

The Fiend Journal

I

2010

The Metaphysical Squinting of the Psyche of London; Five Journal Entries in Lieu of a Review of Niall McDevitt's 'b/w'

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1

On a press not very familiar to me (and therefore immediately intriguing) comes a rather large form book of poems named simply *b/w* (Black and white? An associational obsession with Blake? The curtness of an abbreviation? A mystery skirted over or around?)

The assumption being that we're in a realm of opposites, of assumptions quietly named, tagged and put away... not that this is the view of the poems held herein, but the critique and goal of them? A satire on the "clarity" of group hypnosis when faced with a fascist all-party/no-party/one-party government? The with-us-or-against-us genome?

Or simply, as I say, an unfolding mystery, immediately presented to the reader.

The blurb sings: "The poems are always about more than they are about, suggestive of the zeitgeist". Am I comfortable here? This fragile modernity wafts its slightly stale rays over the pages of the book as they turn... zeitgeist, anyone?

But let's not rush to judgments. Further mysteries entaileth the reading.

An opening quote sports this pidgin English from *A New Bislama Dictionary*:

'Tok we oli raetem blong narafala mani ridim i blong kasem stret tingting we man we i stop harem long hat blong hem.

(Talk where all he write him belong another fellow man he read him belong catch him straight think think where man where he write him stop hear him along heart belong him)'

The 'translation' is McDevitt's. To this reader, unfamiliar with different forms of pidgin, it needs reading over. And over. Slowly the beauty of this sentence begins to seep into the mind. A koan-like gem of a sentence that tells of the wedding of reader and writer, that makes you question the way language functions, and makes you enjoy the fact that it functions away from rules familiar to you, and particularly reveals the London of the following poems thru a filter of its myriad languages, the awareness of the homogeneity and fracturedness of language, possibly after Tony Harrison or the more pluralistic attitude toward language of certain Irish poets, but perhaps with a broader and more articulate sweep?

O.K. You have me hooked. Let us breach this unique shore...

Amongst the haiku sequence dedicated to the poet Michael Hartnett, *Horseshoes*, some strange and interesting leaps of imagination:

‘In *Tesco Metro*,
bargain hunter-gatherers.
Paleolithic.

The Plough and Harrow.
Ancient men nickname it
‘the departure lounge’.

The first piece exemplifies much of what McDevitt’s sense of how the ‘traditional’ in this collection, or the historical contained/maintained within the present, functions, something actually quite obvious, but quite lacking in contemporary poetry... a studied-ness, let’s say. The ephemeral is still there, however... the assumption that society is three quarters instant throwaway still exists, but always framed within the larger English historical landscape. That word ‘English’ immediately informs other concerns:

‘of the news in England of England in English delivered in English accents
I am fly-on-the-wall-impotent to but listen to the received pronunciations of it
and know that I am in mid-Jihad and be suspicious of every syllable that issues forth from politicians and professional-all-too-professional lips’

...from the poem *Babel*. And it is a revelation. FINALLY a poet able to cut the crap re: our political present... and to simply state the bleeding obvious without being jingoistic or attention seeking (again, given aforesaid zeitgeist it is nice to see McDevitt coochie-cooing it one minute and giving it the finger the next... a delightful, and surprising, tac that affirms the blurb’s “Here we depart from the ‘whatever you say, say nothing’ school”). The poem continues:

‘my crapped-out paranoid history-warped baked-potato-with-beans of a mind
thinks: “England is buttering up the muslims by giving them lots of publicity
by interviewing them all the time about mosques Koran hijabs Ramadan halal
and generally making them feel included, listened to, included, nice, not all terrorists
etc. (even while the police are shooting innocent Muslims in their homes)’

Koran hijabs Ramadan halal... inane? Stereotypical? Well, yes... but the public broadcast world is half-inane, half stereotypical (maybe I'm being overly kind here?). So it is good to hear this in a poem from a country where, at least publically, people have stopped talking, and most contemporary poets have followed suit. I'd differ in my conclusions on language here... McDevitt is keen to point out that he, as an Irishman, wasn't interviewed in the same way when London was bombed in 2000. An interesting comparison... but perhaps explained only by the fact that it seems, to this reader, that we're into the hard sell (the hardcore nitwits) on international terrorism now... so that the citizen (of every creed and colour) must be media-beaten to a pulp in order to be divided along his/her own thin familio-cultural stripe (often one that he/she may have been only barely aware of? Remember, if they can't find one, they'll invent one)

Regardless, it's a poem that employs long lines reminiscent of Ciaran Carson, and is made up of Enquiry and thought... a poem aimed at producing thought, another rarity, and the same approach generously frames many of the following poems, in that many deal with, from multiple directions, this tawdry political boxing-in of the personal identity that all but the very few living in Britain are now subject to.

