and more easily thought through than put into practice. With poets – and it is a small circle of five poets who stand here at the centre of Ricks's attention – 'friendship' can sometimes look more like true opposition. One poet can know himself indebted to another without feeling himself to be so, still less acknowledging an obligation to express gratitude; and gratitude, as Ricks remarks, 'is a nub', for while 'the English language recognizes that there are such people as ingrates,' we are also obliged to 'face the fact that there is not a corresponding noun for someone who is truly grateful.' Ricks is (as a critic can be) a master in the role of that impossible thing, 'a grate, a great grate', but the evidence of so much of the poetry with which he deals must leave him in no doubt as to the solid foundation in fact of that other person, the ingrate.

The ingrate: ay, there's the nub. The two poets whose work presides over Ricks's study, Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot, have each occasioned gratitude and dislike from other artists. Not, of course, that dislike is really the opposite of gratitude; but those who do not feel gratitude

might point out that they do not therefore feel ingratitude for legacies which, they might profess, were never theirs to accept. The three poets read by Ricks 'under the sign' of Pound and Eliot are Geoffrey Hill, Anthony Hecht, and Robert Lowell, and the argument of *True Friendship* is that these writers' expressions of complex gratitude to their elders illuminate something fundamental in the relationship, and the artistic achievements, of Pound and Eliot themselves. It is an intricate alignment which Ricks makes here, and one which involves (as he acknowledges) a certain amount of difficulty: not everybody is grateful to everybody else in this particular quincunx, and there are points of tension. But Ricks succeeds in bringing the three younger poets to bear on each other, and on Eliot and Pound, in ways that expose common concerns and preoccupations. Most notably, Ricks follows a thread of allusion and imitation that leads to Dante, whose example lights up – or perhaps casts a shadow across – the originality of the Modernist achievement in poetry.

Why Dante? For Ricks, the primacy of the poet of the *Divina Commedia* is made certain by the place given to him by Eliot, as the key poetic master and the greatest, most abiding influence on his own poetry. As so often in Ricks's work, Eliot is at the top of the pyramid: so, Pound partly inherits Dante from Eliot, while Lowell, Hecht, and Hill relate to Dante through Pound and ultimately Eliot again. Ricks does not say so, but his work makes it clear that for these poets Dante is essentially the Dante of T. S. Eliot. A climax is reached once Ricks can bring together Ezra Pound's late audio recording of Robert Lowell's Dante translation with Pound's own eventual assessment of Eliot's as 'the true Dantescan voice', after canvassing Hill's and Hecht's variously conflicted relations to both Eliot and Pound. Gratitude and ingratitude are both involved when, to adapt a line from the greatest drama of ingratitude in the language, the wheel is come full circle; Eliot is here.

The prime ingrate in this whole process – its Goneril or Regan, perhaps – is Geoffrey Hill, whose critical strictures on Eliot have become

increasingly stern over the years. Ricks's task is a delicate one here, and his long chapter on Hill is as scrupulous as it is critically brilliant, asking us to compare the kinds of creative indebtedness to Eliot exhibited in Hill's poetry with the critical attacks made on Eliot in his prose. Undoubtedly, Ricks identifies places in Hill's poetry where Eliot is in earshot, and for which he is an essential stimulus: the criticism comes close, in fact, to suggesting that even Hill's more raucous recent verse, in spitting-distance of popular culture, is itself dependent on Eliot's example. Ricks reads all creative indebtedness as a species of gratitude, so that the gratitude is there in the poetry, whatever the poet himself might like to think, or however he might address his relations with Eliot in his own prose criticism. Here, Ricks has to declare interests of his own, and honourably does so in full, explaining how Hill has included him in the number of those misled by the later Eliot's 'tone'. The defence mounted here is a spirited and intelligent one, and remains a self-defence for as short a time as possible, but it still fails quite to defuse some of Hill's objections to the manners of Eliot's *Four Quartets* verse; and even Ricks's intense and sympathetic teasing out of the Eliot influence in Hill's poetry does not put those objections conclusively aside.

With Hecht, Ricks is on safer ground, for the American poet was usefully explicit both in his poetic uses of Eliot and in his critical thoughts about him. The exposition of Hecht's work here is masterfully done, and Ricks's eye for a good poem allows him to bring it under the very best kind of critical scrutiny: alert, sympathetic, and conceptually broad. British readers are seldom well-acquainted with Hecht (who died in 2004), but Ricks's close engagement might bring this elegant, subtle, and rhetorically poised writer more admirers. Hecht's sense of gratitude to Eliot was not straightforward, but Ricks follows the ins and outs of its expression with an extraordinary sureness. When Lowell's turn comes, Ricks is able to approach the Eliot relation by way of Pound, and he examines with beautiful precision and economy Lowell's poems about Pound incarcerated in St. Elizabeth's Hospital, and about Eliot

himself. Lowell's gratitude to his elders, however, comes to seem almost indiscriminate; since it is gratitude, it is guaranteed Ricks's approving attention, but the extent of what it achieves artistically for Lowell is not so clear. Perhaps Lowell's verse incorporates too much of what his artistic life professed at length in the way of gratitude and affection: all 'true Friendship', and a disabling of 'Opposition'. In that sense, maybe Hillian sourness achieves more than Lowellian blandishment.

These are, in the end (but not only in the end), questions of 'tone', that term in Hill's criticism of Eliot which, like its counter-value of 'pitch', Ricks claims not to understand. Eliot, too, would occasionally confess to not understanding things – the implication being that they were not, in fact, capable of being understood. Yet Ricks is supremely gifted in registering the 'pitch' of literary language (a gift Hill has acknowledged). Such things have to be tested repeatedly, and the ground chosen by Ricks is that of the long second section of Eliot's *Little Gidding*, where a 'compound ghost', modelled on one of Dante's spirits, addresses the poet in the aftermath of an air-raid. Ricks rightly sees this as a central piece of writing for Eliot's inheritors, and his detection of Pound within the ghost is persuasive and important. Yet the whole episode is also being offered as an exemplary scene of gratitude – more exemplary, indeed, than the Dante which lies behind it – and Eliot comes out of Ricks's interpretation as something of an ethical, as well as a poetic, hero. In the process, Ricks downplays the importance of the 'compound' nature of the ghost's identity, and in particular he slights the significance of W. B. Yeats there. But then, Yeats is the element needed to make sense of Hill's relations to Eliot and Dante as well; of Pound's too, and perhaps (insofar as this can be ascertained) of Lowell's. Eliot's track-record as an ingrate with regard to Yeats might serve to complicate usefully the slightly too simple pattern of poetic hierarchy which Ricks now implies. Yet Ricks may well think (and if he thinks it, it would be as well for him to say so plainly) that Eliot had really nothing much for which to be grateful to Yeats.

For all this, *True Friendship* is a truly illuminating book. Better, it is a book of criticism which radiates not just intelligence and wit, but warmth, sympathy, and disinterested celebration. Ricks's criticism – unrivalled in quality now for decades, and palpably as strong as ever – remains that of 'a great grate', who gives to poetry as much as he has received from it, and more.

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Christopher Ricks, *True Friendship: Geoffrey Hill, Anthony Hecht, and Robert Lowell*

Under the sign of Eliot and Pound, Yale University Press, 2010.

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MARIA JOHNSTON

Seamus Heaney, *Human Chain*

October 2010

By this stage, the verdict on Seamus Heaney's latest and now Forward-prize-winning collection *Human Chain* has been reached; most of the reviews are in and all of Heaney's reviewers can be heard singing exultantly from the same hymn-sheet. In Nick Laird's words it is Heaney's 'Book of the Dead, centred on sadness and loss'; for Eamon Grennan it is the poet's 'first book of old age', while in Colm Tóibín's view it is 'a book of shades and memories'. Nor did it take long for Heaney himself to review his own reviews. As he told the BBC: 'I didn't have such a strong sense of mortality running through the book until the reviews began to appear. It daunted me. I thought, this sounds like he's writing his own obituaries.' Whatever about Heaney writing his own obituaries, it does sound at times as though he is writing his own reviews. Grennan's perfectly-pitched appraisal is liberally seasoned with trademark terms from the Heaney word-hoard: 'depth-charges', 'amplifications', and so on. This tendency among Heaney devotees to ape his signature verbal flourishes testifies to the seductive force of his sumptuous critical rhetoric and shows the extent to which his poetic judgment has become the exemplar for contemporary poetry criticism.

Moreover, as his comment to the BBC reminds us, Heaney is a poet who keeps a close eye on his own critical reception as he prepares the

ground for posterity. As a poet and reader, he has long been aware of the construct that is 'Heaney': 'the textual creature who was living a life separate from you in the newsprints', as he has described it. 'I dwell in this house and in the cities and Heaney lives in the country and in his memory and elsewhere', he explained in the 2009 documentary film of his life *Out of the Marvellous*. Throughout *Human Chain*, the 'textual figure' looms into view as never before in a collection that seems to be concerned as much with its own futurity as with remembrances of things past. In the *opus posthumus* that is *Human Chain*, literary posterity, not human death, is the true focal point. The fact that two of its poems speak to two of contemporary poetry's most influential critics is not insignificant. Addressing his posthumous readership as much as his present readers, Heaney dedicates the title poem to the academic critic Terence Brown, while 'Hermit Songs' is dedicated to the leading American poetry scholar and author of a seminal study of Heaney, Helen Vendler. 'I don't want to achieve immortality through my work. I want to achieve it by not dying', Woody Allen once quipped, but for Heaney immortality is to be achieved precisely through work.

'How do you think of your childhood? How do you imagine it?' Heaney contemplates with furrowed brow during the course of a 2008 interview with Paul Muldoon. To my mind, these questions go to the heart of his poetic project and to the heart of *Human Chain* itself where strategies of re-imagining and re-visioning are central. Throughout, we find the poet foregrounding issues of self-representation, caught up in the process of turning, or translating, the limited span of a human lifetime into a living art-form. The idea of how our lives become stories is key. 'In a sense I was almost introducing him as subject matter', Heaney has described introducing his 'unshorn and bewildered' father to the American poet Louis Simpson, an occasion which is remembered in 'Making Strange' in *Station Island*. In *Human Chain*, ever in thrall to the literary life, Heaney's courtship of his wife, the 'princess', becomes the stuff of fairytale in the visceral sequence 'Eelworks'. Elsewhere, in the

final poem in the sequence 'Album', a moment which has Heaney's son ambushing his grandfather with a hug puts the poet in mind of his own attempts at embracing his father as recounted in the previous poem in the sequence: 'an embrace in Elysium // swam up in to my very arms'. Three times Virgil's Aeneas tried and failed to embrace his father's elusive apparition. It is the poem that is embraced in the poet's arms as, despite the note of regret, art compensates for life's disappointments. Moreover, Heaney is instructing the reader on how the preceding poem in 'Album' should be read; that is, with Virgil in mind. Thus, the historical Heaney's instance of inability is elevated into the realm of myth as he assumes the form of Aeneas. This self-mythologizing impulse is evident in 'Chanson d'Aventure' where Heaney, recovering from a stroke that has induced high levels of poetic recall, is seen doing physiotherapy in a hospital corridor. Not content with being all too human in this vulnerable pose, he casts himself in bronze as the victorious Charioteer of Delphi who, unflinching, stead-fast, 'holds his own': 'His eyes-front, straight-backed posture like my own'. A heroic Heaney still holds the reins, even in the face of debilitation. Later, in 'The Wood Road', he remembers what would prove to be a defining moment for a self growing into adult authority: 'Looked up to, looking down, / Allowed the reins like an adult'. The power to exert artistic control over ordinary life experience is crucial.

Continuing his preoccupation with the writing and the written life, the poet's pen is the subject of 'The Conway Stewart'; a marvellously Joycean affair of sound as the pen comes to life 'guttery, snottery' in this portrait of the artist as the son of an ashplant-yielding father and a mother who, in 'Album', tends the firebox of creativity. At times however, the self-mythologizing approach seems too contrived as every event in his low and rustic life has to be made to 'gleam' – a word that sounds repeatedly. In this regard, one of the least successful poems in the collection is 'Route 110' in which the hinterland of Heaney's childhood is overlaid with mythic import and a bus route of yore becomes

Virgilian in aspect. Heaney's Virgil-tinted glasses certainly lend a sepia tone to the retrospective journey but at times his myth-vision creates a flat, colourless effect as the unvarying stanza patterns buckle under the pressure of conveyance, as in the clunky line: 'Handed me one it as good as lit me home'. Travelling along 'Route 110' the reader encounters more than one such pothole. 'Venus' doves? Why not McNicholl's pigeons?' Heaney self-reflexively enquires in the same poem, calling attention yet again to the writing process itself and to the very deliberate mythic method that is being deployed in writing the self. 'Too late, alas, now for the apt quotation', Heaney bemoans in 'Album' but it seems a disingenuous lament for the lost moment as, if life may be remade in art, then the 'apt quotation' (by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry) has not arrived belatedly for the life of the poem. Life is flawed, limited; the achieved, timeless poem is the true end of human activity. Indeed, the very first keynote-striking poem in *Human Chain* relates the heady surprise of catching a new poem, an event that has the alert poet 'alive and ticking like an electric fence' as art creates its own life-force.

As well as being deeply inter-textual in the usual Heaney way, there is throughout *Human Chain* constant reference to other art forms as the poet explores the various media through which transient, temporary life may be made permanent. 'Canopy' commemorates David Ward's 1994 public art installation at Harvard University which took place over a two-week period between the hours of dusk and darkness. For this evocative performance of light and sound, tape recordings of speakers reading in different languages on the theme of place were hung from the branches of the trees in Harvard Yard. For the literary-fixated Heaney the effect is, predictably, akin to that of Dante's wood of the suicides and this obvious literary allusion unfortunately overrides the earlier simile which was more instinctively and more imaginatively rooted in the earthier discourse of church-going experience, likening the experience to, 'a recording / Of antiphonal responses / In the congregation of leaves'. We can hear this in our inner ears. Set amid the vibrant, conversant world

of grave-side vegetation, the preceding poem, 'A Herbal', after Guillevic, articulates the desire to capture the fleeting music of the human moving in nature so that it may be repeated continuously over time:

Remember how you wanted
The sound recordist
To make a loop,

Wildtrack of your feet
Through the wet
At the foot of a field?

Heaney is a poet who is, above all, committed to a sonorous poetics of sound and sense, deeply attuned to the aural design of poetry, and so it seems fitting to find him preoccupied here with how the ephemeral quality of passing sound can be harnessed perpetually and in a poem that deploys the sound-pattern of alliteration to create a memorable sound-world of its own; the foot-steps of the walker ('At the foot of a field') echoed in the line's anapaestic foot. As Heaney in 'Eelworks' listens to the 'rare, recorded voice' of Walter de la Mare, he must be reminded of how he too may live on in the form of the disembodied 'voice of the poet'.

Throughout, the visual arts are invoked for their ability to fix select images in the mind, to represent finite lived experience and thus counter-act the blank featurelessness of death. In 'Uncoupled' Heaney's parents are immured in photographic form, but, although the snapshots provide an imaginative entry-point into the past, each parent remains cut off, unable to interact. What is more, both parents are now doubly 'uncoupled' in the closed-off space of the poem. Later, in his elegy for the painter Nancy Wynne Jones Heaney remembers her working methods, enacting, through a chain of provisional, shifting metaphors, her transfiguration from being a living artist at work to the artist of posterity who

lives in art. Following on from this, the painter Colin Middleton narrows his eyes 'to size you up / As if you were a canvas', as life is already material for art in 'Loughanure'. With 'So this is what an afterlife can come to?' Heaney ponders the immortality of the artist and, by extension, his own immortalisation. In 'Derry Derry Down' Heaney paints scenes from life in vivid colours as the backdrop of his childhood – the 'storybook / Back kitchen' – becomes a 'Still life / On the red tiles / Of that floor'. 'Poems that are wanting to be pictures' is how Heaney has defined his domestic diptych 'Mossbawn: Dedication' from *North* (1975) as 'Sunlight' 'really wants to be a Vermeer' while 'The Seed Cutters' is 'a Brueghel that hasn't been painted yet' and painterly textures feature significantly in *Human Chain*.

'Film it in sepia, / Drip-paint it in blood' Heaney as film director commands in 'The Wood Road', in a bid to have this scenic thoroughfare remain stubbornly as it is; enhanced, but in essence, unchanging: 'Resurfaced, never widened'. The impulse to craft a life onto film is pointed up in lines from 'Wraiths', a poem that hinges on the shadow life, the condition of being between states:

Zoom in over our shoulders,
A tunnelling shot that accelerates and flares.
Discover us against weird brightness. Cut.

In 'In the Attic' Heaney, 'marooned / In his own loft', becomes Jim Hawkins from the *Treasure Island* of his formative school-days. Here again, moments from life are rendered eerily cinematic, as 'grandfather now appears, / His voice a-waver like the draught-prone screen // They'd set up in the Club Rooms earlier / For the matinee I've just come back from.' Memory is 'a-waver' too for the poet as pains to recall and recreate in language. Indeed, it may have been Heaney's work on the documentary *Out of the Marvellous* that prompted him to consider how the whole trajectory of a life and career may be artfully shaped on film. All of the

poems in *Human Chain* are self-conscious of their status as art, as textual representations, and all of these various screens, scrim, films and canvases create a distancing effect as the boundaries between life and art, word and image are kept in focus and refuse to simplify or dissolve.

More than anything else the collection pivots on the action of translation. 'Ask me to translate' is the opening injunction of 'The Riverbank Field' while 'waiting, watching' the young poet as fisherman is 'needy and ever needier for translation' in 'Route 110'. In keeping with the activity of fishing, the verb 'to translate' means to carry over or transfer from one person, place or condition to another. Translation, then, may occur from life into art, from world into word, from life into death and back, as well as from one language into another; 'between languages' is where the poet finds himself as he travels to the Gaeltacht. Heaney is a consummate translator in all of these senses and each of the poems here bear the marks of some form of translation. Thus, it must also be the human chain of literary and imaginative translation over the centuries and across the world that the title of the collection refers to. That the artistic enterprise is the work of translation and that it demands great exertion is clear. *Human Chain* contains a number of fine, load-bearing poems that display the effort of their own construction; the syntax is deliberately laboured at points and frequently poems open on obtrusive words such as 'Not', 'But', 'And', 'Had', or with an interrogative 'Who'. Words are weighted on the page, testament to the poet's arduous work to convey them from one realm to another. Often, poetic description is revealed as a site of effortful struggle as the poet is seen groping after the exact simile or metaphor only to have to resign himself to approximations, such as: 'Not coal dust, more the weighty grounds of coal,' in 'Slack', or in 'Death of a Painter' where the same formulation: 'Not Cézanne, / More Thomas Hardy' is then qualified further 'Not Hardy but a butterfly' and finally 'not a butterfly but Jonah'. 'Pray for the grace of accuracy / Vermeer gave to the sun's illumination', Robert Lowell wrote in his 'Epilogue'. In *Human Chain* poetic accuracy is

hard-won and the torsion and tensions involved in wresting words into poetry are deeply felt throughout.

Words are material for Heaney, loaded with music and meaning. It is their resonances, the 'back-echo' as he calls it – in 'Canopy' 'the hush and backwash and echo' – that comprise the formative energy of his work. Like Ward's light and sound installation, the highlights of the book are truly luminous, kinetic works of art and the two poems that, for me, stand out are the elegy for the musician David Hammond and 'A Kite for Aibhín'. The former has the poet listening to silence in a truly self-estranging moment as the fact of Hammond's absence is carried over into the final launching image of the airplane that has left its hangar and is now eternally suspended, air-borne. Hammond has been conveyed elsewhere, to a zone where words cannot reach and yet it is words that fill the silence and darkness of life as the poem takes the place of the song in the air. In 'A Kite for Aibhín' – based on Giovanni Pascoli's 'L'Aquilone' which Heaney has translated into English – the force of translation lifts off generating a dynamic, echoic current of words. Between worlds, the kite tugs between earth and sky, just as the poem of the same name moves across temporal and spatial zones and between languages. Charged with its own inter-textual energies this is the same kite that was flown by Heaney's father and is given to his sons in 'A Kite for Michael and Christopher' in *Station Island* while the 'long-tailed comet' remembers the comet of Heaney's 'Exposure' from *North*. In that earlier kite-flying poem the kite signified the 'strain' of grief that must be passed on from one generation to the next but here art replaces human emotion as the gift to be given over. Poetic tradition bears this kite-poem aloft as the 'white wing beating high' surely recalls the 'great wings beating still' in Yeats' poem of poetic inspiration and mastery 'Leda and the Swan'. Ultimately, the poem, like the kite, yearns for release; to escape the heavy, mortal control of the poet's 'hand [. . .] like a spindle / Unspooling'. Art requires both a holding fast to and a letting go, just as the poem-as-kite is a heavy, man-made structure that becomes light

when it lifts off the ground and breaks free. As long as the poet can 'imagine still' (as he puts it in 'In the Attic', with that word 'still' hovering between its two meanings) art is possible. What seems clear from his latest collection is that Heaney is thrusting his words far beyond the fact of his own silence and into the living, clamorous textual spaces of posterity.

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SARAH BENNETT

Paul Muldoon, *Maggot*

February 2011

Corrupt to Maggots

A collage of bones, greasy feathers and florescent debris recreates the form of a dead bird on the cover of Muldoon's rich and grim new book of poems, *Maggot*. It's a substantial collection, which draws together the Sylph pamphlet *When the Pie Was Opened* (2008), and the 'interim' volume and collaboration with photographer Norman McBeath, *Plan B* (2009). Such a disparate production history doesn't injure the coherence of *Maggot*. The book is also efficiently seasonal, recalling childhood Christmases and decorated by flights of geese, reindeer and the gifts of the Magi.

We are no doubt being tacitly invited to believe that 'Magi' and 'Maggot' share an etymological root; this volume exhibits Muldoon's continued fascination with curious lexical relationships. 'Maggot' is variously applied, and in the poem of that name – a sequence of 14-liners – 'whim' is the connecting rhyme word. This rarer definition is as important to the volume as the entomological. The circumspect detective of *Why Brownlee Left* (the 1980 collection which opened with a poem called 'Whim') branches into amateur forensic entomology ('Who knew 'forensic' derived from forum . . .'), in 'Yup', and one of *Maggot*'s stand-out long poems, 'The Humors of Hakone'. In that sequence, 'maggot' functions as a meta-poetic ambiguity, containing as it does the sense of the birth – or imaginative

conception – of the poem, as well as its de-composition. Which here could also be a form of critical de-*construction*, as the speaker regrets it is 'Too late to insist that the body of a poem is no less sacred / than a temple with its banner gash / though both stink to high heaven.'