The key, here, in *Babel*, is an ending where the poet turns the argument around and uses intelligent satire to mirror the way that satire on authoritarianism itself can be re-directed into an equally authoritarian voice (which IS zeitgeist if ever there was one).

2

Again the historical bent amongst our budding-Brit-police-state pops up in *Notes from Wetherspoon*:

'Here I turn from technocratic city-state
Back to the plough

via the time-machine of a glass vessel
cutting with starry edges.'

This consciousness; of history/histories being constantly enacted/re-enacted/buzzing around like flies is unique, and allows McDevitt a lot more psychological room for maneuver within his poems, and where he resolutely, and with determination, departs from the majority of poets out there. Again, we see this in *Abel and Cain*, which is subtitled "150 Years After Baudelaire"... a vicious satire with more bite than bark, and a poem that I'd like to quote in its entirety (thus risking the usual wrist-sawing copyright infringement issues)

'ABEL AND CAIN

150 years after Baudelaire

1

Race of Abel, dine at The Ritz;
capitalism is such bliss.

Race of Cain, Big Mac and frites;
capitalism takes the...

Race of Abel, your gram of coke
powders the nose of seraphim.

Race of Cain, inject or smoke
your 5 pound wrap of heroin.

Race of Abel, your haute couture
is so chic, so pleasant.

Race of Cain, your cheap sportswear
brands you 'urban peasant'.

Race of Abel, you're from good stock;
success begets success.

Race of Cain, you breed like dogs
-gratis – on the NHS.

Race of Abel, your fat cat premium
is a tad invidious.

Race of Cain, your 5 pound minimum
is insulting and injurious.

Race of Abel, money fucks
in its penthouse suite.

Race of Cain, in towerblocks,
poverty sucks its teeth.

2

Race of Abel, fill up your arks.
The flood is coming. Flee!

Race of Cain, your Christ, your Marx
haven't set you free.

Race of Abel, there is one bother:
money can't bribe death.

Race of Cain, kill Big Brother
and distribute his wealth.'

In plain spliced quatrains McDevitt does what absolutely no published poet living in England, of his generation, is currently doing: observing the world around them and reporting back in a plain, no-holds-barred conversational manner, with precision of purpose, with studied technique, and with an awareness of the literary and cultural heritage which the poetic imagination brings to expression. The poem is a *Mask of Anarchy* for the 21st Century, but the reader must decide if 'killing' Big Brother is, literally, the correct exhortation. This reader, within this brand of satire, might suggest laughing, from a great height, on Big Brother.

The 'skeleton in my flesh', of another biting, sensitively conceived poem; *The One Rule is Never to Fall in Love*, again echoes the sense of lineage within the present, an almost perfect metaphor for this sense of the past within the present, brilliantly emphasized physiologically...

'I walk in the public world like a guillotined ghost.
Charm's the veneer. Inside is a tissue of lies
nourished by barium meals and by chickenfeed.

The skeleton in my flesh has been somehow turned..."

The poem (wrongly understood by Tom Phillips as a simple philosophical nod to Plato) is both a poetic near-autopsy of the individual psyche, post-20th Century, post-9/11, post July 05 London bombings, and comes from a poet aware of historical and media manipulations, and of the lies of a country's past, forced on the Epsilonic perambulations of the current teachers of our current university generation. From an earlier section:

'...the lion-tamer is – in fact – a taxidermist
who'll never admit that the lions he tames are stuffed.'

If this isn't the most efficient breakdown of the current body-Politic's concerns in Britain/Europe then I don't know what is. The first trick of the conman is to make the individual believe his lies are in some way useful and significant, even to the tiniest smithereen of a degree. NOTE: great poetry is important things said concisely, and without fanfare.

The pre-occupations with language return in *Savej Singing*:

'taem blong hot
taem blong ren
mun i gowe
mun i kambakegan

no jioj! no bang!
no trak! no ofis!
no kot! no mani!
no klos! no polis!'

Regardless of what the reader takes from this pidgin, perhaps the effort is behind one's reading of it, so that we become vaguely aware of 'an emergency' being enacted within its narrative, even if the details elude us (no job?... no bed? no money? no clothes? no police?)

In 2010, if the human is he who 'dies off-screen' (to quote Jarvis Cocker) then the pidgin poems are, again, an efficient way of using language as television or headline with 'the emergency' of Big Brother government buried (but still breathing) below (Mandelstam: "I am under the earth but my lips are still moving").

It is also a subtle and effective exhortation for the reader to pay attention to the entire picture, rather than the limited spheres of political, cultural, literary, familial and linguistic affiliations.

In order to transcend these McDevitt (as a poet rightly should) has marked out language as both the revealer of truth and the battlefield where it is discovered. And, just when the reader thinks he is full to bursting with the innovations of a truth larger than the poet's most immediate materials provide, we get the concision of:

'Original sin is being born into a society that asks only of its
children:
'make money'...'

in *Ode to the Dole*. Surely the great life-mantra of the post-Microwave generation?? and a sentiment that every person who has reached their early thirties (and perhaps beyond?) will understand. While the public realms still strive after ideals (which are fake and conceived to divide mankind) what is most immediate in the life of all born after the aftermath of the sixties is that, qualitatively, the message, in all areas of life, affirms McDevitt's clarifying clarion bell... the great thinning down of all other concerns, whether you be in England, Iceland or the Ivory Coast. One does not need to be a poetry reader to understand a statement like this... it is always-and-consistently-apparent whether one is in need of a loan, getting a job, choosing hobbies, travelling, moving between country and city... moreover, it is an unanswered, psychic conundrum lying in wait for a more communally spiritual perspective, an obstacle still sitting there, the elephant in the proverbial modern poetry room. And yet, who, in poetry, has actually said it? These are discussions that go on around poetry,

whereas this poet bravely chooses to use the world as material, rather than to use poetry as refuge, or partial refuge, from world.

McDevitt widens the use of the senses far beyond his reflections on language, as he toys, in *Hyacinths*, with the subject of Brion Gysin's "dreamachine", an artwork, McDevitt explains, *meant to be viewed with eyes closed...*

'pink light of the pink lanterns
pink dreamachines of winter

purple-blue illumined bulbs
pink-flight mind of cherubs

spinning white into hypnosis...'

...Kandinsky painting images he sees within his mind's eye, European and American Abstract Expressionism and the Beats are all echoes of this strange circling poem, that, like the poems by the Italians of Dante's era, limits its rhymes to the very few (in the English idiom; even trickier). The visual metaphor implicit in the note to this poem makes the reader pay attention to the wisdom available in not seeing, the role that the unconscious mind (denied by modern poets and scientists alike) plays in, and relates to, conscious human awareness. So; another thread the poet is not afraid to touch upon; the illusion of the separation between labels of conscious and unconscious, sight and blindness.

3

So, I return to the claim: 'The poems are all about more than what they are about', and having lived with the poems for a while, these pieces DO affirm the subject matter that they don't necessarily include, achieving this through the synthesis of the intuition of the importance of specific material found In The Reality of the World and an ability to bend this material into their most communicating and respectful facilities...

Don Paterson asserted, many a year ago, that syntax is what really separates great poetry from the merely good, ordinary or mediocre. I'd say that these are simply concerns of technique. The poetry displayed here has a particular way of carrying its world of associations into newer and more important sounds and meanings... sounds and meanings that I think might give a greater clue regarding what great poetry can do, right now and further into this century. If the fascinations and associations both chime with a focused reality and throw off a particular energy, linguistic and physical, then I think this would give you a sense of what great poetry is.

McDevitt's collection exemplifies a lot of these facets of material that he has both worked on and worked out, and as such one can begin to glimpse a poetry that is shamanic, meaning; an act of both body AND mind... thus ignoring/bypassing the limiting designations of page, stage and academy etc.

One proceeds, largely, from intuition; as Henry Miller touches on... when asked how he wrote, Miller replied “by writing”. For example it is very difficult to learn to drive without getting into a car. What has happened to approaches to poetry as we have progressed into the new millenium is we have simply increased the shouting and screaming that goes on around the picking up of a pen (as if the idea of the expression of a particular truth is such a communal surprise to us that we must mould ourselves to its door without doing the amount of reading and practice required to create great work. In this, we have mechanized and institutionalized a natural human process, thereby tranquilizing its ability to lay claim on truth, and our ability to accept and investigate that truth).

Applied to this problem of the current approach to the composition of poetry; is what I’d term the ‘shamanic approach’ which, to all intents and purposes, could be called ‘human poetry’ in the near future, once humans discover the artistic processes of which they are already conscious, but have forgotten because of continually being bombarded by institutional and media-created societal ‘concerns’ rather than following their own instincts, curiosities, and their own creative urges (certain artists, from different arenas, have peeped above the ugly robotic morass in the 20th Century, to affirm this spirit, some to a greater degree than others... Pound, Yeats, Vallejo, Olson, Ginsberg and Pasolini; a poet not in ‘the visionary tradition’ but an artist intelligent enough to see the ‘guidedness’ of the political landscape beyond mid-century)

All of this comes at a price. The modern poetry reader (along with poetry publishers, editors, even... in short, our current Literary Guardians), buried under the mountains of mediocre volumes which the publishers themselves have produced as a short term fix on a long term problem (the need for capital and the lack of faith in humanity when it comes to accepting open-minded readers), *may* have largely forgotten how to read poetry, and thus how to recognize good from bad (or they are subject to the whims of corporate forces which they would very much prefer not to talk about).