Double entendre amusement trumps philology in one of *Maggot*'s more gratuitous offerings, 'Balls', which pretends to mourn

the loss of a sense of the Latin root and stem
that would help us weigh in on which came first – be it testis as 'witness'
or testis as the 'ball' on which the oath is sworn

as it delightedly links euphemisms for testicles and mendacity ('I listened to the gobblers / while they shook their wattles / and talked a load of old cobblers[.]')

The frequency of casual sexual references in this volume is a return – perhaps unwelcome – to an earlier Muldoon. There are many warmer familiarities. 'When the Pie was Opened' corresponds with a now established mode of Muldoonian elegy. Cancer has become an all-too-familiar aggressor in his poetry, and in *Maggot* we are told that 'melanoma has relaunched its campaign / in a friend I once dated.' 'When the Pie was Opened' begins with fleshed swords and fighting talk, in the company of Hector, Ajax, Ferdia and Cuchulainn. In the fullness of the poem this is tempered by a witty poignancy, recalling the helplessly tautological image at the end of 'Incantata', Muldoon's elegy to his former lover, Mary Farl Powers ('that you might reach out, arrah / and take in your ink-stained hands my own hands stained with ink.');

That your olive-drab body in a shirt
of olive-drab
would be sufficient, after your radiotherapy,
to trigger a dirty bomb alert

At Canal and Mulberry sets the stage
for another twinge at the gauge
on my own instrument bank.

Strains of Yeatsian whimsy can also be heard – ‘Would that the world were indeed to be broken out/ of its crust like a hedgehog baked in clay’.

The long poem delivered the ending flourish to Muldoon’s earlier collections, and it has become increasingly integral to his poetics. *Horse Latitudes* (2006) contained four long sequence poems; *Maggot* is punctuated by six. In returning to this mode, Muldoon does not, thankfully, remain fixated on its more banal temptations. A self-replicating aesthetic, long in development, was heard insistently in *Moy Sand and Gravel* (2002) and *Horse Latitudes*. ‘As’ from the earlier volume listed a series of increasingly inconsequential successions (‘As transhumance gives way to trance / and shaman gives way to Santa [. . .] and Calvin gives way to Calvin Klein [. . .] I give way to you’), and ‘The Old Country’, from the later collection, followed a dense, repetitious pattern of inward turns (‘Every time was time in the nick / just as every nick was a nick in time’). Critics have found in Muldoon the ‘self-inwoven’ simile which Empson identified in Shelley – a formula where, analogies not coming quickly enough to the poet’s excited imagination, he ‘compares the thing to a vaguer or more abstract notion of itself, or points out that it is its own nature’; this has seemed in danger, in Muldoon’s more recent work, of being overtaken by something more tiredly self-regarding.

It has been noted that in Muldoon’s elegy for his mother, ‘Yarrow’, a preoccupation with the cancerous bears upon the poem’s formal complexities, its numerical patterns, replications and reproductions. ‘When the Pie was Opened’ accords to a basic, more traditional formula, in which the last line of a poem compels the first of the next in sequence. It seems to catch itself in the neat simplicity of its formal game when, at the end of the fifth fragment, our subject is found ‘enmeshed in a snare’. Whilst the poem’s ending effects a circular return, the snare (‘through

which I myself might squeeze / on my hands and knees [. . .] in which we find ourselves enmeshed’) is the sticky groove in which we remain.

There is plenty of exhilaratingly new material in *Maggot*. ‘The Watercooler’ is a syncopated, seven-line version of a sestina reflecting upon an office Christmas party. There is one consistent rhyme word, which chimes with a transforming other in each stanza, and one strand of corresponding syllables and assonance. Rhyming pairs (‘watercooler’ and ‘carpooler’) stage a two-stanza residence, overlap with a succeeding pair, and then retire. There seems to be an attendant, thematic imperative for each of the seven stanzas to contain sleaze, flora and fauna – an imperative which holds for much of the wider volume.

Muldoon signals new imaginative territory in ‘The Side Project’, where the nefarious, dizzyingly mobile space of the nineteenth-century American circus responds to the Coney Island amusement park of the opening poem ‘Plan B’. Fran Brearton recognised, in a *Tower Poetry* review of *Horse Latitudes*, that the experience of reading Muldoon has changed in the Internet age. And just as the onus on the critic has lightened, so the careful research of a volume such as *Meeting the British* (1987), or the opaque allusion of *Madoc* (1990) is demystified, and replaced, in some of *Maggot*’s long poems, by a visible Wikipedia trail. Yet while the feat of gathering and connecting historical personages such as the Union General William Sherman and the circus manager and entrepreneur Adam Forepaugh might now seem hollow, ‘The Side Project’ manages to perform an imaginative and contextual triumph. The poem is broadly a love letter written from one circus artiste, named Frog Boy, to another, Human Chimera – a pair who have broken free of the main troupe during American Reconstruction. The idiom is satisfyingly pitched to the circus truism (‘No Human Skeleton or Bearded Lady will primp / less for a small show than a great’), and ‘The Side Project’ is a tale of infidelity (casually insinuated in the title), betrayal and greed, set in couplets of oblique, consonantal rhyme, which over 10 compelling pages, extends to biblical proportions. A curious Catholic sub-plot starring the longest

servicing pope, Pius IX (whose *Syllabus Errorum* appeared in 1864 – the same year as the Battle of Atlanta), brims close to the surface. Muldoon rekindles the intrigue surrounding Pius's involvement in the American Civil War, and his rumoured (unverified) endorsement of the 'Confederate States of America'. The language of the poem, hovering between piety and play, seems to be gesturing at an extant paradox of American society; Frog Boy's declared impulse to 'give anything a try' accommodates 'both sudatory / and Psalter'.

The current profile picture on Muldoon's official website shows the poet felicitously squeezed between the President and Michelle Obama; it has become traditional for each of Muldoon's collections since his removal to the US in 1987 to be declared more 'naturalised' than the last. Mindful of the repetition, I would maintain that *Maggot* is more completely and comfortably embedded in America, its history, society and culture, than previous volumes. Two dedications – a sonnet for Richard Wilbur and a sestina for John Ashbery – are perhaps overdue acknowledgment of Muldoon's company in the American Academy of Arts and Letters. And in the last, 'Capriccio in E minor for Blowfly and Strings', a likeness is revealed between a Muldoonian wit, idiom and range of reference, and some of Ashbery's deadpan performances, such as 'Daffy Duck in Hollywood'.

'Capriccio in E minor for Blowfly and Strings' notices, with a look at a 'flaying' Jonathan Swift, who used 'a lyric ode' to 'slate' John Vanbrugh's town house, that 'all youthful rebels tire / of their youthful spirits'. And, as 'satire' is linked to 'tire' and 'retire' in this sestina, we realise that behind the energy and dynamism of this volume is a note of belatedness, and a fear of expiration, from a poet in his 60th year. 'The Humors of Hakone' continually misses the substance of its investigation, built upon the anaphoric strain 'Too late . . .' Each poem in the 'Maggot' sequence advances from a nostalgic past imperfect: 'I used to wait for another ambushade / with only my hotwire shim. / Now I'm no less a blade / than Pistol, Bardolph or Nym.' And the action of 'The Side Project', already

a far historical reach, is surveyed from a distance of four decades. A repeated refrain in the Swift poem alluded to in Muldoon's sestina brings us back to the volume's title, as 'animals of largest size / Corrupt to maggots, worms, and flies'. Yet 'Capriccio' also brings us back to 'whim', and *Maggot* persuades us that whimsy is not an exclusively youthful occupation. That the maggots of fancy in this volume are replicating far beyond the maggots of decay is an encouraging portent.

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CHLOE STOPA-HUNT

David Harsent, *Night*

May 2011

Night is David Harsent's tenth collection of poems; his first since *Legion*, which won the Forward Prize in 2005 for its anguished, ambiguous war poetry. The new book begins before it's expected to, a short, untitled lyric preceding the acknowledgements and table of contents. These twelve lines stand as an epigraph to the main body of poems, sketching *Night's* motley cast of ghosts: the gambolling inhabitants of that 'Happy Hour which lasts from dusk to dawn'. This collection explores, more intimately than any of Harsent's previous work, the premise that 'darkness unquenched is our true endowment' ('Elsewhere'), so the transfiguration of night into an extended Happy Hour may seem disingenuous. Yet the essence of Harsent's dream-time, that slippery space in which many of the book's finest poems are sited, is its mutability of tone, its see-sawing from tenderness to horror.

As early as 1998, in *A Bird's Idea of Flight*, Harsent perceived that 'the kind of hocus-pocus dreams deliver' ('Good Weather on the Lizard') could offer fascinating if refractory material, and much of *Night* is concerned with presenting the irrational and hyper-emotive territory of dreamscapes. One sequence of poems, 'The Queen Bee Canticles', tells the reader that 'this was dream-time, remember / when things come fast

and smudged' ('The Apiarist Dreams of the Queen'), and many poems are rich in what Harsent calls 'the sort of dream-fluke / that changes everything' ('Elsewhere'). Dreaming, we rescind control, and *Night* is a take-no-prisoners collection, a book that holds the reader's attention forcibly. By the time we reach the end of that introductory poem, its narrator is announcing that 'the time to be gone has gone'; like a victim of Coleridge's *Mariner*, the reader of *Night* 'cannot chuse but hear' all that is to follow.

Harsent invokes the same motif in the collection's last poem, 'Elsewhere', as its protagonist – dreamer and drinker, lover and guilty leaver – is drawn by memory's unrelenting tug through nearly thirty pages of fluid, devastating septets. Reaching the sea, he meets a 'sad old sack' of a man:

I start to get to my feet, but he takes me hard by the arm.
'You of all people . . .' His hand drops, but the wet
of his eye, reflecting a lick of flame,
red in the iris and deep there, holds me.

The tales he's compelled to relate are at first archetypal: 'the maiden and the loathly worm / [. . .]the gallant roped to the mast'. But they are superseded by the less familiar story of a 'man who spoke his mind, / fastened his eyes on darkness, and hunkered down in a cage / of secrets'. The narrator of the poem is being offered his own tale: his are the eyes fixed on darkness, the darkening skies and the dark cinema-screen of reminiscence. Harsent's poems collapse the boundaries separating creators and consumers of narrative. In 'Live Theatre', there is ultimately no meaningful distinction between actor and audience member: 'The leading man's / in the seat next to yours, worn out, his head in his hands'. The death-bed dragged onto the stage is also the death-bed in 'Black', the scene of thoughts turned inside out ('It's been a lifetime coming but now you understand, / or think you do, why what you wanted wasn't what you

planned'), and consummate intimacy achieved; the dying speaker feeding from Death's own hand.

Harsent's narrators even seem eager to borrow their author's organising forms. In the eponymous 'Night', the sleepless vigil-keeper is charged with an unusual work of accountancy:

his duty then to check

statistics, to itemise the download, to keep track
of the trade in flesh, of the how and where and when of the recent dead

Harsent is a great list-maker. He favours the extended sentence, many clauses long, and the poetic catalogue; both allow him to construct breath-taking chains of images which spill across the restrained stanzaic forms (usually couplets or tercets) he typically prefers. This amplification swoops inventively between registers, absorbing everything in its path. In 'Rota Fortunae', the progress of the inexorable wheel is 'simply the way of death':

is death

as shiftless shadow, death as that hint in the air, as the first

waking thought, death as a face in the street,
a face in a photo-album long since lost,
is death the dreamer, death the locksmith, death now cast

as a friend in need, death as the thin
end of the wedge, is the fuddle of death, the way death sidles in
with a nod and a cough, is death self-styled,

is the niff, the nub, the rub of death[. . .]

This rapid-fire juggling of death is tinged with a seventeenth-century sensibility: Harsent, like Donne, might be caught exclaiming, 'How witty's ruin!', half-admiring and half-afraid. 'Rota Fortunae' articulates *Night's* need to fuse merciless determinacy – 'a deal // struck at the hour of your birth' – with randomness, or 'giving yourself over to chance'. In 'Elsewhere', the universe telegraphs its annihilation of this fragile balance: watching the sun sink 'like a broken wheel', it becomes clear to both dreamer and reader that deciding to surrender to chance was always an illusion. As in *Ascending and Descending* (1960), Escher's lithograph of an endless staircase, the dreamer re-treads an inescapable pattern: his life.

In 'Contre-jour', one narrator seems to sum up the book's katabatic progress with his assertion that 'My descent was a kind of dance'. *Night* is infused with the capacity for such reversals, always threatening or promising a change of key: even joy is 'hazardous' ('Live Theatre') and 'a slippery slope' ('Elsewhere'). Harsent recognises that ending the sort of journeys he traces will always more-or-less mean pulling the wool over his reader's eyes; the promise of metamorphosis, then, is his best resistance to the pressure of *telos*. Old doubts about journeys, dating back to his first collection (*A Violent Country*, 1969), have shaped *Night* profoundly. 'The Hut in Question' illustrates a quest – the narrator visiting Edward Thomas's writing hut – yet attacks questing's egotism: 'its self-regard[. . .] its need to know / the worst and wear its sorrows like a badge'. These quests have ceased to satisfy, or perhaps to occur at all: 'Elsewhere' affirms that 'despite everything your journey was no true test / since the road that took you away is the self-same road / that has brought you round again'. Here, Harsent uses the idiom of 'big poems' in no spirit of mere imitation. On the contrary, he re-fashions the idealised circularity of Eliot's *Little Gidding* – 'the end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time' – into something restless, dissatisfied, and infinitely contemporary. *Night* is anchored by expertly-observed material detail, yet its prevailing tone

is one of evasive and grief-stricken mysticism. Harsent has written a bookful of *Dream Songs* for our time, a collection revealing again and again that its author is at the height of his powers.

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DAVID WHEATLEY

Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts,
Edgelands: Journeys into England's True Wilderness and
Harriet Tarlo (ed.), *The Ground Aslant: An Anthology
of Radical Landscape Poetry*

June 2011

'No Idiocy of Quietude':

Landscapes of the Edge

In his poem 'To the Snipe', John Clare salutes that small brown wader's knack of going about its business far from the haunts of men. In its secluded nests:

Security pervades

From year to year,
Places untrodden lie
Where man nor boy nor stock hath ventured near
– Nought gazed on but the sky

And fowl that dread
The very breath of man.

Pursuing the comparison of poet and bird throughout, 'To the Snipe' builds to a visionary defence of the imagination working in isolation: the bird's 'calm and cordial lot' teaches Clare 'That in the dreariest places peace will be /A dweller and a joy.' His confinement in asylums first in Essex and later Northamptonshire is well known, but 'To the Snipe' dates from his time in Northborough, in a cottage a few miles down the road from his native Helpston, and purchased for him by his London patrons. It was an early sign of his mental instability that he should experience this minor uprooting (one might have thought) as such a creative disaster, but as a poem of exile 'To the Snipe' succeeds wonderfully in turning the poem itself into a nest, a refuge, an ecosystem.

As the editor of a 2007 selection of Clare's work and noted poet-twitcher, Paul Farley has given a lot of thought to the question of the ecosystems inhabited by the contemporary poem. Co-authored by Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts, *Edgelands: Journeys into England's True Wilderness* is a timely study of England's shifting landscapes today and the poetic opportunities they enable. The edgelands (the term derives from the cultural geographer Marion Shoard) are neither city nor country but the undervalued spaces round the fringes of both, the business parks and motorway services stations, the builder's yards and railway embankments. A *donnée* of the edgelands is that they are overlooked, never the easiest proposition in a country that boasts the highest density of CCTV cameras in Europe. 'Most of it has never been seen', Roy Fisher wrote of his native Birmingham in *City* in 1961: the intervening decades have taken these spaces from invisibility to the surveillance state without any noticeable interval of being merely there. How to fight back? Inverting our usual relationship of passivity towards our day-to-day surroundings might be a start. In 2007 London-based artist Manu Luksch made a film based entirely on CCTV images of herself obtained under the Data Protection Act, and Farley and Symmons Roberts too suggest all manner of subversive re-enchantments of their edgelands. They propose relocating Arvon writing retreats from the deep country-

side to a 'Touchbase' Meeting Centre in Swindon and cause something resembling panic in the custodian of a yard full of pallets with their over-the-top enthusiasm for those giant wooden coasters.

A key to the edgelands is the clash between public and private. The Enclosure Acts of the early nineteenth century were one of the great disasters of Clare's life, cancelling grazing rights on commonly held land and transferring over a fifth of the country into private ownership. The election that returned the current Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition forms a backdrop to *Edgelands*, and since coming to office the Con-Dems have feasted wolfishly on the public sector on a scale not seen since the Thatcher regime of the 1980s. Hundreds of libraries have been selected for closure and large tracts of public woodland earmarked for sell-off, though protests appear to have stalled the latter decision at least (for now). The Conservative privatisation of public spaces has a literary dimension too. When former Tory Secretary of State for Education Kenneth Baker published his *Faber Book of Landscape Poetry* in 2000, the volume came decked out in endpapers mapping its poets onto the landscape: Marvell in Hull, Wordsworth in the Lakes, Betjeman in Cornwall. This is landscape as birthright, with no place for meditations on the matter of Albion from interlopers or birds of passage such as Pound, Lowell or Ed Dorn, to list only Anglophone visitors. It does not take a Tory grandee to write poets out of the landscape, however. Cultural amnesia does the trick too: Owen Sheers' *Poet's Guide to Britain* (2010), a tie-in for a BBC television series, offered a poetic map of the territory that finds room for first-collection debutantes but none for Geoffrey Hill and Basil Bunting. Where Farley and Symmons Roberts are concerned, amnesia is the message rather than the medium: the edgelands are delivered to us pre-forgotten, falling outside traditional categories of habitation, attachment and nostalgia. Perhaps they are an attempt to find romantically twenty-first virgin territory, with the role of noble savage transferring from the last uncontacted Amazon tribe to the homeless man sleeping under a motorway flyover.

On closer inspection, the concept of virgin territory has a habit of turning out slightly more second-hand than we were promised. Someone has always got there before us, leaving their own time capsules or graffiti tags. Or devoted his whole career to them, even, as Iain Sinclair has done in *Lights Out for the Territory*, *London Orbital* and many other books in the same vein. It's more than a little odd that Farley and Symmons Roberts don't acknowledge this, though they direct an aside at the misanthropy of unnamed 'psychogeographers' who have ventured onto their patch. There is an unarticulated argument going on here over a different territory entirely, that of contemporary British poetry: Sinclair is a polemical opponent of the nominal mainstream in British verse, his radical alternative to which can be found in the 1996 anthology *Conductors of Chaos*. The term 'mainstream' has been eroded (biodegraded, even) beyond all critical usefulness in recent years, but a certain kind of British pastoral with its roots in Edward Thomas does persist in the work of a writer such as Andrew Motion, though lacking anything like Thomas's darker edge. Farley and Symmons Roberts' self-description as writers in the 'lyric tradition' places them on one side of this opposition, where the more jagged stylings of the psychogeographers are concerned at least (who are not confined to Iain Sinclair: other names would include Chris Tarrant, Allen Fisher, Brian Catling and Bill Griffiths).

The poets quoted by Farley and Symmons Roberts on their travels, from Larkin to Sean O'Brien, confirm their differences with Sinclair, though the laureate of Whitechapel would hardly cavil at their use of Anglo-Welsh modernist David Jones's wonderful 'A, a, a, Domine Deus' as an example of prospecting for the sacred in unwonted surroundings ('For it is easy to miss Him /at the turn of a civilisation'). Geoffrey Hill's *Mercian Hymns* also feature, that archetypal modern raid on Albion's myth-kitty, whose presiding spirit, the eighth-century Offa, King of Mercia, is described as 'overlord of the M5'. The question is how to bed the mythic down in the contemporary, and how to negotiate the twin

risks of cultic obscurity and the drudgery of signposted 'relevance'. Sinclair's compulsive mythopoeia often skirts self-parody, and an innocent South Sea Islander might be forgiven for forming the impression from his work that today's Britain is peopled exclusively by art-school dropouts, radical film-makers and walking-wounded underground poets. But something is lost too in Farley and Symmons Roberts' more user-friendly style, giving their book the feel of a documentary-in-waiting (and as a sticker on the cover reminds us, their book has already been 'heard on BBC Radio 4'). References to 'the poet Robert Frost' rather than plain old Robert Frost are not confidence-inspiring; nor are the slightly too frequent uses of the book's title, reminiscent of a student essay underlining the point a little too obviously at every opportunity. If the psychogeographer's Gothicizing of his landscapes is distorting, the question is whether Farley and Symmons Roberts have removed one layer of authorial overlay only to replace it with another, and whether a landscape free of such projections is ever possible or even desirable.

A good test of this is the representation of the natural world. Whether offering tips on the best sewage plants from which to view Lapland buntings, or threading the names of wild flowers round those of well-known retail outlets, Farley and Symmons Roberts assemble a rich biosphere in *Edgelands*. If you want to see a fox in Britain today, try a city (one was recently found living on the seventy-second floor of London's tallest skyscraper). The edgelanders finds stone curlews laying their eggs on the beds of working gravel quarries, and bee-colonies thriving on raggedy clumps of buddleia (as in the US, British bee colonies have experienced worrying collapse). Nature and modernity stage strange meetings: tech-savvy twitchers resort to ipod luring, using recordings of birdsong to lure their targets into the open. Human edgeland-dwellers are in shorter supply. This raises the spectre of another important *Edgelands* forebear, W.G. Sebald, who trail-blazed his baggage of historical melancholy through solitary rambles along the East Anglian coast in *The Rings of Saturn* but, no less than Farley and Symmons Roberts, often

found ghosts and absentees more manageable than the merely living. For all his furrow-browed meditations on history and genocide, a more startling discovery to emerge from Sebald's *Rings of Saturn* is that even large market towns in East Anglia are apparently devoid of inhabitants. The same might be said of another edgeland poet, John Burnside, whose response to the ring roads and retail parks of contemporary Britain has been to withdraw to a more mystically-tinged, auratic darkness than Farley and Symmons Roberts explore, out beyond the CCTV cameras. The trade-off is between glamour and habitability, the pregnant dark and the street lights' antiseptic orange. It is an opposition that tells us much about the nature of place in poetry now, whether in British and Irish writing or beyond, and not one that *Edgelands* can claim to have resolved.