Newcomers to this book, particularly those who are schooled rather than ‘readers’ (i.e not the rest of us, the ‘plebs with eyes’ without their certificates for reading) will need to spend weeks or months with a book of this kind before the penny is allowed to drop. For the rest, we have a feast of innovations to ponder and return to. Let us hope that, for the benefit of Niall McDevitt and future poetry (particularly younger writers and readers), the penny will do just that sometime in the near future.

4

But, having been (up to now) all praise, certain negative things do come to mind. You have to be careful around a book like this. It is alive, and will suggest things, simple or complicated, over larger periods of time.

To try to be balanced I’d say a certain masculinity of tone pervades that could be lessened in later work, also the danger of imitating, rather than using, one’s influential beacons (the title *The One Rule Is Never to Fall in Love* is Rimbaud over McDevitt... I’ll temper that with the view that if

everything and nothing is original then it is simply a question of picking the *right* influences, and one cannot criticize McDevitt too much here, but it is something for poets in this highly innovative vein to watch out for).

Possibly a more pervasive international focus could be developed or encouraged, but again this is a game of focus-juggling... the familiarity of an artist's materials need to be absolutely honed tight and McDevitt is a poet who obviously understands the importance of not sounding off on a subject even mildly unfamiliar. Also, in this way one can understand the need for a community of poets rather than the prevalence of untouchables who reign supreme in a shower of media emptinesses and awards ceremonies... this, in itself, represents the loss of touch with the materials which immediately helped the artist gain the thing that has made his work so exemplary.

Another important concern is whether one needs to re-affirm evils like *Tesco Metro* by mentioning them in one's poetry (this is/should be a big debate in poetry). My jury is personally out on this one, but it is worth a mention, and if McDevitt were to heed Blake's visionary exhortation in Jerusalem 'They became what they beheld' he may well excise these portions of text in order to move closer to the "poetic envisioning" this reader believes is his goal.

One also wonders how far a talented poet can take the satirical ball and run with it. If one believes that life in Europe and beyond will become increasingly fascistic and authoritarian (and I do not lower myself, in this, to speak of the ignorant that believe the aristocratic order and the parliamentary system in Britain, as it stands, can be upheld by simply 'going on', and without a gigantic psychic change in the individuals in this area of the world) then the poet, after highlighting the issue (the all-important first step made in this collection) must "go beyond" the taxidermist-lion tamers of the public mind and access the information that these enforcers of culture are hiding, exactly... and, for this, one must be more radical and open-minded than even Blake was in his own time.

McDevitt, for the most part, has much more than the strain of satire intertwined through these complex, and spiritually revealing, pieces and honours the spirit of his influences while reaching for new revelations (and one would want to leave open the question of where satire ends and the work of finding causes for the lunacy and the eventual emancipation of the individual begins)

So, nit-picking aside, McDevitt has understood the control mechanism that Europe is in the grip of... and, without intending one iota of condescension, time will tell if further collections will, like Blake before him, allow the less-socially-acceptable-bite prevail over the bark of the mediocre. I say this hoping that the muse allows him access to expound upon or have full awareness of the even larger hidden levers of power, the hoax of the conservative/liberal paradigm, the hidden Fabian socialist leanings of the Blair years, the anti-environmentalism of "climate change" and other soporific apocalypses, and the oh-so-PC silences that, by the hour, have created the global mess that his poetry, within the local crucible of London, so brilliantly and forthrightly unmasks, regards, and siphons off for its own purposes.

The eager and sane will need to read this book at least 6-7 times to fully understand the innovation and import of it, the rest may take 20-30 times, many will never understand... particularly poets who do not deserve to scribble in its shadow. (Note to self: is this why we still don't have a decent complete edition of Shelley's poetry?)

My instinct, beside difficult attempts at negative critique, tells me that this book is going to stick for a very, very long time, and will be very hard to better, even by the author himself... and as the various awards ceremonies roll by every year, readers of this book who *do* masochistically choose to run in 'poetry' circles may hopefully begin to wonder why they are so consistently being served up such turgid, fantastical nonsense to read.