'Even now there are places where a thought might grow', runs the oft-quoted first line of Derek Mahon's 'A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford' (*Edgelands* quotes it too), a poem whose unease with the concept of roots and attachment in the modern world sent its author down disused Peruvian mine-shafts in search of uncolonised spaces. The murderous toll of the Northern Irish Troubles provided an obvious incentive for this imaginative *Wanderlust*, and other early Mahon poems too abound in hermits (if hermits can abound), waste lands and deserts, while in more recent times he has relaxed into more welcoming locales, as in the West Cork ecopoetics of his *Life on Earth*. The depopulating temptation is not one Farley and Symmons Roberts have entirely resisted, and when the denizens of the edgelands do speak, the results are mixed and sometimes awkward (though I was sorry we never got to hear from the poet who fell in love with cooling towers). It would be unfair, however, to suggest that the edgelands are apolitical spaces, reservoirs of untapped melancholia where Farley and Symmons Roberts go to ponder their favourite Richard Billingham photographs and John Clare poems while elsewhere David Cameron gets on with politics-as-usual, the 'greed /and garbage (...) too thick-strewn /To be swept up now' that Larkin, that classic edgelands-

poet, foresaw in 'Going, Going'. When it gets its romanticising urges under control, this is a wonderfully materialist book, offering a primer in the stuff and matter of how we live now, with chapters on dens, wire, containers and sewage: a *Parti pris des choses* for the Google Earth generation. But what, finally, the politics of the edgelands are remains very much for up grabs. Protestors shivering under tarpaulin in treehouses make a picturesque addition to any edgelands genre scene, but as Farley and Symmons Roberts have implicitly argued, this is a landscape that can adapt pretty well to the palimpsest of a motorway extension or high-speed rail link.

Perhaps, then, the most authentic edgeland combat zone will remain on the page, in the fierce territorial disputes that range round landscape and ecowriting today. I was reminded of this recently when I posted an essay on poetry and birds on my blog, and was sent a copy of his text 'Graphology 300: Against "Nature Writing"' by John Kinsella, a full-on diatribe against the evils and imperialist designs of nature writing: 'Nature writing equals the new racketeering (...) Nature writing is a departmental party trick.' There is always the risk of the nature poet appropriating a landscape or passing flock of birds to his or her all-too-human purposes, reducing them to impotent tokens of our post-industrial alienation. But while examples of such commodification are easily produced (allow me to nominate Mary Oliver's geese), it is no idle provocation to wonder how any one kind of poetry, no matter how anarcho-vegan-pacifist-*avant-garde*, can wholly escape the charge of treating nature as material, as an object for poetic use, a testing ground for literary mastery. We might want to substitute 'opportunity' for 'object', and 'coexistence' for 'use', but the question of artistic will-to-power is not so easily disposed of as all that. It is there in Shelley and Wordsworth, but there too in Oppen, Alice Oswald and John Kinsella. Oppen's 'Psalm' strikes me as displaying a luminously ethical relationship towards its scene of some deer in a wood, down to the lovely 'that' in the line 'that they are there!' – giving us not just the deer, but the

principle of their presence, beyond the poet's personal investment in the scene. Yet none the less, the poet is there too, as surely as Lawrence watching his snake crawl to a watering hole or Bishop peering at her moose through the bus window, bringing the poem to the beautiful pitch of controlled simplicity from which it can then work to unravel our crudely anthropocentric view of the natural world.

The dilemma is nicely phrased by Peter Riley in a couplet from his sequence 'Western States': 'We turn our backs and the deer /come to drink in the dark.' Once again the elusive deer are there, but in the dark and only when the observers turn their backs; but here too there is a framing 'we', on whose approach and withdrawal the poem's epiphanic payoff heavily depends. 'Western States' is included in Harriet Tarlo's anthology *The Ground Aslant*, a volume that no less than *Edgelands* reports from a marginal zone, as summarized by its subtitle, *An Anthology of Radical Landscape Poetry*. Introducing the book, Tarlo admits to trouble with terminology: landscape poetry is not pastoral poetry is not ecopoetry. While the exact dividing lines are matter for debate, readers more use to the Kenneth Baker map of the territory will recognise immediately how far from the usual nature trail we have strayed when confronted by the work of Colin Simms, Tony Baker, Wendy Mulford or Helen Macdonald. These are poets who publish with Shearsman and Reality Street rather than the bigger commercial presses; in these circles the librarian poet called Larkin would be not Philip but Peter, of Warwick University not Hull, and the author of collections such as *Terrain Seed Scarcity* and *Lessways Least Scarce Among*.

Through its very existence alone, *The Ground Aslant* helps correct a number of widespread but groundless assumptions. The first is that British experimental writing operates in a realm either of rarefied abstraction or metropolitan indifference to anything beyond the city limits (though, in passing, it would be an amusing parlour game to work out who the most nature-phobic poet is: Elizabeth Bishop liked to twit Frank Bidart for his aversion to the countryside, and O'Hara's

distrust of even 'a blade of grass 'unless I know there's a subway handy' makes him a contender too). A second misconception is that landscape poetry belongs, anyway, to an organic tradition (that of Frost and Edward Thomas), onto which experimental writers trespass at their peril: if Pound or Olson or their British followers write about nature it goes against type, runs the argument, whereas Frost, Thomas and their contemporary heirs simply belong by river and tarn, in the natural order of things. A third assumption is that experimental writing proceeds from theory to practice, bypassing any individual sensibility and producing clone poetry much as urban planners now produce clone towns, when in reality Peter Riley is as different from Frances Presley or Nicholas Johnson as Gary Snyder is from Robert Hass is from Mary Oliver.

Active in the small-press scene since in the late 60s, Peter Riley is the most senior poet to feature in *The Ground Aslant*, and one whose frank emotional register ('The entire brochure of love and all') belies the terminal *froidueur* associated in the public mind with Cambridge poetry. Influenced early in his career by T. F. Powys, Riley is no less a rugged individualist than the author of *Mr Weston's Good Wine*, and a sceptical observer of British poetry orthodoxies, whether radical or otherwise. His *oeuvre* is a sizable one, and the ten-page cutting offered by Tarlo can't help appearing short on breathing space, though anything that drives readers to seek out fine collections such as *The Llŷn Writings*, *A Map of Farings and Alstonefield* (among the most audacious of British long poems in recent years), can only be a good thing. Riley has always spoken up for the poets of the 40s, many of whom were swept aside by the astringent rationalism of the Movement years that followed, and in its omnium-gatherum capaciousness *Alstonefield* reconnects with the energies of 40s poets such as Nicholas Moore and Lynette Roberts:

Silence lines the horizon, glowing to a lost
nation, snow-brushed fields glossing the vein
to a hole in tense, a history of light

or moving pain to paper an agreement is touched,
that death shall have no choice.

Colin Simms' ambitious and philosophical musings on pine martens and otters will remind many readers of late Robinson Jeffers, while Thomas A. Clark's sequence *The Hundred Thousand Places* refines an idiom from which all traces of the first person appear to have been surgically excised. Here are fields unfussily algow with the landscaper's gaze, summoning not just Clark's North-Eastern Scottish seaboard but Beckett's 'Dieppe', with its own echo of Hölderlin's 'Der Spaziergang': 'with measured steps /with deliberation /walk the quiet path /the between time /the grey fold'. Looking is no merely passive activity for these poets: 'I can do more dangerous things /just with my eyes', writes Zoë Skoulding. Written mainly in short prose paragraphs, Peter Larkin's work too has affinities with Beckett, specifically the late Beckett of *Lessness* or *The Lost Ones*, using its pared-back syntax to mark off small defended spaces for the imagination:

Some livery to simplify a real shank through the wards, power-
lines at a slope of conduction with rapid incomplete owing of
ground. To blow with spreading on the grid some green flutter
of smaller rigid body.

Helen Macdonald is among the most engrossing and distinctive writers in Britain today. Her 2000 collection *Shaler's Fish* seems to me a small modern classic. A historian of science and the author of a cultural history of falcons, she writes poems that are not without talons of their own (she also lives in Cambridge 'with her goshawk, Mabel'). Forgoing any kind of cosying up to the reader or scene-setting preliminaries, they plunge us into the beautiful and savage world of the raptors she describes with such scientific precision. Moments of sudden avian illumination ('a spark that meets the idea of itself') flare up amid an arcane lexis and

dizzying torsions of syntax. Rarely are epiphanies of weightlessness more earned than in Macdonald's poems, the moment at which they 'let the wind renege & fields upturn to sky' coming only after long, hard looks at the insuperable species divide between human and bird. 'Skipper/Copper' ends:

No idiocy of quietude brings it rolling over into ice
an embellishment crackling between the same fingers
paper refuses the body but the line moves out gently
breathing almost covers the whole of the sound
pheromones motion to close or disguise closer

mottled as paper but safer, rolled
like a Hartz bird & the mouth always closed

With their insistence on the bird's closed beak, these lines take a stand against the tyranny of speaking-for and anthropomorphization, stressing the process of translation from the natural world ('paper refuses the body'). The refusal of pastoral equivalences between the human and the non-human is a running theme in *The Ground Aslant*. *Contra* Pound, 'It won't cohere', argues Tony Baker; these are songs of the natural world tuned to the twelve-tone rather than the diatonic scale, Messiaen's *Catalogue d'oiseaux* rather than Vaughan Williams' 'Lark Ascending'. But these are still recognisably John Clare's fields, where peace can be 'A dweller and a joy.' As Elizabeth Bletsoe writes in 'Here Hare Here', 'the gates are open /& all the paths are clear.'

Many modern poets, from Bishop to Ciaran Carson have pored lovingly over maps, to the point where the metaphor threatens to lose all meaning, but *Edgelands* and *The Ground Aslant* are both, in their different ways, field maps of territories still in a state of evolution and flux. What could be truer to poetic psychogeography than the 'ground-truther', as discussed in *Edgelands*, the private eye-meets-cartographer whose job

it is to walk the ground and ensure that this lamp post, that garden fence really are where the map says they are? Many a slip is possible between landscape and map, with even the most reputable cartographers including deliberate mistakes on maps as deterrents to plagiarism. Excessive reliance in maps' trustworthiness is never a good idea, in any case, as suggested by the sub-genre of contemporary news stories involving people driving off piers on being told to do so by their satnav. No less importantly, we must attend to the blank spaces on the map too, or the spaces we fancy to be blank, the nothings that are there as well as the nothings that aren't, to invert Wallace Stevens. Several years ago, a quest to find Britain's most featureless place ended with the coronation of Square SE830220 on Landranger map 112, in Ousefleet near Scunthorpe, lacking a ditch, a fence, a stream or anything else. 'There has never been anything of great interest here', commented a deadpan local, though in the paradoxical way of these things, to trumpet its obscurity is also to rob it of this very quality. I've been there, as it happens, and with its proximity to the Ouse, down the river from Kingston-upon-Hull, it is strongly redolent of Peter Didsbury's 'Three Lakes by Humber'. The vast, muddy Humber estuary produces temporary islands, some lasting decades, but destined to be swept away as the tidal patterns change. The dividing lines in British poetry that appear to mark Farley and Symmons Roberts off so sharply from the poets of *The Ground Aslant* follow cultural channels we also do well not to see as permanent. Philip Larkin, mascot of one poetic tribe and fall-guy of the other, knew all about the transience of our landscapes, whether in the aerial panoramas of 'Here' (another Humber estuary poem) or 'Friday Night in the Royal Station Hotel', with its beautiful dialectic of company and solitude, city and country, the familiar and the uncanny:

In shoeless corridors, the lights burn. How
Isolated, like a fort, it is –

The headed paper, made for writing home
(If home existed) letters of exile: *Now
Night comes on. Waves fold behind villages.*

It hardly matters whether home exists or not, so long as the letters keep coming. But as these two books suggest, the bolt-holes of exile remain well-stocked with lively correspondents.

© David Wheatley, 2011

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Harriet Tarlo (ed.), *The Ground Aslant: An Anthology of Radical Landscape Poetry*,
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VIDYAN RAVINTHIRAN

Bernard O'Donoghue, *Farmers Cross*

October 2011

The ochre-coloured farmhouse at Gort Athaig
doesn't need much enhancing; but there's a story too.

('Menagerie')

It's not just that Bernard O'Donoghue doesn't like to insist on the poetic significance of his subject-matter – he's out-and-out self-deprecating, somehow avidly deflationary. The opening to 'Menagerie' seems to say – who am I, the poet, to try and confer significance on a world so manifestly capable of doing it for itself? And yet the poem goes on, because 'there's a story' to that painterly farmhouse – a narrative rooted in place which pre-exists the poet's ratiocinations and may outlast him. To touch upon that story – which I won't spoil here – is all the poet trusts himself to do. Stories are important; as he writes at the end of 'History', summarising what has gone before –

... never forget
that you once read something by someone
who said they had known when they were young
someone who said their father told them
they had been to Abraham Lincoln's funeral.

Reading these lines, with their uncharacteristic claim as to the value of the poem itself, I recall O'Donoghue's style of reading his poems out loud. Many poets introduce their poems with a little preamble explaining possible obscurities, but O'Donoghue's stories tend to actually deploy the same content. The effect, when we do then hear the poem, can be, again, deflationary, rather like Percy in *Blackadder* regaling us belatedly with his story about how he was almost eaten by a hammerhead shark – 'Well, ma'am, I fell into the water; and was almost eaten by a shark. And the funny thing is, its head was exactly the same shape as a hammer!' Percy doesn't know how to tell a story; O'Donoghue, rather, refuses to read – or to write – his poems in a grand manner. He never lets us forget that they operate on the same plane as the true and tall tales he often takes for subject-matter. When he mentions, in 'Magic Lantern', 'a comet, like an old-style, opened-out / girl's hairgrip', it's characteristic of him that the movement is from the cosmic to the homely, and not the other way round. I can't imagine any other writer coming up with that comparison – except possibly Hopkins, in his journal prose.

Eschewing both out-there lyricism and the vague contentless melodrama common to much contemporary poetry, O'Donoghue relies on more subtle textural effects. In doing so, he appears to obey Elizabeth Bishop's advice that one shouldn't take 'the catastrophic way out' when writing a poem – where this might mean the sudden ascription of significance, a barn-door swinging open on the kind of starry epiphany, or revelation of personal damage, which is meant to convince us that the plain-style stuff that has led up to it really is that strange, unplaceable thing, the contemporary poem. O'Donoghue is plain-style all the way, though with skilful ruffles:

At home there's no space left on the walls
to hang the new pictures I'd like to introduce.
I move things round, hopelessly: the icon
of the virgin is now over the stairs,

her matt, pastel gaze reproving us,
which before caught the light from the fire.

(‘Exhibitions’)

That last line captures the sound of extinguished significance so gently – it’s to do with the play of ‘before’ and ‘fire’, and ‘caught’ and ‘light’ – that it’s easy to miss. Another poem in this collection, ‘Vocation’, ends with the protagonist

. . . sat alone in the back
benches of the unheated chapel, hour
after hour, staring for inspiration
at the golden, unresponsive tabernacle.

O’Donoghue has always written sensitively about the religious beliefs of ordinary people, and those poems of his typically picked out by reviewers or anthologised often fit this description. But what I would draw attention to here is the difficulty, once again, of writing poems which so totally refuse the tendency towards any kind of unearned uplift, or conclusive darkness. This isn’t an original problem, but it seems we do need to get to grips with it if we are to encounter what is quietly unique about this poet’s style. O’Donoghue has a way of making you feel the inadequacy, the sad approximateness, of adjectives – ‘golden’, ‘unresponsive’, ‘unheated’. He is the kind of poet the blurb-phrase ‘hard-won simplicity’ was invented for, although one doesn’t want to use it, partly because it is a cliché and partly because it seems to turn the writer in question into a kind of saint. But then, if one had to describe a contemporary poet this way – the force is strong, in some critics – then O’Donoghue’s your man. He has a kind of quiet sacerdotal authority about him, which can risk telling, not showing. In this, he resembles more closely ‘the solitary wise man’ of his translation of ‘The Wanderer’

than the hero of ‘The Canon’, much as its opening question seems to apply to him: ‘An ascetic: but was he before his time / or after it?’

That this authority derives from the poet’s strong sense of literary history is clear from that translation of ‘The Wanderer’, which forms the centrepiece of *Farmers Cross* and allows O’Donoghue to enlarge his usual tone of moderate authority toward more comprehensive assertions, possible, again, because not truly, or only, his:

When you start holding forth, be sure you know
exactly what your drift is and where it will end.
Any person with a spark of sense
must know by now how desperate it will be
when the whole of our dear world
stands silent and empty.

O’Donoghue isn’t afraid to go over old ground – ‘Yes, we know these tales of unrequited love’, he remarks in ‘Amicitia’, but ‘we also know / what truth they have’. Except we don’t – or we only periodically know, before we forget again. That is why these stories, these poems, are so important; and why, perhaps, O’Donoghue has become of the most dedicated elegists of our time. In this collection, ‘The Year’s Midnight’, an elegy for Andrew Glyn, is particularly beautiful.

This is not to say that O’Donoghue doesn’t do politics. He appears to share Michael Longley’s conviction that the poet must approach such happenings through the pastoral – since, for this kind of poet, the pastoral is what is immediately available to him, the conduit of sensuous delight which connects him to the world, and to do otherwise might risk bad faith. In ‘Flocks and Companies’, the poet hears the birds outside, and realises, slowly, that ‘they, like all of us, / lived in societies, and that the wren / who trilled within my hearing yesterday / was one of many’. Since the solitary bird is a long-standing image for the poet, O’Donoghue seems to articulate here a more grounded sense of his own vocation.

Birds, and poets, and humankind more generally, are joined in common endeavour.

A quiet assonance outlines that apparently simple phrase, 'trilled within my hearing', so we catch, perhaps, the phrasing of the Book of Job: 'Surely thou hast spoken in mine hearing, and I have heard the voice of thy words, saying, I am clean without transgression, I am innocent; neither is there iniquity in me.' O'Donoghue's poem suggests that individuals can't absolve themselves of a collective guilt so simply. Only at the end of the poem can he make sense of a starling's 'foreboding sequence':

But I saw what he was sent for, what he was warning,
when the first ordnance descended on Fallujah.

A parallel could be drawn, again, with Michael Longley, but his transitions of this kind are subtler, exquisitely-managed – O'Donoghue is almost brutal. (He deploys a similar special-effect more gently in a poem from his previous collection, 'Vanishing-Points', where the prostrate body of 'your daughter' in the dentist's surgery fades into that 'of the thrown-away body / of the young Taliban soldier'.) By ending his poem so suddenly – it's an unrhymed sonnet, and one starts looking for the rhymes, to try and justify the last two lines – he leaves himself open to obvious criticisms. That this poem can be read in terms of a tokenistic liberal gesture seems to be important to it. It's got to brave those accusations and win through, without using any of the soft-focus tricks available when it comes to writing a well-wrought political poem. The abrupt linkage between the personal and the political is meant to be felt, as we reach the twist, along the heart. So once again, O'Donoghue doesn't show, he tells – and it might not be to everyone's taste.

If there's anything I miss in *Farmers Cross*, it's those moments of righteous anger which have previously cropped up here and there to texture O'Donoghue's wise poise. Take his early poem 'O'Regan the Amateur

Anatomist', which breaks off its tale about the titular sadist – 'he halved a robin with that knife' – to announce that he accidentally beheaded himself in a collision with a lorry: 'I wonder what he thought he was up to then?' Or 'The Mule Duignan', the last poem in O'Donoghue's *Selected Poems*, which features a passage of astonishing, MacNeicean self-laceration:

The cow was standing up, eating hay.
And then for the first and only time I saw
my parents embracing. I hate that country:
its poverties and embarrassments
too humbling to retell. I'll never ever
go back to offer it forgiveness.

Much of O'Donoghue's power relies, as already discussed, on his sensitivity as to which stories he should tell, or retell, and which not. One wouldn't want him to totally jettison his stoical wisdom and join the rest of us in the familiar mire. Nevertheless, I think, reading his poetry, of an old Tamil saying – that when the saint does finally lose his temper, his rage will be so potent as to shake the whole jungle.

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Bernard O'Donoghue, *Farmers Cross*, Faber and Faber, 2011.
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MARIA JOHNSTON

Sean O'Brien, *November*

November 2011

'What makes a person a bore in conversation?' asks Michael Donaghy in the course of propounding his five rules for the newly enrolled poet: 'Droning on about himself? Preaching? Telling you what to think? All these things make for boring poetry too'. Moreover, as Donaghy judiciously imparts, 'The sad fact is that nobody wants to know what you think. They want to discover what they think.' Starting out as a poet himself it was in Derek Mahon's poetry of 'the singing line' as well as in that of Mahon's forebear Louis MacNeice that Donaghy found 'a voice that engaged the whole of one's consciousness without resorting to any theories or manifestos. It used a richly varied diction and syntax. It could be witty and ride a razor edge of irony, and in the next line break your heart or fill you with wonder.' Apart from being one of the most exact descriptions of the work of Mahon and MacNeice that one might encounter, Donaghy's evaluation reminds us of just what is lacking in the recent poetry of one of Mahon's most ardent devotees. Regularly touted as 'the most prize-winning poet of his generation', firmly established as a prominent critic, editor, and currently Professor of Creative Writing at Newcastle University, it has doubtless been some time since Sean O'Brien considered enrolling in a workshop. Yet as his latest collection *November* makes apparent, it is not only the trainee-poet

who would do well to consult the finer points of Donaghy's no-nonsense starter manual.

Throughout the interminable *November*, O'Brien can be seen exhibiting the most fatal symptoms of what Donald Hall – in a winningly self-deprecating moment of self-diagnosis – once identified as the 'elegiac syndrome'. In O'Brien's full-blown case, the disorder is brought on by a deleterious predilection for death, decay and dereliction, which culminates finally, after a prolonged period of formal debilitation and acute artistic failure, in a pallid, lifeless poetic by-product. Although the disorder is not usually contagious the exposed reader can expect to experience a range of adverse reactions, including depression, dismay, varying degrees of disgust, and even, in the more extreme and distressing cases, death by boredom. Not for O'Brien is death the mother of beauty. Rather, it emanates a stale, oppressive gloom that becomes increasingly deadly as the collection progresses and as the memories of far greater elegists – Mahon, MacNeice, Muldoon, O'Hara, Larkin, Plath, Eliot, Auden and Yeats – are stoked. An indefatigable elegist of the working-class North of England and of all that is necessarily grim up there and elsewhere O'Brien is always dutifully mindful of tradition but is less attentive, it would seem, to matters of individual talent. Moreover, instead of the poetry of 'the singing line' throughout *November* it is the choking sound of the death-rattle that we hear.

But we do at least start off on the right note, or at least close to it. One of the few snatches of the 'singing line' that the reader must otherwise strain to hear throughout is the opening poem 'Fireweed' which voices the collection's persistent motifs and is sensitively composed with an ear to rhythm and articulation and – suitably for a collection that is so dominated by trains, by lines of travel and retrospective journeying – with an eye to the possibilities of movement across the musical silences and spaces of the line- and the stanza-breaks:

Look away for a moment.
Then look back and see

How the fireweed's taking the strain.
This song's in praise of strong neglect

In the railway towns, in the silence
After the age of the train.

Rosebay willowherb – or 'fireweed' as it is more commonly known due to its ability to flourish in bombsites and scorched ground – is a hardy perennial plant adorned with an eye-catching magenta flower. Just as this ubiquitous plant, spread by the expansion of rail networks across Britain, continues to grow in barren, disturbed soil, thereby colonising otherwise desolate landscapes with its lustrous blossoms, so here, in this dynamic opening song, echoic sonic chains and networks of assonantal linkages generate a kinetic energy across the otherwise empty spaces of the page. The verb 'strain' soars mimetically across the swinging lines to harmonise in the final 'train', its vowel-music reverberating with a propulsive effect through 'taking', 'praise', 'railway' and 'age'. Poetic form here sings of the same resilient vitality that the fireweed itself embodies. And the effects themselves are sonorous, moving, and proof of what O'Brien can do when he leaves the poem to suggest its own mysteries to the reader. Because of this it remains one of the most memorable pieces in the entire collection.

Elsewhere, however, O'Brien follows Donaghay's blueprint for 'boring poetry' – the 'preaching', 'droning on' and tendency to tell the reader what to think are all there – as the 'singing line' is abandoned and he assumes the podium to vent his own long-held concerns (or grievances) with class, politics and history. Dogmatic to the end even the 'Elegy' addressed to his dead mother cannot avoid grandiloquent politicising: 'The state that failed to keep the faith / Pursues you for its money back'.

'Tell that to the clerks who'd rob your grave' he angrily denounces. O'Brien persists in telling the reader how to read, how to think, and this despite the fact that one poem, 'Aspects of the Novel', smugly looks down on the 'Uninvited Reader' – the 'seeker after knowledge, / Truth and Beauty, equipped / With disposable income' – as a customer who expects a service. Every occasion is an occasion for political comment as O'Brien casts himself in that favoured role of the working-class hero and a paid-up subscriber to Larkinesque deprivation. Indeed, O'Brien outdoes Larkin in the field of 'Welfare State sub-poetry' with his brand of monotone, hackneyed, loud-speaker verse. 'You sleepless masses, whither politics?' he harangues the reader in the poem titled 'Sleep'.

Drawing obsessively on a predictably working-class childhood, the pretentiously-titled 'Cahiers du Cinema', a claustrophobia-inducing sonnet sequence, has O'Brien as *auteur* directing his life-long love-affair with the cinema as escapist retreat. With numerous swashbuckling heroes of the silver screen making cameo appearances throughout, the poem is clearly derivative of Muldoon's strategies in 'Yarrow' yet the comparison serves only to illuminate O'Brien's misadventures in this mode. 'But this was Hull: no 3D specs for us' our down-at-heel hero gripes, as this generational tendency, knowingly disparaged by the Bronx-born Donaghay as the 'cliché sob-story of the working-class writer', is laid on thick with an honest tradesman's trowel. How the reader longs for some escape from all of this browbeating. 'Mothers of America / Let your kids go to the movies!' Frank O'Hara comically enjoins in his exuberant cinema-poem 'Ave Maria'. In O'Brien's 'Verité: Great Junction Street' we are treated instead to the utterly humourless cinema bore:

Bite down, once more, my fellow citizens, into
The silver foil in which your choc-ice comes,
For when it meets your fillings that is all
The ecstasy eternity will grant –
No tongues, no hands up skirts, no chance.

Reading the poetry being tossed off in Britain today by established poets in middle-age one is forced to wonder just how many pontificating, wistful old farts one *Cinema Paradiso* can hold. Down with this sort of thing, one ventures to protest.

How different from the collection's delicate opening prelude is its prolix, puffed-up finale, 'On the Toon' wherein O'Brien gives himself epic licence to truly indulge his appetite for lofty social and moral judgement. Following the surely by-now exhausted route of the Dantean poet through the seedy underworld of the contemporary city – Newcastle by night becomes the 'Hell of Tyne' with its 'locked-in boozers' full of 'fat slags' and 'slabs of lard / in dandruffed suits' – our clearly past-it poet-hero flashes his artistic currency to choose for himself a scantily-clad, alcopop-swigging floozy as Virgilian 'guide'; one of many kindred spirits, all essentially voices of the poet, who are encountered along the dark way. 'We speak the truth / And for our knowledge we are flayed alive / Like Marsyas', the poet disguised as an obligatory chorus of down-and-outs laments his poetic lot in Canto II. What is clearly just a typical night out in any city is nightmarish to O'Brien's sensibilities – a veritable 'proletarian bacchanal' – as, putting the cant in canto over ten pages of long-winded, very loose iambics, he sets out to lift the ubiquitous veil of ignorance from over Tyneside and bring the common reader out of the dark. 'Massage my feet', the poet's nubile guide orders him at a spectacularly cringe-worthy moment in what is little more than a sustained delusion at the levels of both art and life. This muddled middle-of-the-road, mid-life fantasy of the poetic ego expires finally with an (unintentionally) hilarious, overblown finale in which a long-benighted, sordid Newcastle is momentarily transformed by the ceremonious arrival of the river-borne sun-poet and his crew as all are greeted to a hero's welcome by the 'ordinary citizens' of Tyneside at tear-jerking end.

Because of the uniformity of so much contemporary British poetry it can perhaps be difficult at first to pinpoint exactly how O'Brien's poetry fails as art, that is, until we arrive at 'The Landing Stage' and the answer

begins to reveal itself. Derek Mahon's influence on contemporary British poetry has of course been profound – O'Brien himself is a 'great fan' – and Mahon as the intrepid pioneer into a territory marked out by disused sheds and garages must surely act as an important role-model for O'Brien and his exploratory ambitions; indeed Mahon's prized variety of Wexford mushrooms are cultivated in 'Europeans'. Dedicated to Mahon, 'The Landing-Stage' comes after O'Brien's elegy for 'Michael' (Donaghy) in the collection's closing pages. Here the poet Mahon, one of the few of November's undead, takes to the stage at a poetry reading. 'Like one surprised yet tolerant, / You walk out of the darkness now', the poem opens, with Coleridge's 'Rime of the Ancient Mariner' audible here. As this suggests, the language is a little too cloyingly decorous and overwrought, with lines such as 'Who even as you speak to us / Take care to keep your counsel still' intensifying the stultifying archaic air. As O'Brien apes Mahon's stylistic moves in this over-eager fan-letter what is missing throughout the rest of *November* becomes apparent. Here are the concluding stanzas:

In our unheroic age
You have sustained a northern clarity
Enriched with the harmonics of the south,
And learned to voice whatever is the case
For wisdom's and its own sweet sake
As music, intimate and vast.
You let the grave itself unstop its mouth.

You tell the language that your love
Endures, whatever you have undergone
Of shipwreck or dry-docked disorder:
Wave-wanderer, beach-comber, far-flung
Singer with a shell for Nausicaa, at home
Nowhere and everywhere, but here and now,
And straddling the border once again.

As O'Brien tries to out-Mahon Mahon here the poem almost lifts off. Mahon's entrance in the book functions as a salutary reminder of what is wrong with O'Brien's poetry, and, by extension, with the type of written-to-formula poetry that is being peddled in Britain today. Far from 'straddling the border' or being 'at home / nowhere and everywhere', O'Brien's is rigorously one-sided, one-dimensional, unable to live in doubt or uncertainty as it stubbornly rehearses its fixed views within closed boundaries. 'It was so liberating to discover that you could do this, write beautiful, memorable language and yet still be funny and ironic', Donaghy rapturously remembers his discovery of Mahon's work. Ultimately, O'Brien's verse lacks these qualities but most of all it lacks Mahon's formal necessity. Mahon himself has stated that form must be 'organic': the 'chemicals hissing inside the well-wrought urn'. There is no space within *November's* stiff, lifeless structures for the vivifying forces of ambiguity, multiplicity, the dynamics of tensions and lively oppositions; words must serve the cause of straightforward political and social opinion. Music, imagination, wisdom and humility are in short supply. Discussing Mahon's landmark 'A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford' as 'a poem where Mahon's poetic gifts come together in a great elegy for the lost ones of the world', O'Brien observes how it 'takes weary facts – death, decay, fear solitude – and reanimates them for the reader's contemplation'. No such transformative process occurs in *November*. O'Brien has also noted how 'Mahon's fascination with stanzaic form serves him well [. . .] It has brought him many imitators, but few so far have managed to create [his] kind of richly furnished echo chambers'. This is true of so many of Mahon's spacious, resonant poems but the same cannot be said for those of his imitator in this impoverished collection where poetry fails to live.

'I had a bucket of excrement dumped on my head for daring to criticise the North-East', O'Brien once reported and his suitably feculent punishment points up the serious lack of willingness on the part of contemporary poetry critics to read beyond prizes and packaging.

Naked emperors abide and 'all because', in the words of Donaghy, 'no one stood up and said it was piss'. In his introduction to Donaghy's *Collected Poems* O'Brien criticises the 'ultimate sterility of the poem-as-anecdote which is so heavily represented on the contemporary scene'. There is much sterility on the contemporary scene contributing to which is the type of cadaverous specimen that O'Brien offers up here: the poem as aggressively instructive autobiographical anecdote, as blatant social manifesto, as soapbox oration stridently telling the reader how to think but failing to help us to live our lives, break our hearts or fill us with wonder. Donald Hall has described the impulse towards elegy as 'to try to make it endure in language as it could not endure in the flesh' and this seems truer to the poetic enterprise. Too few of the poems here 'endure' beyond a first or second reading, even fewer make language live as the flesh cannot. Ultimately, this bleak, inhospitable *November* presents the reader with few places where a thought might grow.

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Sean O'Brien, *November*, Picador, 2011.

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TESS SOMERVELL

Roddy Lumsden and Eloise Stonborough (eds),
The Salt Book of Younger Poets

February 2012

An anthology which claims to showcase the poetry of a generation, rather than poetry of a particular theme or genre, ought to show diversity. Therefore the sense of consistency within *The Salt Book of Younger Poets* is a double-edged sword; it ought to, and does, give a coherent sense of a new generation of poets, but, as co-editor Eloise Stonborough puts it in her introduction, ‘a conspiracy theorist will always find evidence of collusion’ when editors have selected poets they have come across in their own circles. One does not have to be a conspiracy theorist to recognise that this collection showcases the talents of a certain Russell Group-educated (and often Tower Poetry Summer School-educated) cross-section of a generation. Yet that cross-section is a significant and powerful one when it comes to who will “dominate UK poetry in years to come”, and the insight given into this group of writers by *The Salt Book of Younger Poets* is both valuable, as an introduction to future big names and an indication of trends in the most contemporary poetry, and enjoyable, as an anthology of intelligent and energetic writing.

Stonborough points out that the Russell Group emphasis in the anthology is a welcome sign that “poetry is still attracting bright young

minds”. There is not a poem among the three or four by each of the fifty poets in this anthology which is not in some way intelligent; dominant, however, is a specific type of intelligence, an intellectual self-indulgence of an almost metaphysical character. The grand abstract concept is less the order of the day than the local image stretched to its figurative limit, a brief moment teased out to fill a poem.

... The idea was simple to grasp:

the cake, the fork, their proximate places at the table. And easy,
to clutch its delicate bodiless limb, lever it against the outside

edge of his index finger, to jig the light upon its joint with his
large thumb. He takes it to the cake, its scalpel finger investigates

the sponge.

(‘Cake Fork’, Emily Hasler.)

Like many of the poets featured in this anthology, Hasler ‘investigates’, and in sometimes torturous detail (which is by no means a bad thing), but any conclusion, or one might say sense of justification for this level of investigation, is absorbed into the investigation itself: ‘Already he fails to imagine // this instrument before he was shown to it’. The subjective, and furthermore the sensual, experience is everything, and rather seems required to counter-balance or justify any abstraction than vice versa. The ‘figurative limit’ to which many of these poems aspire is set not by a definitive pre-ordained tenor, as in the metaphysical poets, but by the vehicle itself, ‘the absolute sweetness of material.’ (‘Plate’, Martha Sprackland.)

The obvious danger is that material itself could have no limit, that a cake-fork, a plate, a maggot, a moment of awkwardness on a date or any of the other varied subjects which feature in this anthology, could poten-

tially fill a book with the sensations or images they give rise to in such receptive and perceptive minds as those of these young poets. A different kind of intelligence is required to rescue the poetry from looseness; the 'immediate consciousness', in Henri Bergson's words, must be 'brought together and amalgamated with the intellect'. Occasionally in this anthology there is the sense that a figure is introduced purely because the poet liked the sound of it, without any reference to the organising principle which is the meaning of the poem as a whole, and the result can be disjointed lines of disparate images held together only by their tenuous connection to that original object or moment. There are several stock images which recur throughout the anthology, most obviously birds and bones, which for every intelligent usage are deployed elsewhere as something like this generation's equivalent of the eighteenth century's compound epithet, a flag to indicate that 'this is poetry'.

At its best, however, the figurative verve so characteristic of this generation is coupled with intellectual restraint to produce pieces of astonishing virtuosity, such as John Clegg's brief and powerful 'Antler':

now ossified utterly—
only the swerve
and feint of its grip
like a magnified nerve

to mark it organic.
It twists like a thought—
a petrified thicket
which broke in the rut.

Here the relishing of pure sound comes at no sacrifice of the sense. The antler is transformed from a nerve to a thought to a thicket with risky rapidity, but the figurative swerve and feint is not only held in poise by the thread of a consistent idea but in this case actually mirrors that

idea, which is the play between the static and the mobile. This kind of controlled movement between tenor and vehicle, concrete and abstract is what informs the strongest poetry in *The Salt Book of Younger Poets*, such as Jack Belloli's 'Yurt' or Charlotte Runcie's 'Staying In'. If control is not what is expected from younger poets, this anthology will contain many instances of pleasant surprise.

Thankfully none of the fifty featured poets conform to what is probably the most ubiquitous stereotype of young poets; as noted above, it is intellectual self-indulgence which some might be accused of, rather than narcissistic emotional outpouring. The intellectual energy is counterbalanced by emotional reticence; Judgement Day itself comes 'with a banal clunk' ('New Translation', Dai George). It is a state in which

The question is no longer that of living, but how
to keep lost comforts purring through the static

of a time (and we count it minute by minute) that offers
little more than the hum of libraries

('Chaos', Eloise Stonborough).

And it is frustration at this state which constitutes the main emotional thrust of the anthology: 'One learns / almost to hate the world, so fine, so closed.' ('2nd June 1916', Dan Barrow) This sense of the world being 'closed' persists in many of the poems. Rachael Allen who opens the anthology and Jack Underwood towards the end express comparable sentiments: 'everyone around us has taken / everything to talk about, so that suddenly, after / years, we have nothing left to say' ('Impotence', Rachael Allen); 'These days there's little left to call.' ('And What Do You Do?', Jack Underwood.) Perhaps it is the sense of having "nothing left to say" which leads so many of these young poets to latch on to the most particular objects and the briefest moments, to find something unsaid

in the details of the world, and then to defamiliarise those objects and moments through metaphor and sometimes simply elision, the deliberate cultivation of mystery. The effect is reminiscent of magic realism, as eyes weep vodka or ‘people transform into beautiful petit fours’ (‘Squalor’, Charlotte Geater).

Clearly these poets do have something left to say. This generation’s strength lies in its ability to produce the most surprising figures: ‘the sun was the face of the man / in the American Gothic painting’ (from ‘In my dreams you walk dripping from a sea journey on the highway across America’, Andrew McMillan), a whale is ‘heaps of / Unskimmed stones’ (from ‘Whalefall’, Harriet Moore). Not only linguistically but epistemologically they are what Shelley called ‘vitality metaphorical’, and their abilities to perceive ‘the before unapprehended relations of things’ stands them in good stead for the future. These potential relations are infinite, so there is no reason not to suppose that these poets will continue to find new things to say, and will only mature further in terms of their expression and formal control. Perhaps their confidence will also grow in dealing with abstract philosophical questions, since they are so proficient already with physical stuff and matter. Whilst distinctive voices are already audible (which is quite an accomplishment in such a small space), it is also to be hoped that, with larger collections of their own, these poets will develop and be able to showcase their more individual characters, and it will be possible to say with more assurance what are the differences and likenesses across this generation. Some of these poets, such as Helen Mort and Inua Ellams have already started to make waves in British contemporary poetry, and undoubtedly many more of Salt’s *Younger Poets* will do the same before too long.

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C. E. J. SIMONS

Simon Armitage (trans), *The Death of King Arthur*

June 2012

If the numerous problems with this book had to be condensed into a single statement, it would be that the book tries and fails to be both a faithful translation of the Middle English text, and a viable contemporary English poem. It fails at the former because it is a lazy and painfully literal translation; it fails at the latter because it is a dull read, even for enthusiasts of medieval literature.

The *Alliterative Morte Arthur* is a difficult text even for scholarly translators and commentators. Armitage’s translation suffers from three failures. The first is that it is a dogged line-by-line translation, without any larger sense of poetic phrase; the second is that it assumes some Middle English words have the same translation in every context, or worse, the same meaning in modern English; the third is that it sacrifices style, even sense, for the sake of forced alliteration. Modern English poets have committed the first two mistakes in the past (see Wordsworth’s translations of Chaucer) but the third mistake will ruin any verse, translation or no.

The first failure – Armitage translating line by line – causes havoc for a number of reasons, one of which is the use of distanced appositives and relative clauses in Middle English verse. For a readable contemporary poem, the translator needs to compensate by arranging lines to keep

appositives next to the nouns they modify. Armitage does not bother to do this. For example, he translates:

With Carlisle behind them, riding hard on their horses,
courteous Sir Cador set them on their course ... (20)

Either Carlisle is a man rather than a town, and a man who can ride several horses at once, or the first and second clauses of the first line should be reversed; even this correction will not solve the problem that 'Sir Cador' is the subject of Armitage's sentence, and is left riding the horses if Carlisle is not. The Middle English is actually much clearer (ll.480–1). Similarly, Armitage writes that the Roman forces

... gathered by the Greek Sea with their grievous weapons,
in their great galleys with glittering shields. (24)

Galleys are not normally armed with shields. Throughout the poem, the reader spends so much time backtracking to mentally adjust syntax that the verse frequently loses momentum.

Sometimes this problem causes the poem to grind to a halt through the almost total breakdown of sense. The British sheriffs, organising the departure of Arthur's forces, assign

soldiers to certain lords
on the seafront, in the south, to sail at his say-so.
The barges being ready they rowed to the beach
to ferry aboard horses and fine battle-helmets,
loading the livestock in their livery and tack ... (29)

In the first sentence it is unclear if the soldiers, or their assigned lords, or the seafront itself, are setting sail, and under whose say-so (since 'his' is singular but there are numerous sheriffs, soldiers and lords). In the second sentence the barges row themselves to the beach, and in a

remarkable feat of automation, load themselves with horses, helmets, and livestock. Finally, for some reason, the livestock are all wearing livery. Either Arthur likes to see his cows and pigs well dressed in more than the culinary sense, or Armitage is suggesting that the British warhorses count as livestock, and will be ridden or eaten as required. Again, the Middle English text is less confusing (ll.725–31).

In another example of the poem's recurring syntactical uncertainty, enemies frequently attack themselves during combat. When the Britons ambush the Romans at Barfleur, Armitage writes that

they raced at the Romans that rode by the woods,
all those royal ranks that were loyal to Rome,
falling urgently on the enemy and eagerly striking,
all the earls of England ... (53)

The comma at the end of the third line has a tougher job than Horatio at the bridge. Even in the most careful reading aloud, that comma cannot keep the ambushing Britons from striking 'all the earls of England' along with the Romans – perhaps an editorial comment on friendly fire. The same thing happens again two lines later, and throughout the poem.

Another problem of Armitage's excessively linear translation lies in pronouns. The Middle English often requires the reader to go back half a dozen lines to find a pronoun's antecedent. Armitage follows the original text too closely at times by using pronouns when he should repeat the subject of a clause or a sentence for clarity. For example, when Arthur finishes off a cannibal giant, Armitage translates:

Then Arthur did damage with the dagger he had drawn,
hammering that hulk right up to the hilt,
but he throttled [sic] him so thoroughly in the throws [sic] of death
that he broke three rib-bones in the royal man's breast. (43)

Arthur seems to stab the giant and then 'throttle' him. Most of the fights in the text are similarly incoherent, like a Michael Bay action film in

which the cuts are so rapid that the viewer gives up on trying to make sense of what they are seeing. Furthermore, one cannot throttle someone around the chest (the verb ‘throttle’ even comes from the Middle English word for throat); and ‘throws of death’ is incorrect.

On the other hand, sometimes the pronouns and their antecedents in the original text are perfectly clear, but Armitage’s translation renders lines and whole passages incomprehensible. For example, when Guinevere protests to Arthur against his departure, she seems to ask him to commit suicide and die in his own arms:

‘All the love in my life now marches from the land
and I am left alone and empty, believe me, forever.
Why not die, my dear love, die in your arms
before enduring the dread of this destiny ...’ (28)

The source text is perfectly clear, with Guinevere protesting, ‘Why ne *might* I, dere love, die in your armes’ (l.703). These are not the occasional errors one might expect in a hastily proofed first edition; they clog the text.