5

In a recent post to the poet Todd Swift's *Eyewear* blog McDevitt writes:

"I'm also really trying to address the complete change in reality that has occurred in the first decade of the third millennium. It amazes me that so many poets carry on Larkining/Muldooning/Paterosning about as if nothing had happened."

I, personally, would go further than ten years. What has occurred in English, Scottish and, for the most part, Irish poetry* since the early-to-mid seventies is really a sham (or a shame?) in the sense that the discipline, the seriousness, of an endeavour which has truth as its goal was so diluted, so anti-social, so navel-gazing, so in-need-of-attention that it had chunnering minorities as its elitist goal rather than the broad candid sweep, CARRYING the illucidation of an innovating truth, as in say someone like a Pound, Yeats, or a Ginsberg**. However, this is not a vote for 'political' poetry or 'public' poetry, it is a vote for good, well-honed and crafted verse with the goal of truth on all its horizons.

Yet, still, in this approach, there is often the criticism of looking back, of doing 'an elegiac turn'. But a poet must always work with The Good as lineage, and not with what is closest to hand if it does not spiritually satisfy... which makes pronunciations on the current and the mediocre necessary ('To the pricks, cunts, glandes and clits / Who 'sex up' the same old mediocrity / For a bourgeois / PC / moral majority: / History *will* consign you to plague pits.' –*To the Intellectual Proprietors*), a tension that McDevitt further expands on, in *History*:

"I cannot go naked in history's fields.
I am clad in the body of my father"

With this book let's be brought back to the notion of poetry as simply a revealer of truth, dig in, and re-focus on the illusions and realities of what we are presented with daily, because I believe it is a book we can be made great by, and the publishers should be heartily congratulated for having the good sense to put it out.

I also believe that a renaissance in a humane, generous and forthrightly curious poetry is long, long overdue, particularly after 1/the dark post-WWII years 2/the failure of the poets of the sixties to take Pound's economic hot potato and run with it*** 3/the selfish, indulgent and ignorant approaches in poetry of the last 20-30 years.

"I treat poetry as an art, not as a competitive sport or an academic discipline" writes McDevitt.

Perhaps this book will initiate, or be part of, a wider movement toward the fundamental restoration of the art that poetry is, and has been.

Andrew O'Donnell, Sept 28th 2010

*There are still the marginal figures in all countries, and other innovators in Ireland, and cut the cultural cake however you want to slice it... it is, indeed, this urge, of the individual, toward the boxed-in demographic and comfort-blanket-lies of polls/statistics which will make mince-meat of us all, if we let it.

**While each poet had his own political affiliations, we must remember that Pound's fascism, while suspect in-and-of-itself, and in terms of what it was for (Mussolini) was also directed against the banking systems of Europe, who now quite openly, and, in most cases legally, ride roughshod over the citizens they profess to protect within Europe (over 70 percent of Britain's laws originate, in bill form, from within the European Parliament in Brussels, which the banking cartels populate and survey).

This is also where Blake and Pound are not so far apart as they might seem, at first glance... and also where McDevitt may also enter the debate through the contemporary poetry scene via the satirical, and particularly via such visionary pieces as *Song of the Jinn*, *Lilith*, and *The Jewess* (could the satirical, alone, in the long term, only be a beginning, while being a great loosener of poetic energies... in the long-term is it simply a symptom of a malais; the knowledge that the communal lack of the will toward knowledge is severely lacking? Knowledge that will not be pushed into new territories, and can act as an extension of self-policing authoritarianism? This I leave open as a question for further debate).

In this discussion it is rare, however, even in poetry circles, that most want to investigate beyond Pound's journalistic extension of Blake's criticism of the banking networks, as manifested in his work on the carefully constructed lie of capitalist economies (*Selected Prose* 1972, *New Directions*) in his protege Eustace Mullins's prose work *Secrets of the Federal Reserve* (commissioned by Pound) and Mullins's little known (and out of print) biography of Pound *This Difficult Individual*. Here the majority are split between retreating into robot-dom or waxing satirical into eternity.

***The more significant reason for why Pound was arrested and incarcerated in an insane asylum, meaning the absolute corruption and conspiracy of the 'Cold War' before, during, and ever since WWII, which books like Antony Sutton's *National Suicide* unmask as a series of opportune trading

deals between The Soviet Union and The West, and not at all the ‘daggers drawn’ scenario we’ve been fed. Sutton also provides ample evidence for the argument that Bolshevism was, for the most part, an invention of Wall St.