The second major problem with this translation lies in Armitage failing to adapt the poem’s Middle English vocabulary to different contexts. The poem is riddled with unfortunate choices of word and phrase, and a number of outright errors. Some of these problems might be caused by Armitage’s hasty or inappropriate translation of the source text; others must be the children his own brain.

For example, the Middle English noun ‘strenghe’ (from the Anglo-Saxon *strengð*, strength) can mean strength, stronghold (as in a fortress), or strong position. Armitage translates it universally as ‘stronghold’. So when the Romans capture Sir Lewlin and his brother in a skirmish on the road to Paris, Armitage writes that ‘lords of Libya led them [the captured knights] to their stronghold’ (68). While the Middle English clearly suggests that the prisoners are taken to the centre of the Roman army

(‘lordes of Lyby... led tō their strenghes’), Armitage conjures a castle in the middle of the French woods for the itinerant Romans (l.1827).

Similarly, when describing the Roman camp at Barfleur, Armitage writes:

Pennants and pommels of princes’ coats of arms
were pitched in the valley for people to view. (48)

Readers might wonder how ‘pommels’ might be erected for people to view. Here the Middle English word ‘pommel’ does not mean the pommel of a saddle, but a tent-pommel. Armitage does not bother to interpret this word for the contemporary reader, even when a relatively small change of diction (e.g. ‘Pennants and tent-pommels ...’) could provide a clear reading and help, rather than hinder, the alliteration.

As one more example of this recurring problem, when Gawain jousts with Sir Priamus, Armitage describes the latter as ‘embracing a bright shield, on a beautiful horse’ (more confusing syntax), a cripplingly literal translation of the phrase: ‘Enbr ced a br de sh ld’ (92, l.2518). The Middle English verb means to wear on the *bras*, or arm, and was indeed the correct word to use when wearing a shield. But in modern English, to embrace a shield means to throw your arms around it – an ineffective tactic. Armitage has not bothered to find an appropriate modern synonym.

However, the most grievous (and inadvertently amusing) choices of vocabulary and phrase in this translation often have little to do with the Middle English text. For example, Sir Lot swears to leave many dead Romans behind him, declaring:

‘... where my steed rushes so red blood shall run.
He that follows behind and is first in the aftermath
will find in my footsteps many fallen to their death.’ (17)

Apart from the problem that he is on horseback, and so would not leave footprints, Lot seems to imply that his enemies will die from falling from

great heights rather than by his own sword. (The Middle English puts it more gracefully.) In other places Armitage's English has the ring of Benefit-Office-speak: 'we shall soon reassess the right he asserts', says Arthur, getting out his assessment forms; on the next page, Emperor Lucius is seen 'processing through the site' in the language of a ministerial visit; later Sir Clegis goads the Roman knights to single combat with the provocative phrase, 'Should any be forthcoming, we request armed contest' (48–9, 61).

Elsewhere, Armitage's lack of control over his language seems almost slapstick: 'Reindeer and roe bucked with reckless abandon' puns strangely on 'roebuck'; and 'specialist Spanish maids' does not conjure up 'skilled Spanish maidens,' but rather an erotic cleaning service (35, 38). A lack of crucial prepositions suggests the battle of Soissons becomes a gigantic fry-up in which the besiegers 'fritter their arrows' and are then seen 'battering the barbican' (90–1). And in the final naval battle, Arthur's sailors 'stood proudly at the prow and steered from the stern', with their incredibly long and flexible arms (133).

While most of the problems in the text come down to poor grammar and word choice, there are occasional mistranslations as well, as in the forest fight on the road to Paris:

Then the Roman troops retreated a little,
and our royal rearguard rushed to the breach,
so rapidly that they rang with the sound of rivets ... (65)

It does not make sense that the rear-guard of the advancing British host fills the gap of the Roman retreat (unless the Britons are advancing in reverse). A quick glance at the Middle English confirms the problem:

And then the Rōmanes rout removes a little,
Raikes with a rere-ward those real knightes;
Sq raply they ride there that all the rout ringes ... (ll.1761–3)

The Romans are covered by their own rear-guard as they retreat.

The most unfortunate aspect of the translation as a whole, however, is the modernised alliterative verse, the awkwardness of which ruins the poem as a free adaptation as well as an accurate translation. Syntactical errors might be forgivable if this was a vivid poem with only a passing resemblance to the original text. Instead, Armitage follows the manuscript closely—down to the structure and vocabulary of individual lines. This results in mangled text that sounds neither poetic nor contemporary.

Armitage often chooses inappropriate words in order to make his lines alliterate, frequently compromising sense for the sake of sound. For example, his knights are always 'shoulder[ing] their shields' (65); Armitage intends this to mean 'unslinging their shields' or preparing them for use, whereas the alliteration suggests the exact opposite (as in 'shouldering a rifle'). Armitage says of the dragon in Arthur's first dream, 'His wings and his womb were wondrously coloured', thus even more wondrously giving a male animal a womb; Armitage does not bother to translate the Middle English word 'womb', which can simply mean 'underbelly' (30). Furthermore, throughout the original poem, knights are often named for the sake of alliteration, but Armitage makes this habit worse with epithets such as 'Sir Richard who was rarely fearful' – no doubt a companion of Monty Python's brave Sir Robin (74).

This awkwardness is everywhere. Confronting Sir Lionel, the Emperor 'unleashed a long sword', rather than a blow from one (82). Similarly, Sir Idrus Fitz Ewain employs the dominatrix style of chivalric combat, as he swings into action 'with lusty lashes'; I assume he is armed with a whip as one cannot lash with a sword, only lash out. This compromising of sense for sound reaches a frenzy in passages such as the following, in which Sir Cadour's knights are

chasing and chopping down chivalrous chevaliers,
regal Romans and royal kings,
their ribs ripped apart by ripe steel. (84)

'Chivalrous chevaliers' is not quite redundant, but a clanger; kings are 'royal' by definition; and I have no idea how one ripens steel.

Elsewhere in the poem, many lines are padded for the sake of alliteration. For example, Arthur speaks to the British pilgrim Sir Craddock with 'a lordly reply in the language of Latin', as opposed to Latin dance; and Sir Kay goes to tell the other knights 'what in secret their Sovereign had kept to himself', apparently a doubly secret missive (127, 45).

Finally, the poor alliteration often destroys any consistency of tone; the whole poem veers between grisly comical children's verse in the vein of Roald Dahl, and the bombast of Dryden or Southey in their worst moments. For example, Arthur promises to ride 'to marvellous Milan to wallop down its walls' (18). Then after the battle at Barfleur, his knights 'Hurriedly ... all hopped onto fresh horses' (57). During the final naval battle at Dover, some knights 'were slotted on iron spikes and made the weapons slimy', while 'squires lay squashed', like lamented fruit (135, 134).

The poem's dialogue is similarly childish; Arthur's first words in the poem sound like schoolyard chanting: 'Ha! Craven knight, what a creeping coward' (8). On the few occasions when the narrator editorialises, he is equally glib: 'some dirty new deed annoys me deeply' (67). If the whole poem maintained this immature tone, we could imagine that Armitage was reducing the futility of medieval slaughter to an allegory of contemporary bullying with a nod and a wink. But although the poem's language often veers towards the comical, the majority of lines are dully serious. The references to rape and incest also suggest that Armitage is not translating for younger readers.

Finally, the text of this edition has more than a few errors – some easily correctable, but many that require whole lines to be rethought. Great poetry celebrates neologisms, nonce-words and slang, but there is a difference between improper English for thematic and stylistic ends, and the sort of casual bad grammar that makes readers grind their teeth. Too much of the latter crops up in this text. Mistakes like 'Is their anyone here' (62) and 'Countless foe came after' (51) might be forgivable in a first

edition; but 'my special envoi' (21) (using the French spelling) refers to a stanza form, not a dispatch rider; a person can be 'held bound', or they can be 'held in bonds', but not, like Sir Boice, 'held in bounds' (55); in modern English 'enjoined' (78) does not mean 'to join with' but 'to prescribe' or 'to impose'; and 'rapidest' (127) is no more an English word than 'funnest'. More spectacularly, Arthur kills an enemy named Golapas by '[cleaving] him cleanly in two at the knees'; is it pedantic to point out that if one cleaves an enemy cleanly in two at knee height, one is actually cleaving in three? (78).

The Death of King Arthur was chosen as the Poetry Book Society's 'Choice' book for Spring 2012. Their selectors' commentary on the poem is a scant page. Half dwells on Armitage's previous translation of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*; the other half quotes twice from Armitage's own introduction to this new text but only once from the actual poem, with no analysis. Even for a few hundred words, this is inadequate criticism, and gives readers the mistaken impression that the PBS selectors have not bothered to read their own Choice carefully. A single pass through this text's 4,347 lines reveals the persistent truth that here, as in all art, the whole depends on the parts. The poet's indifference towards the sound and sense of individual words and phrases inevitably undermines the poem as a whole. Other reviews might protest that the faults of this translation lie in the Middle English source. It is true that the original text is a difficult one, containing, as Larry Benson writes, 'many words and lines that make little or no sense.' Nevertheless, it is a more coherent and exciting poem than Armitage's translation.

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PETER McDONALD

Geoffrey Hill, *Clavics* and *Odi Barbare*

June 2012

Today would not be the best time for someone to start reading Geoffrey Hill. This is not because it is a bad idea to read Geoffrey Hill – on the contrary, he really is that thing he keeps being called, the best English poet alive – but because new readers of any contemporary poet are always liable to begin with that poet's newest work. Hill's most recent publications, which seem to be coming now at the rate of around one full volume per year, are daunting prospects for even his veteran readers. For novices, the place to start is Hill's Penguin *Selected Poems* or his *Collected Poems* (1985), moving on then to work like *Canaan* (1996) and *The Triumph of Love* (1998). To plunge straight into Hill with the volumes that have been appearing under the general rubric of 'The Daybooks' (the two volumes under review here, plus the Clutag Press *Oraclau | Oracles* (2010)) would be for many – indeed for most – an initially unrewarding experience. This is not to say that these books are somehow just not as good as the rest of Hill's work – that is unlikely to prove true – but that they will require a lot of time, and a lot of readerly patience, before coming properly into focus.

Now that he is entering his ninth decade, and more than half a century since he published his first full volume of poetry, Geoffrey Hill has surely earned the right not to have his new books judged instantly,

and on the same terms as the mass of contemporary verse with which they are only literally contemporaneous. To complain that Hill doesn't keep up with poetic fashions would be, at the very least, critically foolish: in the first place, Hill's poetry has never been greatly indebted to the verse of its own time; more importantly, it is the very excellence of his work which makes dominant modes of poetry seem so tame, so limited, and so similar to one another. Hill's name will never, for the best of reasons, be part of that mutually-awarding circle of poets who dominate the major prize-lists in Britain. In the cases of most of the British poets who are laden year-about with honours for their new books, a reader will require little patience, and need exercise very little in the way of dedicated attention: most often, one suspects, he or she has only to recognize a name, and tune in to a vague mood-music – unoriginal, untaxing, and unmemorable – which can pass for 'poetic'. In Hill's case, the situation is exactly the reverse, and one can understand how some readers feel initially that they must react with a kind of affront. In fact, it's dignity that is being preserved in such reactions, and readers can feel obliged to defend a certain media-led notion of contemporary artistic value in poetry which they sense coming, however obscurely, under attack. (Why these readers feel that the *status quo* of contemporary mainstream poetry needs them to defend it – when clearly it does not – is a puzzle for cultural theorists, and not for mere poetry critics.)

Neither *Clavics* nor *Odi Barbare* will bring Hill any closer to British poetry's congratulatory esteem, nor to its business-cold heart. These two instalments of the 'Daybooks' series are both densely formal affairs: *Clavics* consists of 32 poems, each in an identically rhymed and patterned form of 30 lines in all, divided into a 20-line 'altar' shape and a 10-line 'wings' visual arrangement (after George Herbert's 'The Altar' and 'Easter Wings' in *The Temple*); *Odi Barbare* is a book of 52 poems, each consisting of six stanzas of sapphics (a classically-derived form, in which the strophes have three lines of eleven syllables, and a concluding line of five, with accents disposed to imitate the quantitative patterns of the Greek

and Latin models). Such things need not pose any problems in themselves; but Hill's manner of expression in the forms certainly does, since it is so heavily marked by compression, allusion, tonal variation, and complexity of argument. Connections between individual sections, and even within those sections, are often very hard to discern; and while there is a consistency in form, there is seldom a consistency of voice for long in either book. Breadth of reference, too, is unhampered by any apparent anxiety about ease of understanding – hardly a new thing for Hill, of course, and a matter which has become one of the most boring (and intellectually pointless) themes for critical debate about the value of his work. (As Tim Kendall pointed out some years ago, the internet search engine has rendered the referential aspects, at least, of Hill's notorious 'difficulty' essentially nugatory.)

Putting 'difficulty' aside, though, it's true to say that Hill's current poetry is not exactly easy to enjoy at first go; furthermore, those who claim to be its admirers are under some obligation to explain what they mean when they say they enjoy it, and how that enjoyment relates to literary pleasures more generally. To begin with, it's still relatively easy to point to lines, phrases, and even single words that possess the singular originality and power which poets many times more fashionable and celebrated than Hill would love to command, but never will. From *Odi Barbare*, for instance, these: 'Music steel-rimmed spectacles make as objects | Claiming a victim'(I), 'How the sea-lightning with a flash at hazard | Cleft the lanterned yard into pelting angles'(IV), 'lamp-black scuttery gusts' (XV), 'Woods yet thriving wrapped in an intricate still | Tumult of ivy' (XXII), 'Luminously radioactive watches | Fizzled green plaque riding elastic wrist-bands' (XXVI), 'Passchendaele's chill mud at a gulp engorging | Men and redhot rashers of sizzling metal' (XXXV), 'long demolished | Iron bridges clamped over backstreet inlets | Tremor to footfalls' (XXXVI), 'Bracken-guarded airfields where now the pigeons | Ponderous, wingladen, in near-botched take-offs, | Rattle the spinneys' (XLII), 'Glasstight black porter' (XLIX). A poet who can write

like this is suffering from no decline in his powers of expression.

Since I've been accused before (though only by Craig Raine) of quoting snippets of Hill's poetry in order to avoid the unintelligibility of what I fail to quote, I had better say that such turns of verbal dexterity (though really they're more than that) are parts of a radically challenging series of poems whose overall import I can't (and won't) claim to understand. But – before cries of victory go up from elderly Martians – this is neither a confession of my own stupidity nor a condemnation of Hill's lack of clarity. In critical terms, it seems to me an entirely reasonable position at this stage; and it is not an attempt to hide behind the poet's supposed mystifications. Hill, in other words, is not some poetic version of the Wizard of Oz; I am not the Tin Man; and Raine, however hard he tries, makes an unconvincing Dorothy.

What can be said of these new books, in a general way, is that in them Hill's subject matter has become hard to disentangle from matters of poetic voice. That other besetting concern of Hill's critics, the distinction (made in his critical prose by the poet himself) between what he calls 'pitch' and 'tone', is starting to look less and less helpful as a way of approaching the poetry. At extreme points, it makes little difference whether the voice – or, more accurately perhaps, the voices – made audible in this verse should be felt as painfully pitched, or as unsettling in tone: the effect is more or less the same. The voice is marked by insistence, even vehemence, and by compressed, often highly complex, diction (Hill's own term for his sapphics – 'cricked' – catches this discomfort exactly); it can feel as though several shorthands are being employed urgently at the same time, in an exhausting hurry with which it is hard for any reader to keep pace. In both books, form's heavy presence forces Hill into a kind of exaggeration of his own voice – in *Clavics*, rhyme's high visibility (and audibility) push that voice sometimes beyond what either 'pitch' or 'tone' can measure:

Worst of our age: no time here for patience
 While there is a grand unwisdom
 Legislates stun-wisdom
 Buy quittance
 Absurd
 Last word
 Stamped pittance
 Although BAD LUCK! quizzdom
 Scores well enough if you buzz bomb
 Some sorry target aim pox Christians. (Clavics 21)

In a sense, writing like this represents a nightmarish blow-up of earlier Hill at his most delicately painstaking – think of the lines in *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy* (1983), where ‘Patience hardens to a pittance, courage | Unflinchingly declines into sour rage’. Now, a particular quality of verbal attention, which in earlier poetry was all the more effective for having its disruptive energies held in check, is allowed to go out of control. Or rather, it might be said, this writing permits control only by the form itself – and rhyme’s potential for chaos, the potentially anarchic workings of its own kind of order, have long been understood as the test of any poet’s nerve and will. With lines like those quoted above, it is not that Hill’s nerve has failed him, or that he has somehow failed a test; instead, he seems not to be taking the test at all, and writing as though the determination not to be used by rhyme (and pun) was necessarily in vain. It is an odd decision, but it is a decision, and not an unwitting loss of control.

‘Patience’ is at issue, certainly – the writer’s patience, and the reader’s. In fact, both of these books – which are in formal terms so meticulous and intricate – are marked by an effect of severe, almost debilitating, impatience in the poetic voice. ‘No time here for patience’ might put all this in something of a biographical light for, although Hill has been writing about dying now for some considerable time, the poetic idioms in his

latest work announce repeatedly that there is no time to spare. Even here, however, it would be unwise to try to interpret Hill’s work as a series of urgent diary entries for putative last days, as though his poetry was hurrying towards the resolution of a huge *dénouement*. Things, in any case, are not getting clearer as the supposed end draws closer; and the sheer energy of Hill’s writing, more in evidence now than ever, forces him away from all conclusions, easy or otherwise.

There are, of course, preoccupations in the place of conclusions; and Hill’s preoccupations, like those of all great poets, are abiding and irresolvable ones. *Clavics* paces over again some of the seventeenth-century ground covered in *Scenes From Comus* (2005), while *Odi Barbare* returns to the explicit encounters with poetic Modernism (and Modernists) that marked *Without Title* (2006). This isn’t a case of repetition, since Hill proves that such areas have plenty left for him to explore: *Clavics* (following from a pronounced theme also in *Oraclau | Oracles*) is fascinatingly attuned to the hermeneutics and hieroglyphs of renaissance alchemy, while *Odi Barbare* gives several new turns to Hill’s edgy, sometimes confrontational, sense of personal communication with the artistic dead. W. B. Yeats, in particular, finds Hill commanding his attention: in this, he is becoming a much more interesting figure than Ezra Pound or T. S. Eliot, both still liable to turn up around any corner of Hill’s poetry, but both much more readily dealt with by his imagination. Yeats remains a problem, in the most creatively productive of senses; and of course it is Yeats who is the most formidable modern poet of old age, one who is in fact every bit as hard for critical tastes to accommodate as Hill himself – harder, indeed, in some ways. ‘Concurring that the old man is in shock | Won’t do’ (*Clavics* 14): no – and it won’t do for Hill either who, just like Yeats, knows exactly what he is doing, and expertly calibrates the outrage he stirs up. The image of ‘Yeats and your author | Photomontaged, | Graciously inclined each to the other’ (*Clavics* 14 again) allows the peaceable relations it imagines to be subtly irked by artificiality, and the line ‘Yeats with his clangour of despotic beauty’ (*Odi Barbare*

XXXVII) records accurately a discomfort even in what looks like Hill's praise, where Yeats's word 'clangour' ('Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen', II: 'All men are dancers and their tread | Goes to the barbarous clangour of a gong') makes an audible challenge to Hill's own adjective, 'despotic', on the disputed ground of 'beauty'. Things aren't resolved here, and Hill's unfinished business with Yeats – to whom he is now, in terms of years lived, senior – is very much a part of the 'beauty' of his own late verse.

And in the end, 'beauty' is the right word. 'I am sick of this dying || Time that bends so beautifully around things,' Hill writes in *Odi Barbare* IX: the poetry puts that adverb repeatedly to proof. However bewildering the complexities and urgencies of these books, and however unclear their immediate intent, Hill remains one of the very few poets now writing who is capable of making beautiful new things because he can conceive of, and believe in, beauty as an absolute reality. *Odi Barbare* XXVIII has at its centre the question, 'Quick, is love's truth seriously immortal?': that 'Quick' is characteristically pressing, but the poem as a whole is proof that real questions like this cannot have any quick answers. Instead, the true response is in the slowness of lyric intricacy (a lesson taught most comprehensively, as it happens, by Yeats), and its result in what we call 'beauty'. In that sense, the question has already been answered by the power and brilliance of the poem's opening strophe:

Broken that first kiss by the race to shelter,
Scratchy brisk rain irritable as tinder;
Hearing light thrum faintly the chords of laurel
Taller than we were.

When asked what there is to enjoy in Hill's latest poetry, where there is obviously so much to find hard, recalcitrant, and offputting, the best answer is verse such as this, and its proper name is beauty. 'Beauty,' as

Yeats famously remembered his friend Aubrey Beardsley insisting (and as Pound, in his turn, quoted him remembering) 'is difficult'. And in a way – all critical, cultural, and quasi-political squabbles aside – this is for Hill, as it has been all along, the heart and the point of his entire labour.

© Peter McDonald, 2012

Geoffrey Hill, *Clavics*, Enitharmon, 2011.

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Geoffrey Hill, *Odi Barbare*, Clutag Press, 2012.

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DAVID WHEATLEY

Fiona Sampson, *Beyond the Lyric: A Map of Contemporary British Poetry*

September 2012

Surtout, pas de zèle, Talleyrand liked to advise: above all no enthusiasm. Nowadays, a more energetic self-belief is called for, and Fiona Sampson is just the person to provide it. *Beyond the Lyric* is billed as a 'book of enthusiasms', a 'radical, accessible guide' to the 'period of exceptional richness and variety' we are currently experiencing in British poetry. Seldom can a critical book have got off to quite as bad a start as *Beyond the Lyric* does, however, with its zealous rejoinder to one of the most celebrated lines in modern poetry. 'Unlike the American Modernist Marianne Moore', writes Sampson, 'who famously wrote that "I, too, dislike it", I love contemporary poetry. I enjoy reading it, hearing it, thinking about and writing the stuff.' Few critical surveys of the contemporary age begin with claims that it was all so much better twenty years ago, but while the present era enjoys an inflated view of its achievements the critical challenge will always be to situate the contemporary within literary history in ways that do justice to both, and confirm or expose the claims we or the blurb-writers at Chatto and Windus make for ourselves. Without short-circuiting what follows, I would like to suggest that Sampson has loved contemporary poetry perhaps not wisely but too well to take up this challenge in quite the critical spirit the task requires.

Bookshops today are full of how-to-write-poetry manuals, untroubled by any conception of poetry except as self-expression, and while *Beyond the Lyric* abounds in sociological and political pronouncements they do not fare notably better than the how-to guides at connecting with a sense of history. To start with modernism: British resistance to this movement, we are told, may stem from discomfort at its 'hands-dirty acknowledgement that poems are *made of something*'. This is one objection to *The Waste Land* I hadn't heard before, but like an uncomfortably hot plate the argument is no sooner picked up than dropped again. Made of what? Sampson doesn't tell us; the terms of the argument are never set out. Consequently, a basic problem with the cheery chapter groupings of *Beyond the Lyric* ('The Iambic Legislators', 'Free and Easy?', 'The Anecdotalists') is how much sense they make on their own terms and how little they make on anyone else's. The opening chapter on 'The Plain Dealers' establishes a solidarity of plain-speaking between Dannie Abse, Alan Brownjohn, Elaine Feinstein, Anthony Thwaite, Fleur Adcock, Herbert Lomas and Ruth Fainlight before, unaccountably, adding Peter Redgrove to the mix (if ever there was a born obscurantist it was Redgrove). Their role appears to be to act as ration book-era foils to the Sixties dandies who turn up in the following chapter. But what of other poets of a similar vintage failed by this label? Where are Roy Fisher, Charles Tomlinson, Edwin Morgan, Christopher Middleton, Rosemary Tonks and Christopher Logue? In three cases not in the index and in the other three cases name-dropped once. I don't expect Sampson to cram in every last eligible writer but what she does not do is acknowledge any blurring of her categories, or the possibility of conflict between rival groups and generations as a driver of poetic history, let alone conflict within groups and generation, as explored by Heather Clark in *The Ulster Renaissance: Poetry in Belfast 1962–1972*, to take a random counter-example. Instead, homogenous groups and generations coexist peaceably or give way one to another like relay racers, with the odd, muffled note of dissent passed over without development ('... the poetic

mainstream that both Bob Cobbing and Michael Horovitz sought to resist'). British poetry may be 'quarrelsome' and 'cantankerous' as well as 'fascinating', and a chapter may have the word 'exploded' in its title ('The Exploded Lyric'), but most of the conflict has happened behind the scenes here rather than on the page. This may be to underestimate the amount of disagreement a book on this subject can absorb. The problem goes beyond disagreement, though, to anything that stretches this book's easygoing taxonomies too uncomfortably around the edges.

By way of immediate example, a chapter on 'The Touchstone Lyricists' (all three of them: Gillian Clarke, Sarah Maguire, Michael Longley) makes no mention of that term's Arnoldian genealogy or the awkward cultural politics of imposing an Arnoldian framework on an Irish poet (no Ulyssean 'agenbite of inwit' here). A chapter on 'The New Formalists' might set up reasonable expectations of some contextual description of that term's origins in the US. These are not forthcoming, instead of which we are offered the bizarre lumping together of Ciaran Carson, Mimi Khalvati and Don Paterson under this entirely unconvincing flag of convenience. Why not add chapters on John Riley, Jeremy Over and Maggie Hannan as 'The Language Poets' or Roger McGough and Adrian Mitchell as 'The Beat Generation'? Critical labels, or some critical labels at least, have meanings and histories that cannot be overwritten by the herding instinct of the press-release. Yet if the literary movement is a community of sorts ('A literary movement', said AE, 'consists of five or six authors who live in the same town and hate each other cordially'), a more developed theory of its dynamics ought to be among Sampson's priorities. Critics study, but need not succumb, to groupthink. *Beyond the Lyric* has problems resisting the temptation. Poetry, it insists, is 'above all a communitarian form'. In Sampson's most stirring formulation of this theory, poetry is 'the hum of neighbourly voices in a meeting-hall. To be welcomed in, all you need do is open the door', which brings us within hailing instance of the *Cheers* theme-song, with poetry as a bar 'where everybody knows your name'.

Few words have taken as comprehensive a battering from contemporary Newspeak as 'community'. Long before 'care in the community', anyone who followed the Troubles on BBC Northern Ireland will have grown accustomed to the 'community representative', whose belligerent and sectarian outpourings the c-word debarred the unfortunate interviewer from challenging. To Sampson, however, the word and its adjectival proxies have retained an entirely unsullied and utopian charge. Michael Longley has a 'dignified and also modest role as a communal spokesman', staging 'communal truths' in 'images or stories that will be universally understood'. (It gets worse when we look abroad and learn that the Serbian and Palestinian Vasko Popa and Mahmoud Darwish come from 'socially and culturally unified communities'.) A critic might wish to dwell on the pathos of the individual in but also against the community, the profound and violent struggles between the two dramatized in Heaney's *North*, now going one way now the other, but this struggle appears lost on Sampson. Elsewhere, the benefits of community membership are spelled out in more detail. A chapter on the 'Oxford Elegists' (Fuller, Jenkins, Imlah, Motion) is often little more than a rehashing of these writers' CVs, from Magdalen College to *Poetry Review*, the *TLS* and Chatto (from which two of these poets 'went upstairs' to Faber). 'Enthusiasms are shared and junior colleagues helped along', we are told in what sounds like a memo for a staff training day, a spectacle that is 'always encouraging'. Meanwhile, by the time of his death in 2004, the group centred on Michael Donaghy 'sometimes appeared to be the only community within British poetry.' I will hazard that Sampson is not advancing this claim in the same spirit as *Private Eye*, when they complained about the judging of the 2002 Forward Prize; but failing this scenario, nothing pejorative I might add could possibly top the shock value of this statement. If this is Sampson's idea of poetic communities in Britain today, what must her idea of poetic coteries be? Where is her natural scepticism towards so degraded a word, so degraded a concept?

A key aspect of any discussion of poetry and community in the

United Kingdom is class, but here *Beyond the Lyric* encounters an almighty stumbling block. This makes itself felt in the first instance in questions of terminology or, in a word for which Sampson shows a marked weakness, 'tone'. All four poets in a chapter on 'The Anecdotalists' 'write proudly about working-class roots'. Does Andrew Motion write 'proudly' about his middle-class 'roots'? A note of unthinking condescension is sounded over and over: Ian Duhig is 'that rare thing in contemporary British verse, a working-class poet' (where did Craig Raine's working-class childhood go, in the discussion of Martianism?); when Tony Harrison began combining traditional verse forms with working-class subject matter this kind of 'transfusion' 'had yet to be normalized' (says whose 'normality?'); Derek Walcott writes of the dignified, archetypal experiences of small fishing communities; British poetry of class consciousness draws on a vernacular tradition of 'ballads, fishermen's shanties and work songs from industrial communities such as mining' (a community 'such as mining?'); Ken Smith is the 'prison-visiting, working-class Ken Smith'; and Irish poets look back on harsh rural childhoods as 'a world they have escaped, usually through education; an exception is the working-class Galway poet Rita Ann Higgins' (is Higgins an exception because she grew up in a city, isn't educated, or hasn't escaped her childhood poverty? The syntax is incoherent.) Yet Tom Leonard doesn't even make it to the index. The problem goes beyond tone and theme, as questions of community also intrude on Sampson's theories of language and meaning. A repeated habit of *Beyond the Lyric* is the intimation that writers hand over responsibility for meaning from the individual to the community, *langue* and *parole*-style perhaps, though how this meaning comes to be in the individual's gift to begin with is never explained. The anecdotal poem 'transfers meaning from person to community', John Fuller 'delegates meaning-making (. . .) to quoted material', and Jo Shapcott's solution to a stylistic problem is 'to delegate any gestures towards capital-M meaning.' Would re-delegating responsibility for their meaning back to Sampson help to clarify what is going on in these sentences?

Why is it, I wonder, that this opacity is so prone to emerging when the individual's relationship with the group is at issue, or the close reading of a short lyric is asked to carry the weight of a larger argument? Frequently, the problem comes down to that question of 'tone' again, the press-ganging first-person plural assuming assent and blanking all disagreement. No other explanation springs to mind for sentences such as this one: 'The Tommy missing in action, the awful hoarding at the concentration camps, are touchstones that we as a society have been forced to agree.' Perhaps if a community 'such as editing', to adopt the Sampson style, had intervened more forcefully, we might have been spared further nostrums in the same vein: 'The twentieth century's world wars and the societal shifts they triggered were a kind of 'trump' that affected all writers and artists.' Unless intended as a Joycean trouser-salute to history, I don't know what the word 'trump' is doing here. (And speaking of editing, a blue pencil might have made itself busy with Sampson's free-and-easy way with spuriously emphatic italics ('a Burnside poem also escapes from *itself*', 'In anecdote poems, *the thing that happens* is working as a metaphor, or a symbol, in the way that a *thing* usually does', 'Greenlaw's verse may be rich with *particular* themes and resonances, but it doesn't have a complicated *relationship* to those meanings').

If this is confusing, consider Sampson's relationship to the basic co-ordinates of the critical map she is drawing. *Beyond the Lyric* directs a barb at Kate Clanchy and Sasha Dugdale for 'orientalism', but doesn't even need to leave the United Kingdom to break out in an exoticizing rash of its own. Carson (a 'native of Belfast', no less), Khalvati and Paterson occupy 'edgy' positions, we read. Whose edge, whose centre? This is lazy, inflationary writing. Still on the subject of the centre and the edge, Sampson exhibits no small confusion as to what does and does not fall within her remit when she insists she has included Northern Irish poets 'not for complex political reasons' (such as Northern Ireland being part of the United Kingdom?), 'but because they work and publish under the

same conditions as the rest of British poetry (no tax-breaks or life-time pensions from the Aosdana for them). First, it is 'Aosdána', not 'the Aosdana'. Second, its members receive grant assistance only if not otherwise in paid employment. Third, Aosdána has all-Ireland membership and is not restricted to the Republic. And fourth, several well-known Northern Irish poets (Carson, McGuckian, Gillis) publish with presses based in the Republic while, equally, not a few well-known poets from the Republic (Riordan, O'Donoghue, Durcan) publish in London or other Ukainian outposts. These still aren't very 'complex political reasons': this is the bog-standardness, rather than the drunkenness, of things being various, and Sampson's failure to grasp them is not to her credit.

T. S. Eliot has an endearing tic of affecting not to know what a poet meant when it is obvious he understands all too well, but since I have now pleaded ignorance of Sampson's meaning and argument several times over, let me stress my good faith: I am genuinely at a loss. Perhaps it is a question of scale: *Beyond the Lyric* is too short to aspire to full-scale literary history but too big to manage without some obligatory colouring-in of its period backdrop. The upshot is a book-length series of hiccups and stallings, as Sampson throws out one generalisation after another but fails to corral them into an overarching thesis. What do all those fancifully named but atomized schools add up to, beyond a mixed choir limply informing us, in Sampson's words, that 'there's more than one kind of poetry in the world'? As Edna Longley once asked, was there any particular reason Shelley did not title his essay *A Defence of Poetries*?

On an individual level too, poets suffer from inaccurate and reductive labelling. Paul Muldoon's current identity as an American poet means 'we simply cannot call him a British poet', thus ruling him out of consideration, though we learn he has transformed himself into a 'trickster-poet' since his 2002 collection, *Moy Sand and Gravel*, as though he has not been an archetypal trickster since his first collection almost thirty years before. Clichés are shepherded into place: Jackie Kay 'burst onto the

British poetry scene' and is a writer 'for whom the personal is always political', while French theory comes 'hot off the Paris barricades'. Anyone who knows their Geoffrey Hill will cherish his wise-crack that 'Public toilets have a duty to be accessible, poetry does not', which makes it all the more remarkable that Sampson should hail *Mercian Hymns* as a collection that 'seems "accessible"'. And there is more. Some smaller-scale mistakes and pratfalls: 'Épatent' should be 'épatant'; Sean O'Brien (the book's dedicatee) was born in London, not Hull; the 'Roberts' on page 154 is (Robin) Robertson; Hugh MacDiarmid may have been an autodidact, but 'didact' on its own is meaningless; still on MacDiarmid, why is he a 'communitarian idealist' rather than a plain 'Communist?'; it's Robert Greacen, not 'Graecen'; at one point Larkin's work exhibits a 'general lack of tunefulness' before, a few lines later, showing a 'highly traditional music' instead; in what is already one of his most misunderstood lines, the same Larkin did not write 'what remains of us is love', he wrote 'what will survive of us is love'; the third-last syllable of a word is 'antepenultimate', not 'pen-pen-ultimate'; the *New Princeton Encyclopaedia of Poetry and Poetics* is innocent of the terms 'sestrameter' and 'quatrameter'; Adorno never said 'No poetry after Auschwitz' (he said that it was 'barbaric' to write poetry after Auschwitz); a list of Hull poets includes someone called 'John Osbourne', presumably the editor of *Bête Noire* and Larkin scholar John Osborne; Raymond Carver was already dead by 1989; a woman may be a *protégée* but not a '*protégé*'; 'so much', not 'everything' depends on William Carlos Williams' red wheelbarrow; Anne Stevenson has not written a biography of Elizabeth Bishop; Les Murray's *Fredy Neptune* is not written in iambic pentameter; if modernism, 'as the term suggests', 'has faith in progress', the modernists Sampson has been reading can't include T. E. Hulme, Wyndham Lewis, T. S. Eliot or David Jones, for a start (though elsewhere Sampson writes that the belief in literary movements is an 'old-fashioned' legacy of modernism); and John Burnside's *Black Cat Bone* is 'much-awarded', which I take to be shorthand for Sampson having served on that year's Forward Prize committee (is

it normal for writers to mention in critical books having awarded their subjects prizes?).

I have dwelt on Sampson's weakness for communities, but one grouping that fails to feature in *Beyond the Lyric* is that of her fellow critics. *Beyond the Lyric* finds room for neither footnotes nor bibliography. She managed to accommodate them in her essay collection *On Listening*, or a bibliography at least, so perhaps this was an editorial decision here. Still, the entire twentieth century, she claims, produced only two 'serious attempt[s]' to respond critically to the contemporary poetry of the day, Leavis's *New Bearings in English Poetry* and Sean O'Brien's *The Deregulated Muse*. Sampson likes the idea of a poetry that 'serves' its readers, but other critics are readers of poetry too: their omission here should not be allowed pass without comment. It is extremely silly, to put it no more harshly than that. Towards the beginning of *Beyond the Lyric* Sampson derides the innocent belief that 'successful achievement' in poetry is 'all about power and influence'. One revealing index of how well she succeeds in overturning such preconceptions would be the number of overlooked or neglected poets championed in this book. Eccentric moments aside, such as a commendation for the work of Chloe Stopa-Hunt (b. 1989), 'already publishing in periodicals' but not in book form, this is not a book overly devoted to rescuing the casualties of canon-making, though I was glad of the attention paid to Frances Horovitz, Frances Presley, Wendy Mulford, Barry MacSweeney, Elizabeth Bletsoe and Herbert Lomas. Writers I was sorry not to see considered, by contrast, include Thom Gunn (not exactly a historical figure yet, I would have hoped), F. T. Prince (ditto), Lynette Roberts, Michael Hofmann, Peter Riley, John Ash, Douglas Oliver, Helen Macdonald, Peter Manson, Patrick McGuinness, R. F. Langley, Frank Kuppner, Richard Price, John Riley, Michael Haslam, Vahni Capildeo, Sasha Dugdale, Mark Ford, Alan Gillis, Zoë Skoulding, Paul Batchelor, Sinéad Morrissey and J. O. Morgan. Despite this, my scepticism towards *Beyond the Lyric* is not based on its author failing to share my preferences and prejudices, nor is my main

problem with it the errors catalogued above, damaging though they are. My principal point is that it is essentially a series of appreciations one large and unbridged gap away from the larger picture it consistently promises but fails to deliver.

It is not difficult to think of critical studies with sceptical and harsh things to say about the poets studied, but which still strike the reader as fundamentally generous in conception, in the breadth and seriousness of their execution. *Beyond the Lyric* is devoted almost exclusively to praise, but falls short of true generosity – a rather distinct quality from the enthusiasm Sampson possesses in such abundance. It is too nervy a performance for that, too careful not to stray off-message or allow for a broader range of ambitions than popularizing and enforcing unspoken boundary lines beyond its various principalities. With its already-quoted insistence that 'There's more than one kind of poetry in the world', it fatally invites the live-and-let-live comeback that there is more than one kind of poetry criticism in the world too.

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STEPHEN ROMER

Clive James, *Nefertiti in the Flak Tower*

November 2012

Clive James is our very own neo-Augustan – his gleaming formal structures go about their discursive business of conveying a clear idea, and setting forth a recognizable place and context in which the idea can take root and flourish. Thought and emotion, object and subject, analogy and resemblance, vision and revision, sound and sense – the constituents of all poetry become a fluent traffic in the well-proportioned architecture of an ideal James poem. His verses do not become clotted, they do not fragment under semantic or syntactic pressure, they place their trust in a stable subject, a shared perception, a tonal subtlety, in the natural life of the perceiving ego. His poems shuttle easily between past and present, and though he knows – he would not attempt – the danger and the folly of writing the poem including history – history, or fragments of it that concern him personally, are readily available. Known to be a polymath – he is certainly well-read – he practises the art of allusion but without drawing attention to it, the allusion is also subdued to his overriding aim – to deliver the idea, the conceit and create the poetic emotion in his reader. The fragments he unearths, and inserts, do not, as in the Modernists or in a neo-Modernist like Geoffrey Hill take on a life of their own, or come to constitute an antagonistic voice, or a dramatic chorus which threatens to deflect or overburden or impact upon the

fluent traffic of the matter in hand. This voice will suffer no impediment, except one conjured and exorcized on its own terms. Language is firmly kept in check – Clive James is a serious student of Auden – and it remains firmly in the service of clarity. He is, to use the jargon, a poet of the referent, eschewing wordplay, ambiguity and a *signifiante* that never quite settles on meaning – in a word he is not a card-carrying post-modern. He is also very funny.

All this, as far as I am concerned, is a cause if not for rejoicing exactly, then certainly for pleasure. Whose primary dictum was it? – *it must give pleasure* – and Clive James assuredly and repeatedly delivers that welcome commodity. Voice is everything – or rather, tone of voice. Thanks to his other life – his life in showbiz, in what he calls ‘the blaze of obscurity’ – we are familiar with that winning flat unfazed Australian drawl, delivering its witty and ironic commentary. One can hear it in the poems – even though in many of these late poems there is an elegiac lilt and swoon – but he is never lost for words or for a phrase, rather in the sense of Walter Pater’s comment to Oscar: ‘Really, Mr Wilde, you have a phrase for everything’. Clive James has made a parallel career of commenting on the fads and follies of the times, and no one does it more wittily – his talent is riotously let loose in the one indisputably and generically comic item in the book: ‘Iliad !’, with the sub-title: ‘from a fragment of an ancient manuscript recently discovered in the ruins of Los Angeles’. The opening ‘paragraph’ sets the tone :

Then well-toned Brad of the head wider in the jowls than in the brow, Brad of the digitally enhanced thigh, addressed his army of computer generated warriors, saying : Computer generated warriors, merely because the city we besiege is suddenly full of water would you fall back? Are you afraid of Kevin ?

There follows a four-page romp (I believe the piece was originally turned in as a review of Hollywood’s preposterous *Troy*) in which the celebrity cast gets treated to a range of Homeric epithets: we have ‘Angelina of the

exaggerated curvature and the extensive self-harm', and a little later, of the 'inconceivably curvaceous rack'; there is 'Mel of the hair extensions and the deficient anger-management' and 'Naomi of the dark elegance and the irrational anger' who lets fly her telephone 'at Russell of the neck wider than his head' ... and so on and so forth. 'Iliad!' is unforgettable, though it is less formally worked than some of the earlier comic classics – one thinks of 'The Book of My Enemy' or 'Bring Me The Sweat of Gabriela Sabatini' or 'A Gesture Towards James Joyce', or of James's inaugural piece of Augustan satire, dating from the 'seventies, 'Peregrine Pryke's Pilgrimage Through Literary London'.

Which brings us to one of the many fascinating paradoxes and difficulties of dealing with a phenomenon as mercurial – or as slippery – as Clive James. 'He's a brilliant bunch of guys' as one wag described him in the *New Yorker*. As a fundamentally serious and thoughtful man, aiming to be taken seriously as a poet – this much is now clear, and openly admitted in the copious notes on his website – he is a victim of his own wit. He risks being remembered as a brilliant talker – I still recall gags from his End of the Year Shows – Nigel Mansell crowned as the 'most boring sporting celebrity' several years running – and as the author of a handful of very funny poems (the ones I have just mentioned). He risks (let us be honest about this) the resentment of his poet-peers viz how can a man who is apparently so successful at everything, a polymath and a TV celebrity, both here and in his homeland Australia, and presumably wealthy to boot, lay claim to the laurel as well? He is already a successful writer of prose autobiography, cultural criticism and song-lyrics. Not that I begrudge Clive James anything – for one thing he has provided abundant pleasure. But here – asked to review *Nefertiti in the Flak Tower* – one is put on the spot. Despite hearing the familiar drawl and wit, I must lay aside my memories of Clive James the clown and take seriously a self-description he has given 'I'm a crying man that everyone calls Laughing Boy'.

There are manly tears aplenty in *Nefertiti*, sub-titled 'Collected Verse

2008–2011'. The sub-title of course is a cunning strategy – one that is present throughout the volume – that of self-deprecation. But the length and formal ambition of the verses that follow will fool no one – for James, poetry is a competitive sport, and he can do the formal, regular, rhyming stuff better and more cleanly than most. Without raising the hare of 'verse or poetry?', I have no hesitation in awarding the title 'poem' to many pieces in this book. James is a self-advertised polymath, but in that rare breed there is a familiar and touching vulnerability: confront them with a true scholar or specialist of any particular period or subject, and the beast will back down, and show signs of deference if not even obeisance. One person to whom James shows an almost boyish deference is his wife of many years, the Dante scholar Prue Shaw. This is explicitly the case in 'Book Review', his touching *hommage* to her 'brilliant scholar's soul'. The book under review is Shaw's edition of Dante's *Monarchia*, done for the ultimate Dante 'authority', the Società Dantesca Italiana. For James, the publication after twenty years in preparation of this book, presents a rare opportunity (he is famously reticent about his family life in his memoirs) to express both admiration and love. He does it with grace :

Today, so far from our first years, I bless
My judgement, which in any other case
Is something we both know I don't possess,
But one thing I did know. I knew my place.
I knew yours was the true gift that would bring
Our house the honours that mean everything ...