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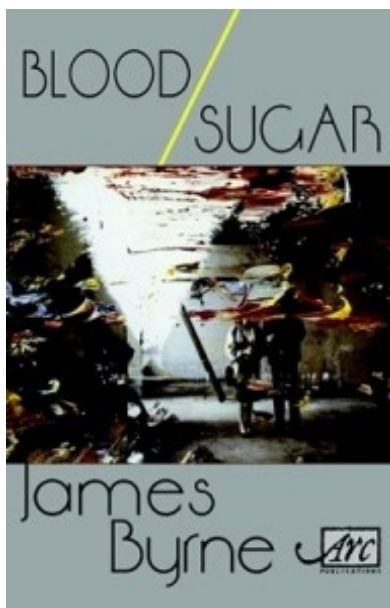
A House for the English Mythologies; Review of ‘Blood/Sugar’ by James Byrne

Posted on [October 4, 2010](#) by [thefiendjournal](#)

This almost-recent release of James Byrne’s new book follows on from *Passages of Time*, released seemingly many moons ago, although it may be worth stating that ‘follows on from’ gives only partial illumination on what Byrne is up to these days.

While the earlier collection was a testing ground for a number of different attitudes and atmospheres, *Blood/Sugar* is more focused, distinct and stalwart than the previous collection.

While many poems have clearly defined subject matter or more rounded or enclosed narrative devices, the majority are happy to leave their respective themes open-ended; node stones for a particular passion or belief, or fascinations and reading matter (after Ezra Pound, who is quoted a number of times throughout the collection) as indications on the always incomplete journey of human learning.



Blood / Sugar - James Byrne

Blood/Sugar, also, is a lot more clear on the poet’s thematic and literary lineage than Byrne’s previous collection. An early poem, *Apprentice Work*, clearly demarcates the territory of influence in the wake of the death of the British poet Peter Redgrove, the poem ending with the solemn (and useful) piece of advice: *We apprentice poets need an innovator, / ‘verbal haemoglobin’, not a casket key. / I repeat the only rule you knew as mantra: // everything is invitation ...also a good way into this text as a whole. Everything is invitation. Read it again. It is important.*

The other aspects of the book very much traverse, and are in conscious conversation with, other poets, and poems, past and future, and display a wide range of reference across realms of poetry and assorted theory... to be noted

only in as much as this attitude is absent from much new poetry. Poems, here, are patchworks of personal significances, rendering up interesting connections between people and things, the atmosphere of a search for a form of life code is ever present, again much absent from contemporary poetry, and celebrated here. Also questions of translation, and life as translation, come up (in all their forms), naturally enough for a poet no stranger to translation:

“If it cannot be translated as it was...

A ‘version’ empowers me:

Pain is inevitable...

(how we clown after it)

Suffering is optional

(the first rule of confession).”

There is a calmness and distance here which allows that truth to sink in. I watch young children as I watch uncles, aunts, fathers, mothers, strangers... and ask for a process that allows us to see where time thrusts its hands into us as spiritual awareness rather than the same reactionary behaviours. *Pain is inevitable... / (how we clown after it)*. So I read these lines again. They are important.

And from *Two Phonecalls at 4 am*:

‘Lacking the mirror-work of Cocteau’s *Orphee*
or the white throat of a Busoni sonata,

mismouths become crosscuts,

the blue-black spell:
garlic in the roses.

We offer anecdotes:

Li Po drunk on Saki.

Li Po bent mad over books.

Li Po remade as a lithical martyr by Deng Xiaoping.’

All these lines intrigue, in how they’ve been arranged on the page, in how they cross from the physical to the psychic, the historical... what is missing are perhaps voices that conclude. But the poem is less about connections and more about how the individual is mysteriously revealed in its most pungent aspects, something timely perhaps, in that history is so well read and analysed in our era (particularly in the utmost assuredness of

the British psyche) that the founding reasonings behind its multiple existences often escape us. The individual, against it, is reduced to simply a hapless listener, hopefully choosing the correct narratives. The poem, here, stands on the side of the individual/the reader... and this reader wishes for a more forthright spring from which histories are seen as just as fragile. Perhaps the significance of this poem is what it offers, however, rather than its urge toward conclusion...

At a slightly different angle, *Blood/Sugar* concerns itself with how forms of history harden themselves through the looking glass of the common place (again, a big Poundian theme) in as much as Byrne marks himself out by being very much a questing poet in search of the new; meaning; the 'unreported', that which lies below our official histories, as in *The Buddhas of Bamiyan*:

“The death, even the disappearance, of something holy
is unreal to me’
says the tour guide,
a local Hazara, trained by Tarzi, who,
when the Taliban torched villages around Kush Mountain,
had to bury all the men in his family.”