Note though, even here, the weight laid on honour, achievement – and on competition. Nothing if not competitive, on numerous occasions Clive James pitted his wits and broke lances against another famous Australian expat London-based poet, also a brilliant and copious talker, his friend Peter Porter. (There are audio cassettes available of the two men 'in dialogue'). Porter, who died in 2010, is the subject of two elegies

here, most movingly in the poem 'Silent Sky'. There are moments when James strikes the unmistakable Auden note :

There's all our usual stuff of which to speak;
Pictures and poems, things that never die,
And then there's history, which in the end
No one survives, not even your best friend.

Unable to bring himself to utter what he knows will in all likelihood be a final farewell, the poet changes tack – 'Better to wear my mask/Of good cheer ...' The mask of good cheer is the mask of Democritus, that Robert Burton clamps over his features in his *Anatomy of Melancholy*. Many of the poems in *Nefertiti* are composed *sub signo doloris*, in the sign of Saturn. The elegiac note is not difficult to strike – *do you remember when – and how and where ?* – though it is especially well done in 'Silent Sky', and in the upbeat opening poem (another piece addressed to his spouse) 'Signing Ceremony'. A more interesting angle is taken in 'Grief Has Its Time', one of the finest achievements in the book, in which James's many qualities come to bear. The poem is in part a homage to Samuel Johnson – one of the great Augustan heroes, the writer who almost defines good sense, the great debunker of poppycock. The poem enfolds within it an anecdote that happened to James himself. Taking her place at the end of the signing queue, after one of his public readings, 'An ancient lady touched my wrist and said/ I'd made her smile the way he used to do/ When hearts were won by how a young man read ...'. The young man in question went to war and did not return, which makes one wonder if the ancient lady is in fact not the ghost of James's own mother; he has recounted elsewhere, in poetry and prose, the central 'traumatic fact' of his own life – the death of his father in an accidental air crash, on his way home to Australia, having survived the horrors of Changi POW camp. The guilt James has borne, of being lucky, and how he feels enjoined to live life intensely and productively, as if to make up for what his parents never had, has begun to enter his

prose memoirs and his poems. Other writers of his generation have expressed regret, sometimes bitterly, at coming 'too late' to participate in the fight, and share the experience of their fathers and their elder brothers. The ancient lady shakes James's conviction that he is 'blessed with the light touch,/ A blithesome ease ...' He finds that his words have cut deeper than he supposes – and here the voice of Johnson rejoins the poem

'Be certain, sir, we take a deeper tone
Than we believe. Enough now for tonight.'

The most memorable poems here are those that have the whiff of the *vécu* – they are often the shorter ones, less the set-pieces – when Clive James the seventy year old smiling celeb is shaken in his self-belief, and his life, caught off-guard, 'turns to face itself'. 'Special Needs', about an encounter with a severely disabled child accompanied by his father is such a poem.

But James is rarely fazed for long, and even in these poems there is a suspicion that, yes, he suffers self-doubt a moment, or guilt, or shame – but he rights himself quickly. He is incorrigibly buoyant, and he has the gift of – to employ the demotic as he does on occasion – covering his arse. He has the kind of ironical intelligence that allows him to compose poems in the round, and to distance himself at the right moments, if an emotion is coming through too raw or an analogy is taking him too far. He is a self-conscious poet (for Eliot, a mark of the 'civilized mind'), and in 'Fashion Statement', a remarkably clear-sighted vision of his youth and apprentice years in Australia, he delivers a poetics of style, both poetic and sartorial. He casts his young self as a dandy, in art and dress:

For nothing rules like easy eloquence
Tied to the facts yet taking off at will
Into the heady realms of common sense
Condensed and energised by verbal skill :

It has no need to check before a glass
The swerve of a frock coat around its arse.

This kind of self-consciousness can itself become a device, a tic, used to disarm the reader (but it also can disarm the poem, damagingly) – in ‘Book Review’, mentioned above, the self-deprecation can seem a tad overdone – methinks the gentleman doth protest too much. An astonishing poem in this regard, written (one is given to imagine) from his hospital bed in Addenbrookes, is ‘Vertical Envelopment’. This long piece in irregular blank verse, is a kind of fantasy-cum-diary in which the poet recounts his illness as an overwhelming assault, and the running parallel he creates is with the experience of young men in wartime:

Taking the piss out of my catheter,
The near-full plastic bag bulks on my calf
As I drag my I.V. tower through Addenbrooke’s
Like an airborne soldier heading for D-Day
Down the longest corridor in England.

The gritty demotic macho tone is sustained – even though he is also ‘taking the piss’ out of his own pretensions at such analogy throughout. Improbably, despite or perhaps because of the rough edges, he pulls it off, though crucially, near the end, by taking distance in the familiar way:

Another night alive
To lie awake and rue the blasphemy
By which I take their deaths as mine, the young
Soldiers of long ago, in the first years
Of my own full span, who went down through the dark
With no lives to look back on. Their poor mothers.

Along the way, we can hear the familiar drawl and the easy wit – surviving even in these dire circumstances – and for that, frankly, one can only say *chapeau!*

Bruises from Clexane like Kandinsky abstracts
Blotch me with blue and yellow and bright pink,
A waistline from the Lenbach Haus in Munich.

It is a piece of bravura, but it is genuinely brave. If writing from the terminal, or nearly-terminal ward – or from the ‘departure lounge’ as James has dubbed it – is becoming almost a genre *de nos jours*, then this is a very honourable instance of it.

Clive James’s poetic *œuvre* contains poems that are about poetics, and set-piece poems addressed to poets he admires – ‘What Happened To Auden’ is a celebrated one – and in this latest volume there is a long, stately account of ‘The Later Yeats’ and a shorter piece entitled ‘A Bracelet for Geoffrey Hill’. It can be a risky procedure, this business of paying homage to one’s literary heroes. The Yeats poem is written out in a series of eight sonnets of unusual and subtly varied rhyme scheme – and James is tough-minded enough to drive for the full chime every time. It is a homage to Yeats written in the tones of Auden:

Where he sought symbols, we, for him, must seek
A metaphor, lest mere praise should fall short ...

has that unmistakable, confident, hypotactic cadence, the first plural person used with such persuasive authority. Unfortunately, the metaphor chosen – I would prefer the word analogy – which is that Yeats’s work is comparable to a boat, or to a series of boats that grow bigger and more adventurous – sinks under the strain it is asked to bear, and takes in water, falling into banality:

These would have been enough to make him great :
The caravels that reached Byzantium
Alone proved him unmatched. Then, at the heart
Of this flotilla, as if light were haze,
Something appeared to strike the viewer dumb :
A huge three-decker fighting ship of state.

James, true to his usual technique, attempts to recoup the poem by distancing himself from his own analogy, which sinks it further, and offers advice on how to read Yeats –

Worse than absurd, then – witless, in the end –
To trace him through his visionary schemes
And systems...

and he risks the lapidary but becomes sententious:

Few things are true
About the life except the work.

Whatever that means. The danger here of course is that, prompted by the poem, one then takes down Yeats from the shelf – and re-reads, say, the magnificent summation called ‘Dove or Swan’ that concludes *A Vision*, and one notes, among other things, that it may not actually be ‘witless’ to read it with attention. It may actually contain insight and wisdom. Then one turns to the late poems James rightly picks out for singular praise – ‘Among School Children’ or ‘All Souls Night’. Every line of these poems has a specific gravity, grace and stateliness his disciple can never match, and Clive James’s opinions, whether in praise or blame (the part of blame I suspect prompted by the passage in Auden’s own elegy for Yeats that begins ‘You were silly like us’) come to seem nugatory, or like received opinion. The poem for Geoffrey Hill is interesting chiefly because in it James seems – consciously or unconsciously – to be feeling towards an understanding of what it is, precisely, that is missing from his own fluent verse. Two phrases in fact finger it – ‘the densely wrought’ and ‘Coherent multiplicity’. We come to realize that what makes James’s poetry, despite the qualities I have outlined, seem characteristically thin-textured, is that it is essentially univocal, there lacks the torque or texture of ‘a battle won – or lost – against silence and incoherence’ which for Hill defines the poem. There is lacking the authentically dramatic element, the ‘antiphonal voice of the heckler’; there is somehow

insufficient impediment, the submarine rocks, the currents, the small whirlpools and counter-currents that create interesting disturbance on the surface of a great, light-bearing river. The voices, the ghosts, even the friends and the loved ones are summoned up in an orderly way, and he can conjure them away as quickly. His experience is centripetal. What impedes him is always a shame or guilt of his own imagining, and frequently it is quickly righted; he is chiefly haunted by ‘the shadow of my former life’. ‘Your life has turned to look you in the face’ is the final line of a critical and moving poem that confronts his own mortality. Is it because he discovered that ‘life is arbitrary’? Finally, no transcendent or demonic Other provides impediment or gives him pause. He is not to be blamed for that, but the lack of it makes for a thinness in the work. This is to judge him by the severest standards (as presumably he would demand, summoning Yeats and Hill as he does). He does dearly, touchingly, want something to remain ‘When we are gone’; possibly a ‘fistful of poems’ as he has opined in public, ruefully. He has every right to such a modest claim, and I think it will be borne out. But not necessarily for the poems he would have chosen himself. The world being pig-headed and lazy, he will be remembered for his ‘funnies’ and for giving, generously and unstintingly, much pleasure.

© Stephen Romer, 2012

Clive James, *Nefertiti in the Flak Tower*, Collected Verse 2008–2011, Picador, 2012.

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RICHARD O'BRIEN

Caroline Bird, *The Hat-Stand Union*

September 2013

'The people from the London suburbs don't believe in God,' writes Caroline Bird in her fourth collection, *The Hat-Stand Union*. It's the opening line of a poem called 'Genesis', and could serve as an origin point for the concerns of the whole volume. Speaking in the first-person plural, Bird's voice doesn't distance itself from that implied metropolitan smugness, but her declarative 'don't believe' is one of the book's few certainties. In a world detached from all sources of external validation (similarly doubtful poems include 'Faith', 'Atheism', and 'Public Detectives', with its stark finale: 'It's as if no one's listening'), Bird's speakers frequently evince a numb lostness, searching for significance whatever the consequence.

At its most effective, this produces work like 'Mystery Tears'. Subtitled, somewhat restrictively, 'a poem about hysteria', Bird sketches an alternative reality where artificial tears can be purchased online as a dubiously-legal high:

'My partner sadly became addicted to Mystery Tears.
A thousand pounds went in a week
and everything I did provoked despair.
She loved the trickling sensation.
'It's so romantic,' she said, 'and yet I feel nothing.'

The overwhelming desire to feel something raises questions over the role of authenticity. Does the character actually want to experience genuine emotion, or is this replacement preferable? Is the 'despair' a chemical creation, and does it matter if, however perversely, it makes the sufferer happy? Does 'sadly' apply to the speaker or the partner, and what does a word like 'sadly' mean in a poem where emotion can be bought and sold?

'Each day she woke up

calmer and calmer',

Bird concludes. A still point has been reached, but at what cost? The search for calm amid frenetic overstimulation is key to *The Hat-Stand Union*: in 'How the Wild Horse Stopped Me', the titular quadraped coerces the narrator into agreeing to the statement that she 'just want[s] silence in [her] head', and over the page we find 'The Island Woman of Coma Dawn' attempting to carve 'calm mineral caves'. Elsewhere, a speaker refers longingly to 'the calmest place I've ever been', and another is informed that 'There is nothing more relaxed, more tranquil/than living alone in a kennel in a church.' Here if nowhere else, there is a caving in to faith:

'and what with no TV,
no Travel Scrabble, no rowing machine,
there was *literally* nothing to do
but pray.'

The clutter lacking from the church stands in for all the modern noise which signal has to struggle to break through. Bird's poems don't often go in for moments of transcendent realisation; as such, however, they sometimes risk falling themselves into the ephemeral materials from

which they are constructed. Take 'Empty Nest' – a series of statements beginning with the none-more-striking 'My home country has flourished/under the dictatorship of ABBA', each of which by the fact of succession disavows its own importance: 'but the issue is not that.' To speculate about what the issue is might be to fall into the very trap set by this kind of contemporary hermetic surrealism. Nonetheless, whereas poets mining similar veins – such as Luke Kennard and Heather Phillipson – seem to conjure a real joy from dislocation, Bird's displacements can confuse more than they reward.

'2:19 to Whitstable' is a case in point. It's a startling, inventive monologue, its anaphoric structure lending it the quality of ritual, in which a lover reluctantly defers the decision to leave her partner by reeling off a series of extreme and unfulfillable criteria which range from the impossible – 'I'm leaving once inanimate objects get the vote' – to the simply unpalatable – 'I'm leaving once this affair makes one of us a necrophiliac.' But occasionally, a line appears which feels so far left-field of the central relationship as to distract the reader from the poem's otherwise compelling forward movement: 'I'm leaving once our agents have fallen in lust'; 'I'm leaving once there's an Oscar buzz around your psychologist'. This tendency towards derailment – introducing seemingly irrelevant characters or references into previously self-contained situations, such as the custard cream-toting 'bus traveller' who pops up for a single bemusing line in a sequence riffing on the myths of Camelot – felt to me like a dilution of the power of certain poems. It is, perhaps, the logical extension of the linguistic overspill addressed in 'Rain', where Bird compares poetic language to 'liquid thunder'.

The best work in this collection sees Bird marrying the ludic and the lucid. 'Lancelot's Poetry Reading in Smoky Bar' and 'A Disgruntled Knight', the 10th and 12th poems in the Camelot sequence, present Arthur's court as an anachronistic nightmare devoid of chivalric valour, where 'expendable brothers with rhyming names' become 'ugly red-

brown stains on the battlefield'. As for the holy grail, 'They took it to paint it for a magazine and now it's disappeared.' The vocabulary of modern celebrity culture allows the author to deconstruct the destructive pomp of a society built on brutal heroism, where 'romantic leads' can lead hundreds of underlings to their deaths. Blending registers and frames of reference, Bird mocks our persistent need to romanticise the premature deaths of icons:

'Camelot, the more miserable I get, the more handsome I become.
If I ever commit suicide, a nation of women will orgasm
simultaneously.
Camelot, lube up your cemeteries.'

'Medicine', however, finds a way to celebrate life, working in simple couplets through a jumble of contradictory positions ('My head says willing/My heart says slave'; 'My head says children/My heart says, how?') which resolve themselves into a hard-won unity:

'My head says mend
My heart says, how?

My head says willing
My heart says now'

It's partly a poem about taking control of your own narrative. Throughout *The Hat-Stand Union*, figures from the Knights of the Round Table, to a Biblical crab, to the theatre director Joan Littlewood, refuse to be defined by the stories other people tell. In 'Username: specialgirl2345', Bird's speaker rejects a series of epithets which 'Some people call me', declaring: 'I'm not a cult. I'm a small person' [...] 'I am not religious. I have no guiding star.' The self-determination which these poems manifest in the face of an often meaningless, sometimes overwhelming

society, is commendable; a context which may go some way towards explaining their occasional propensity to retreat into the puzzles of private myth.

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Caroline Bird, The Hat-Stand Union, Carcanet Press, 2012,
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TESS SOMERVELL

Tara Bergin, *This is Yarrow*

September 2013

Tara Bergin's debut collection introduces a mental world of weird voices, tense relationships, dreamy (or perhaps nightmarish) places and nearly magical animals. It does seem to be one world that the poems occupy, varied though they are: from a returning soldier coming through town on Armistice Day to a boy on a stag-night to an academic giving a paper, Bergin's characters are disturbed and unsettled, searching their repressive environments for meaning and security. 'I am unwell and far from home' ('White Crow').

Clearly we should connect this unsettlement with Bergin's Irishness (she is from Dublin, though has lived in England since 2002). Several of the poems invite this connection in their explicit concern with Irish identity in all its power and fragility: there are references, for instance, to Yeats's political poems 'Sixteen Dead Men' and 'The Rose Tree'. This one level of context, though, takes us but a little way; to it the poems are far from reducible. When it comes to identities, the narrators in *This is Yarrow* prove elusive. No voice in the collection belongs to a really identifiable figure, certainly not to any fully-fleshed-out persona. Each poem offers up a fragment of a life, and, more provokingly, just a fragment of a story.

It was my fault for kneeling in your dark chamber or closet
when I told you my name was –
dee da, dee da

(‘The Confession’).

Pervading *This is Yarrow* is a sense of the unsaid and the unwritten – a recurrent image is of ‘restriction. / In the hands especially’ (‘Restriction’), of ‘muteness in my hands.’ (‘The Passion Flower’.) Each poem is a stammer towards revelation that finds itself falling short, and falls into quietness.

This can be frustrating, and Bergin pushes her poems to the precipice of acceptable obscurity. She provides a few notes at the end of the book to explain some of her references and sources, but not nearly as many as she could. However mystery is not cultivated for its own sake. Bergin’s fractionalisation bears the weight of meaning, rather than disguising the lack of it, as in too many modern poems.

And what had he done?
And what was he going to do now?

We don’t know.

(‘Christmas Window, Armistice Day’.)

Unknowing is a part of *This is Yarrow’s* world, of the experiences of its people who live with war, illness, an unstable nation, and the unfathomability of one another. In such a world – in this collection – the seemingly straightforward is exposed as denial and even becomes sinister. An apparently simple poem like ‘Candidate’, giving trite job interview advice in what might be prose or might be verse, appears downright scary in its banality following a poem like ‘Queen of the Rodeo’ that, conversely, finds terror and sublimity in the everyday. ‘Honey is feeling hemmed in’ in the face of the rodeo audience:

Give us a twirl!
calls the crowd
but Honey doesn’t twirl –
she can’t think of a word to say.
She just opens her mouth
and starts to pray:

*O my God, I am heartily sorry
for having offended thee[.]*

The advice in ‘Candidate’, ‘Here’s an example of what to say: ‘I have 10 years of experience in the accounting profession[...].’ has, in its proximity to Honey’s prayer, assumed a dormant but remarkable menace.

Similarly in the book’s opening poem, ‘Looking at Lucy’s Painting of the Thames at Low Tide Without Lucy Present’, the slightly posh voice, which begins by authoritatively confirming its analysis (‘Water is terribly difficult to paint - / and to drink, don’t you find?’), goes on to hint at an uncomfortable reality beneath the genteel veneer (‘Lucy’s face looks terribly bruised, do you find? / Especially under artificial light’), and ends on that stutter of secrecy which will be repeated throughout the rest of the collection:

I detest it of course – the work.
I simply can’t stand the academic realism of the whole endeavour.
That’s not to say it isn’t worth something.

On the contrary.

I am reminded by this quality of Wordsworth’s poem ‘The Thorn’, in which the sea-captain narrator’s simplicity and bluntness only enhance the ghoulishness of his tale, and the uncomfortable sense that that tale is not as he tells it. It is an association encouraged by Bergin’s frequent

references to and rewritings of Wordsworth, not least in her collection's title: 'This is Yarrow' is an affirmative answer to Wordsworth's poems, 'Yarrow Unvisited' and 'Yarrow Visited', the latter of which asks 'And is this Yarrow?' But the clarity and confidence of Bergin's response is undermined when her yarrow turns out to be not the river but the plant. In 'At the Lakes with Roberta', the narrator visits her idol's home county, where she 'can hardly bear the weight of this poetic air, / the air that WW breathed', but is distracted by her female companion whose 'foolish gasps of pleasure hang on the mist.' Again the disturbances and misdirections of everyday life frustrate artistic satisfaction even as they provide the substance of Bergin's poetry.

Bergin also includes a couple of her own 'Lucy' poems, obviously in homage to Wordsworth's. These references to Wordsworth's mysterious and mystical series on a deceased beloved are telling of Bergin's attraction to themes of absence and sorrow. The unknown, unrealised, and unwritten can be maddening, but it can also be beautiful, as in 'Sonnet for Catherine Who Never Turned Up':

Brave Catherine.
Don't be afraid to stay away –
Sometimes it's all that can be done.

Bergin is not afraid to 'stay away', and withhold from her readers. She withholds words as well as stories. Her style is sparing, restrained like her narratives; no-one could accuse Bergin of over-writing. She hardly ever uses similes and her vocabulary is simple even while it is sensual: 'a soft deep dirt that is soft and thick [...] It makes the whites of his eyes whiter, / and the blues bluer' ('At the Garage'). There is a haunting, skeletal beauty to the language as well as the ideas in *This is Yarrow*, alongside the uneasy emptiness: 'there is singing in the church, / even if there is no God.' ('Studying the Fresco of St Nikolai of Myra'.)

It is simplicity combined with inscrutability that characterises this

collection, but it succeeds. There are ideas in these poems that resist complete expression but strike us nonetheless as odd, awkward truths: 'How vain the sea is' ('Swiss Station Room'); 'Tracey sat [...] as if she had no light on inside' ('Sonnets for Tracey'). We may not understand all these poems, but most reward us at least with flashes of recognition. Bergin's perceptions are sharp, her senses of history, community, and relationships deep and acute, and her technical control over language and form is assured and graceful. *This is Yarrow* may deliberately leave us wanting, but it leaves us wanting more, which can be no bad thing for a first collection.

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STEVEN MCGREGOR

Kevin Powers, *Letter Composed During a
Lull in the Fighting*

August 2014

'I had a sense of being marooned,' writes Graham Greene midway through his account of travelling in Mexico, *The Lawless Roads*. When he reaches Chiapas, the 'prison wall' of the mountains, the dry season, the heat, the wary locals, his inability to speak Spanish, all catch him suddenly: 'I was overcome by an immense unreality: I couldn't even recognize my own legs in riding-boots. Why the hell was I here?'

I was continually reminded of *The Lawless Roads* as I read Kevin Powers' new book of poems about the Second Iraq War, *Letter Composed During a Lull in the Fighting*. Both are travel books, in a sense. To many in the west, war is a foreign country. It occurs in places where other languages are spoken. It affects people we have not met. And like travel writers, the soldiers of today's counterinsurgencies disturb the ground on which they walk. Their presence is a haunting one.

Similar to *Lawless Roads*, Powers' *Letter Composed During a Lull in the Fighting* is also an account of confusing isolation. The first two chapters describe various scenes of violence and longing in northern Iraq. The final two chapters describe a deteriorated, alien American South. Throughout, Powers feels separated from others, place, and time. 'History isn't over, in spite of our desire / for it to be,' begins 'The Locks of

the James.' The poem concludes with a confession: 'If I'm honest, mine is the only history / that really interests me, which is unfortunate, / because I am not alone.' In his moments of greatest sincerity, before hastening to apologise, Powers is very much like Greene, 'marooned ... overcome by an immense unreality.'

Because of his isolation, Powers is at his best when describing his personal feelings of longing and nostalgia. Lost childhood innocence, a prevalent theme, is invoked in 'Cumberland Gap', when the narrator recalls Virginia 'pine trees bright and / luminous / with their late spring blanketing of pollen underneath / the unreal quality of light in which we lived'. Graffiti that appears 'In the Ruins of the Ironworks', expresses a similar longing, though the reader is unsure if this vision is a pre-war memory or post-war exploration of home. Regardless, the ache, the tension between desire and reality is uncovered in this old stone quarry where:

Michael still loves
Lou-Anne,
even if it was for only one night, with black
enamel spray paint in the heat
of a July evening
that they stroked and burned through
in '83.'

Yet Greene is stranded, overwhelmed by his surroundings, halfway through his journey. He is rescued hardly a page later while drinking 'warm expensive beer in the only cantina' in town. As night falls, 'fireflies moved like brilliant pocket torches, and a small boy stood by the track with a flaming brand making mysterious animal noises into the dark'. Here, in a rush that contrasts powerfully with his previous alienation, Greene finds that Mexico has taken 'on the lineaments of home'.

Powers never manages to find his way. His eternal note of sadness

becomes plaintive, tiresome. As he admits in the poem for which the collection is named, there is nothing in Iraq, including his soldiering, that he can look to for direction.

I tell her in a letter that will stink,
when she opens it,
of bolt oil and burned powder
and the things it says

Bitterness continues despite shifts in point of view. 'Self-portrait in Sidewalk Chalk' is told from the perspective of a wounded soldier who concludes his 'self-portrait' with the inability to escape from being 'strapped monstrosly / into a chair.' The trenchant sadness becomes predictable. Not a single joke is found in the entire book, a difficult feat to manage considering the antics of soldiers in combat and the flashes of humour found in other war poets. Even the sturdy Wilfrid Gibson plays for laughs with the opening line of *Long Tom* when describing a comrade who, though ill and possibly on his deathbed, talks of 'Delhi brothels half the night'.

The consistency of tone is often combined with generality. The reader never learns to whom Powers' 'letter composed during a lull in the fighting' is addressed or what the letter actually says. Details are lacking despite promises to the contrary. 'I can tell you exactly / what I mean,' states the narrator of the book's opening poem, 'Customs'. 'The world has been replaced / by our ideas about the world'. While driving through the 'vast unending waste / of Texas ... and on into Old Mexico', the reader sympathises with Powers' need for concrete detail. The fragments that flit past, 'the sun hung out / to dry', 'the turbines' spinning blades', 'some naked mountainside', are the spectral shapes of an immense unreality. But the promised reality never emerges from hiding.

In its most extreme form, Powers' brooding becomes a maddening apophatic tease. 'I am fed / and clothed and not unreasonably happy'

reads 'Valentine for Flat Effect'. Or 'Think almost reaching grief, but / not quite getting there,' in 'Field Manual'. Both poems are hollowed out by the refusal to specify or explore an emotion. The most flagrant example is the concluding decision in 'The Abhorrence of Coincidence': 'I am not anywhere, / and I am not else'. I could go on. Frustratingly, it is this middle ground, this no-man's land, that intrigues us most. This is the world that Powers, 'a machine gunner in Mosul and Tal Afar', has promised to describe.

Perhaps I am expecting too much of *Letter Composed During a Lull in the Fighting*. A cast of characters, a sense of place, an emotional range: these elements are not found in Wilfred Owen's work either. But then, Owen does not invite his reader into the trench as much as to the protest march. Philip Larkin observed this quality of Owen's work in his essay, 'The War Poet'. Craig Raine also faulted Owen because too much of his 'poetry wishes to evoke rather than describe', a tendency readily observed in Powers' work as well. What is needed, it would seem, is an observer more like Greene, who is sensitive to emotion and detail – an observer who can balance, as Greene does, the thrill and hatred one feels in a foreign place. Until then the war in Iraq will remain a dark continent, unexplored, foreboding, and crowded with our superstitions.

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Kevin Powers, *Letter Composed During a Lull in the Fighting*, Sceptre, 2014.

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MATTHEW SPERLING

Simon Armitage, *Paper Aeroplane*:
Selected Poems 1989–2014

November 2014

Paper Aeroplane is Simon Armitage's third selected poems. The first, simply called *Selected Poems*, was published by Faber in 2001, with 161 pages drawn from Armitage's first eight collections, presented in the order in which the poems appeared in those volumes. The second, called *The Shout*, was published in the US by Harcourt in 2005 with a foreword by Charles Simic. Designed to introduce Armitage to American readers, it was a fresh selection of only 107 pages, drawn from ten different volumes, which makes no reference to the original publications; the title poem, which first appeared in *The Universal Home Doctor* (2002), comes first. In an interview at the time, Armitage said, 'I called the book *The Shout* hoping the voice in the poems would be strong enough to carry across the Atlantic', and the book did indeed carry, being short-listed for the National Book Critics Circle Award, and beginning the pattern of Armitage's new collections being issued simultaneously in the UK and the US. *Paper Aeroplane* is, like the 2001 offering, a book made out of books. Its twenty-one sections contain poems from twenty published volumes and one, *The Unaccompanied*, which is coming out next year. It departs considerably from its predecessors. Twenty pages in both *Selected Poems* and *The Shout* – making up almost a fifth of the

latter book – were taken up by the end-of-a-century poem 'Five Eleven Ninety Nine', which is dropped entirely from *Paper Aeroplane*, while another fifth of the poems in *The Shout* came from *Kid* (1992), largely because the book, perhaps with an American audience in view, included five out of Armitage's seven 'Robinson' poems, which pay homage to the work of Weldon Kees; only one of these survives into *Paper Aeroplane*. Most of the excerpts from longer sequences such as 'The Whole of the Sky' which were in *Selected Poems* have wisely been dropped, to keep the emphasis on free-standing single poems, and more than half of the 232 pages in *Paper Aeroplane* come from Armitage's books published after *Selected Poems*. As well as generous selections from his regular collections, we also get well chosen extracts from his translations and adaptations: *Mister Heracles*, after Euripides (2002), *Homer's Odyssey* (2006), *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (2007) and *The Death of King Arthur* (2012).

I reviewed *The Shout* foolishly in 2005, aged twenty-two. Maybe the addition of work from Armitage's last decade casts the accomplishment and variousness of the earlier work in a new light, or maybe I've just grown up a bit; reading *Paper Aeroplane* end to end was a delight. With twenty-five years of work to choose from, Armitage has composed a book where almost every page has something marvellous on it – a turn of phrase, a final line, a metaphor – and where strong powers of intelligence and invention are sustained across a considerable range of modes. Perhaps the most striking thing about Armitage's early poems today is not the Northernness or the slangy, up-to-the-minute diction that his early critics were excited by – since these have become commonplace on the back of his achievement – but the superb confidence and decisiveness of his ways of beginning and ending poems; this, it seems to me, is the chief way in which he resembles Ted Hughes, the poet often named as an early influence. In some ways Armitage's twenty-first century books have become more obviously literary. The MacNeice-like commissioned poem *Killing Time* (1999), an *Autumn Journal* for the millennium, now looks like a turning point: a precursor to the radio

version of Homer (another MacNeician project) and the translations of Euripides, Gawain and King Arthur, as a way of seeing how far the poet's fluency and bantering facility can be pushed through alien materials. The answer was: very far. The 4,000-plus lines of *King Arthur* were, for some readers, too far, but the gobby, gabby, alliterative voice created for these poems is a unique and fascinating piece of historical layering.

Re-reading Armitage's early poems in the light of these later translation projects has the effect of emphasising how synthetic the creation of a poetic vernacular was for him from the beginning. In the same way that the vernacular language of eighteenth-century ballads was a forged literary idiom, the colloquialism of early Armitage sometimes reads like the voice of a language learner so excited by his dictionary of slang that he wants to use everything in it:

It arrived in our town by word of mouth
and crackled like wildfire through the grapevine
of gab and gossip. It came from the south

so we shunned it, naturally,
sent it to Coventry

and wouldn't have touched it with a bargepole...
(‘The Stuff’)

This is lovely stuff, but perhaps there was a sense by the end of the 1990s that Armitage could write colloquial monologues and ripping-yarn poems in his sleep. A great strength of the second half of this book is his keenness to try new and unexpected things, and it's very good to have substantial selections here from the James Tate-like, absurdist prose poems of *Seeing Stars* (2010) or from the poems of *Stanza Stones* (2013), which show Armitage achieving effects of new and delicate simplicity:

Or here,
where water unbinds
and hangs
at the waterfall's face,
and just for that one
stretched white moment
becomes lace.
(‘Beck’)

The book ends with three poems from the forthcoming collection, *The Unaccompanied*. ‘Poundland’ – which Armitage has described as one of his poems which ‘go off on one’ – is a knockabout parody which transposes the idiom of Ezra Pound's Canto I, itself a historical patch-work, onto the end-of-history bathos of value retail, while ‘Harmonium’ and ‘Paper Aeroplane’ are sombre lyrics which put images of artistic creation up against death and emptiness. The title poem, last in the collection, imagines a blank book as the poet's best work yet. It is, in his own words, an image of ‘infinite possibility for a reader’, which holds out the hope that the work Armitage is yet to write might surpass that of the first quarter-century.

© Matthew Sperling, 2014

Simon Armitage, *Paper Aeroplane: Selected Poems 1989–2014*, Faber & Faber, 2014.
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PAUL BATCHELOR

Robin Robertson, *Sailing the Forest: Selected Poems*

December 2014

Robin Robertson was forty-one years old when he published his first collection of poems. Presumably it was his day-job as editor that led him to keep his apprentice work to himself; but whatever the reason, Robertson successfully dodged the indignity of growing up in public (a boast few poets can make) and *A Painted Field* is unusually accomplished. Its finest achievement is the long closing sequence 'Camera Obscura', which concerns the nineteenth-century Scottish photographer David Octavius Hill. Hill's life was a mixture of disappointment and tragedy, from his failure as a painter to the deaths of his wife, his business partner, and his children. He received little recognition for his pioneering photographic experiments and died believing that they had been a waste of time. Robertson's sequence combines (invented) extracts from Hill's letters with modern-day poems set in and around Edinburgh, as well as lyrics that hover inscrutably between the two periods. The partial identification with Hill seems to license a far greater tonal range than Robertson usually allows himself. When the camera is trained on a woman, there is a tenderness that is usually absent from Robertson's decidedly male gaze:

You are turning heliotropic in this
acropolis of light, barely breaking sweat.
Lifting your hands to your hair a drop
runnels down under one arm to its cup
and the swell of your breast, and I am brimming,
scalding, kittling in the heat,
aching for you at the root of my tongue.

These lines do not appear in *Sailing the Forest*, in which 'Camera Obscura' is under-represented by only six brief lyrics. One possible reason for their absence is that Robertson recycles the final line's key words 'aching' and 'root' in the final line of his best-known poem, 'Artichoke', which I will quote in full:

The nubbed leaves
come away
in a tease of green, thinning
down to the membrane:
the quick, purpled
beginnings of the male.

Then the slow hairs of the heart:
the choke that guards its trophy,
its vegetable goblet.
The meat of it lies, displayed,
up-ended, *al dente*,
the stub-root aching in its oil.

At once over-considered and under-interrogated, 'Artichoke' illustrates the dangers of the too-long-delayed debut. Its designs are aimed not at the subject but the reader: having read E.H. Gombrich on the displaced puritan sexuality behind certain kinds of still-life, Robertson is eager to write himself into this tradition. If the reader misses this, the notes will help. With all of the important decisions and discoveries having been

made well in advance of the writing, the poem is relegated to the status of expertly-written copy. The sexual 'subtext' is brandished until it becomes part of the dual surface meaning, but since the poem does not finally have anything to say about either subject, we might ask what we are expected to do with it – give it a prize for its sumptuous phrasing, yes, but then what? A single reading exhausts it. Why would anyone read it twice?

Such overt manipulation of subject and reader can be found in many poets' early work, but Robertson is yet to shake the habit: many of the poems collected here are crammed with literary effects. 'The Lake at Dusk' from *Swithering* begins by drawing an analogy between a day ending and a society in decay (the day is 'breaking down'; the wind is 'looting the trees'); but this is immediately abandoned in favour of a more visually striking image: the wind 'leaving paw-prints on the water / for the water-witch to read'. After this, the poem collects images at random: the lake is both 'scoured' and 'raked' with light; it is like both 'pewter' and 'mirror'. Rain leaves the forest 'triggered and tripwired': terms that don't quite agree, as 'triggered' suggests that something has already detonated, while 'tripwired' is something lying in wait. The bomb imagery is no sooner introduced than it is replaced by dream imagery, after which we are shown frogs that look like stars, frog mucus that looks like semen, and frog markings that look like a rubric. At this point, Robertson ups the ante further with the line 'The reed-pool trembles / as if for a god'. How will the final stanza draw so many loose threads together?

In the open dark
all maps are useless:
the tracks are bloodied,
the tracks are washed clean.
Is this a way through the forest,
this path? Is this the way I came?

Having collected so many visual analogies, and so many conflicting connotations, the poem is all but forced to conclude with expansive, contradictory gestures and rhetorical questions. It is unfortunate that the penultimate line should recall Kipling's 'The Way Through the Woods', which manages its paradoxes so effortlessly and unforgettably.

Robertson tries to excuse the amount of literary display in 'The Lake at Dusk' by instigating a rigorous plainness elsewhere: as they often do in his poems, the line breaks coincide with a sense pause, rendering them redundant except insofar as they slow the pace of the prose. (At this point, I should admit that I am continuing what is quite possibly the world's longest and most boring game of critical ping-pong, as the issue of Robertson's prosiness has been discussed at some length twice already on this website, by Jeremy Noel-Tod in 2006 and Vidyan Ravinthiran in 2010.) But perhaps the real problem with 'The Lake at Dusk' is that it has no focal interest: Robertson has just left his motor running. When he does have a subject or a story to tell then his characteristic combination of ornate diction and slack rhythm can work in the poem's favour, creating a sense of fatigue, or desperation, that could at any moment yield a glimpse of something vivid and otherworldly, which is the sort of emotional/psychological terrain in which many of his poems take place. Here, for example, is the creepy, lulling opening to 'At Roane Head':

You'd know her house by the drawn blinds –
by the cormorants pitched on the boundary wall,
the black crosses of their wings hung out to dry.
You'd tell it by the quicken and the pine that hid it
from the sea and from the brief light of the sun,
and by Aonghas the collie, lying at the door
where he died: a rack of bones like a sprung trap.

Paradoxically, the lack of rhythmic tension in these lines builds the suspense: it has a filmic effect, like a slow tracking shot. It also helps

to make the more unusual features seem natural and unforced, such as the use of Scots dialect ('quicken' is rowan), or the elaborate imagery (those strangely domesticated cormorants, and the pet dog that has turned gothic in death).

Elsewhere, Robertson shows that he can break a line judiciously. For example, 'The Halving' begins by describing open-heart surgery in terms that can make you queasy:

General anaesthesia; a median sternotomy
achieved by sternal saw; the ribs
held aghast by the retractor; the tubes
and cannulae drawing the blood
to the reservoir, and its bubbler;
the struggling aorta
cross-clamped, the heart
chilled and stopped and left to dry.

This could almost be a found poem, the introduction of line-breaks releasing the evocative qualities of the technical diction and dry-eyed procedural syntax. Breaking most of the lines on a noun and beginning the following line with a verb in the past-tense creates a sense of breathless constriction, trapping both the speaker and the reader inside those repetitive cadences. Robertson's additions are all the more effective: 'aghast' here reclaims the force that it seemed to have lost through overuse.

Nevertheless, while 'The Halving' is about vulnerability, it can hardly be said to possess that condition. In fact, despite Robertson's appetite for 'risky' subject matter (sex, violence, despair, death), there is little sense of genuine risk in his poems. Instead, from *Swithering* onwards, his poems frequently tend towards the sort of confessional swagger that merely makes a show of vulnerability. 'Show your wound: Ah yes mine's deeper...': Denise Riley's caustic line from 'Cruelty Without Beauty'

(*Mop Mop Georgette*, 1992) captures the aggressively competitive appeal of this sort of poetry. It's an appeal that Robertson enacts literally in 'A & E', which finds the poet convalescing after the heart operation. One morning he wakes to find his stitches have burst, and goes to hospital (in a taxi, he tells us, rather than an ambulance). The (female) triage nurse doesn't seem sufficiently impressed, and so:

I parted the tweed to show her
what I had going on underneath.
Unfashionable, but striking nonetheless:
my chest undone like some rare waistcoat,
with that lace-up front – a black *échelle* –
its red, wet-look leatherette,
those fancy flapping lapels.

It is a characteristic moment: Robertson demands attention because his wound is deeper than anyone else's. He impresses girls with his stoic, masculine suffering. He goes straight to the front of the queue.

Robertson has said that he finds it 'very tiresome' when readers identify him with his speakers, but poems like 'A & E', or 'Heel of Bread' with its flat declaration 'I have made / a litter of my life', neither invite nor require a more sophisticated reading. Besides, we need not assume that poems are straightforwardly confessional in order to understand that they assert values. Lines such as 'he is the lock / and she is the key' (from 'Static', *A Painted Field*) seem to expect brownie points for having reversed the more predictable gendering of the image, but the problem lies in the assigning of such roles in the first place. An urge to idealise and objectify women can be found throughout Robertson's work. For example, in 'Abandon' (from 2010's *The Wrecking Light*), the female is celebrated for 'the way she lifted her eyes to me / and handed me back, simplified'. The speaker of these lines is Theseus, and he is remembering Ariadne, but the mythic scenario seems to have been chosen simply to

facilitate the expression of an unreconstructed male chauvinism.

If I sound exasperated it's because I feel disappointed. Robertson showed himself to be capable of a more mature, self-aware consideration of male desire in his second and best collection, *Slow Air*. The opening poem, 'Apart', reads in full:

We are drawn to edges, to our own
parapets and sea-walls: finding our lives
in relief, in some forked storm.

Returning with our unimaginable gifts,
badged with salt and blood,
we have forgotten how to walk.

Thinking how much more we wanted,
when what we had was all there was;

looking too late to the ones we loved,
we stretch out our hands as we fall.

These lines seem born of bitter experience, but they forego confessionality in favour of something more reflective; they possess an intelligence that has toughened into maxims. The spare, direct quality of the border ballads is augmented with by an unobtrusive literariness ('forked storm' recalls *King Lear*; 'badged with blood' *Macbeth*), but there is above all a sense of exposure and vulnerability, and this is what makes *Slow Air* such a compelling collection. Its equally impressive closing poem, 'Fall', is a sort of partner-poem to 'Apart', and again I quote it in full:

The leaves are falling, falling from trees
in dying gardens far above us; as if their slow
free-fall was the sky declining.

And tonight, this heavy earth is falling away
from all the other stars, drawing into silence.

We are all falling now. My heart, my hand,
stall and drift in darkness, see-sawing down.

And we still believe there is one who sifts and holds
the leaves, the lives, of all those softly falling.

The first three stanzas offer a fairly faithful version of Rilke's 'Herbst'; but Rilke's ending is more emphatic: 'Und doch ist Einer, welcher dieses Fallen / unendlich sanft in seinen Händen hält'. In an inspired revision, Robertson adds a qualification: 'we still believe'. At a stroke, the poem is updated and ironised, so that it stands both as a translation and an independent work. Admittedly, 'Herbst' is a minor poem of Rilke's, but still, to have improved on the original is astonishing.

Unfortunately, this beautiful poem has now been burdened with a note that directs our attention to the fact that Rilke wrote the poem on 11 September 1902. Why, if Robertson's adaptation really was intended as an oblique response to the World Trade Centre attack, did this note not appear when the poem was first published? It would make more sense to have removed such a note upon republishing the poem, in order to free it from too determined a reading: it is hard not to suspect that adding such a note at this stage is simply designed to appeal to a US market, and perhaps elicit a comparison with Seamus Heaney's post-9/11 translation of Horace, 'Anything Can Happen'. (The preceding paragraph was written some weeks ago. I note that *Sailing the Forest* has today, January 9, received a gushing and content-free review in *The New York Times* from some balloon-head who claims that 'Robertson hasn't yet crossed over into the realm of mainstream adoration that Ireland's Seamus Heaney enjoyed among American readers, but that's probably only a matter of time'.)

While cultivating the image of a poet who favours terseness and paring everything down to the bone, Robertson is, on the evidence of this overlong selection, positively prolix: having perfected the uncanny dream poem, he continues to write it again and again; and why have one poem about Actaeon when you can have three? ‘At Roane Head’ is surely one of the poems that Robertson was put here to write, so why re-publish a dress-rehearsal like ‘By Clachan Bridge’? Why, having staged a complex engagement with a dramatic persona in ‘Camera Obscura’, did Robertson go on to write four perfunctory poems about August Strindberg? Strindberg’s self-loathing and sexual libertinism offer Robertson little but the risk of self-parody. Did Robertson really need Strindberg’s mask in order to confess: ‘I hate women but desire them – / hate them because I desire them’?

It must have taken a lot of nerve to wait so long to publish his first book, and a different sort of nerve to follow it with one even better. But after that Robertson is in – well, not decline so much as retreat. *Swithering* received much more acclaim than *Slow Air*, and was followed by two books that contain some fine writing but are content for the most part to retread the same ground. As the blurb reminds us, Robertson has won many prizes for his work (in one poem he affects not to care about such ‘watery praise’), and so the more complacent he has become, the more he has discovered he can get away with it. The danger of not growing up in public is that you might never grow up at all.

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