The entire poem intrigues, and yet the notes don't provide any sources and we are left with questions over whether this is first-hand narrative from the poet, filtered through the normal mainstream-liberal-conservative medias via the usual twisted roaming global authorities.

The poem, then, could strengthen the usefulness of religious idols in assuming their energetic spiritual strength as the only form of cohesion between people, instead of objects of division, stabilization and control... while, as ever, it assumes that something other than Islamization is better while not questioning the entire crucible of religions, as is necessary, and gives no explicit alternatives. It is a poem of problem over solution, and as such, seems oddly unfinished. Forms of cruelty are forms of cruelty, and shouldn't be dignified by any religious reference... and the Buddhas of Bamiyan might be viewed in that regard... perhaps in this way the poem is at least partially successful. The key, here, is that not “some thing” is holy, but everything is holy. Any dilution of this constitutes social control, a dissonance in the harmony between man and world. But how to acquire wholeness in its positive aspect? To allow those invitations to do their most efficient work?

Another poem that intrigues and stands out is *Prospecting Several Instances of Active Imagination*, which has Byrne referring to Jung's theory on active imagination in his notes (as “a meditation technique often used to translate emotions into images or narratives”). This is where, I think, the poet is at his strongest... Byrne delineates lived experience with an exceptionally heightened form of acceptance and tolerance, and the borders between conscious and unconscious experience are where he is at his most consummate... from the

final section, which asserts a living history as directly in tune with, and in collaboration with present life, i.e a 'carried history' ('I was dreaming you...')

"Light as anthem covering
Cloud-baled mountains.
Chillon's moratorium in bloom.

On a column, under glass:
BYRON. Beside him, my scrawl:
'could not love then as I do here'.

This also brings me to the stronger sense of Byrne's more-clearly defined work ethic, not fully exposed under the more indulgent lyrics of his first collection; the unearthed and utilitarian suggestion that fragmented or linearly separated experience still has a wholeness that the writing of poetry discovers... and that the collection of significances is, in and of itself, NOT the recapitulation of post-modern working methods (the lie of "world" as unfathomable void in which spiky bits of profundity jut out from the giant morass of the unbearable human 'condition'), but a positive method of retrieving the unity of conscious, sub-conscious, unconscious and super-conscious psychic material, in pieces of original form, or transferred form. This collection exemplifies and frustrates that tension, however, regarding our need for wholeness and narrative.

The method is missing, however, in this poetry (the mytho-poetics mentioned in the book's blurb) in that it chooses to become the wellspring or 'direction' for everything of an individual's frame of reference. The imagination, in this M.O, becomes the director of what sections of world, via all the senses, become the stuff of the poem; to interpret Olson... the poem is transferred energy taken psychically, from where physically the poet got it, meaning the transcendence of self and world, or individuality of world.

Although it's unclear as to how much of the poet's mind moves toward narration and providing answers, or the channeling of a single voice, what should be noted is the abundance of quotes, both literary and experiential, pointedly to 'pick up signals'... like this beautiful final icebreaker from *Avoiding a Close Reading of Geoffrey Hill's Mercian Hymns: Magic is for the staggeringly gifted. / The rest of us are furniture. / We move from room to room.* There is a strength and weakness here, the strength being the ability, the ear, to pick up on this particular conversational jewel... along with the seeming inability, in a collection where the conversational element is so brilliantly 'made use of', to provide a counterpoint, or answer (you could have a whole sequence of poems that jump off from this reflection, it's stuffed full of potentialities, particularly where the study and use of magic in the 21st Century is concerned). Byrne, though, is more happy to leave the plurality of voice intact without being guided toward a lyrical heaviness or the will of one purposeful narrator.

Where mytho-poetic poetries have taken on tinges (and sometimes super-tinges?) of the magical it's to be hoped that Byrne takes on this slant more forcibly in later collections, and I wonder if this ambivalence between fracturedness, narration and plurality of voice, both physically and temporally, is something of a new poetic art of its own, and am happy to leave much of its ambivalences hanging...

As in much of Redgrove's most pointed and persuasive work (and, for me, his ethic was more optimistic and explicit than say Ted Hughes's darker will toward the human within the animal, or within the inanimate land) in *Blood/Sugar* there is a resistance to framing these bowls of significances too heavily. And, while much of contemporary poetry has grabbed onto the profuse multiplicity of voices within the individual, few have put all these individual eyes (and I's?) so purposefully to work, as displayed here. And "work", for this writer, always implies quest.

Having said this, the sequence *Inclub Satires*, a collection of gossipy reflections on the London poetry circuit, impresses less... if only for its ignorance of satire, when on the printed page, simply becoming another club-unto-itself (fun in conversation, less so on the printed page... maybe this piece may work better when read aloud? Hopefully to the people it is intended to debunk?) Again, here, we see shades of the younger Pound that may only deflect in as much as they seem out of place in a collection of more visionary and mostly overtly metaphysical and 'serious' poems. Perhaps the intention behind them was made particularly so as to have a counterpoint, one can only guess... if so, as entertaining as they are, they're only partially successful within the context of the book entire.

To temper that last reflection, I would definitely refer the reader to *The Ashes*, which seems to use the gossipy-ness of the satires toward a more interesting purpose, a poem about a man attempting to drink down his father's ashes in order to more effectively grieve. To this reader, this is perhaps an unintended reflection on the sloughing off of each passing generation or the impatience of trying to go one's own way in a world of seeming absolute multiplicity and variety which still reveals itself as un-emotional mass and homogeneity... the kind of heartfelt and generous angst which Byrne's poetry is mature enough to be able to accept and shun in equal measure.

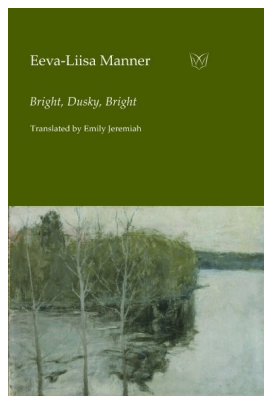
What one receives from this collection is partially what one is willing to bring to it... the need for a poetry that may just transform as much as it is able to digress and debunk... this; along with its ability to describe and reflect while still tolerating as much of what the psyche is able to give out without that very 21st Century urge toward self-censorship. In short; something that will, while re-energizing and unpicking a lineage, calmly open doors for lucid and forthcoming voices in poetry... voices that, while having studied, lived and considered obsessively, are still willing to go all out and say "this is what I've discovered, this is what I think about it, and this is how I think it"

Andrew O'Donnell, Sept 19th 2010

Return to the Light: 'Bright Dusky Bright' by Eeva Liisa Manner

Posted on [October 4, 2010](#) by [thefriendjournal](#)

Translated by Emily Jeremiah – Waterloo Press 2009



Bright Dusky Bright

When reading the poems of Eeva-Liisa Manner, and discovering the landscapes that gave birth to them, I am reminded of these lines by the great Finnish/Swedish poet Edith Sodergran, lines in fact inscribed upon her gravestone, 'See, here is eternity's shore, here the stream murmurs by, and death plays in the bushes his same monotonous melody', for amid the surrounding cacophony of nothingness, the ice-empires and snow-creatures that dominate the psychological terrain of this poet's imagination, we sense the always pervading presence of conscience and creation combined, in

poems that seem to de-personalize and tether the 'I' of the poet to a frozen post in the mind of the reader for the poem's duration. We are, like her, forced to watch as:

'Snow moves like a low animal,

Nests in corners.

Scarce panes and eyes freeze.

If a bird strays in, it drops.

This freezing hand fails to warm it.'

('Winter')

Eeva – Liisa Manner was born in Helsinki 5 Dec 1921. She began her 'career' as a poet in 1944 with 'Black and Red', but it was in her breakthrough collection 'This journey', published in 1956, and from which this book begins, that she truly found her voice, and which led to her becoming one of the most influential modernists in postwar Finland. Time and dream combine in her poems, to pre-empt and then surpass mystery, a ruthless subjectivity that uses the pen as a chisel to carve free the inaudible, the unsaid, from the great white mountainous side of the page:

'Night's coldness moves slowly further

like the edge of a glacier

and covers small corpses.

The trees outside bear emptiness,

loneliness

moves stone-like from tree to tree.'

('How loneliness emanates from me')

Throughout her poems she attempts to sacrifice the 'events' of the world' for the 'events' of poetry, in a vision that drags language on a word-halter into the furthest interior reaches of her experience. Her poems are 'modern' only in as much as they by-pass any pre-conceived formula to speak, relying instead upon a pure language ground out of the fine silt of silence, where everything seems about to defuse and disappear. One of the strongest and most pivotal poems in this important modernist collection is her poem 'Descartes' a poem in which she reverses the philosophers most famous dictum, 'I think, therefore I am', turning it instead into 'I thought, but was not' a seemingly irrelevant notion but which plays dividends in the way that the poet reinterprets the duplicity of this truth for her own means:

'I thought, but was not.

I said animals were machines.

I had lost everything apart from reason.

Give my regards to all those

Whose knowledge is secret...

Tell them that philosophy is loneliness and a dead body

Which copulates with reason,'

('Descartes')

The beauty of the line beginning ‘give my regards...’ is remarkable and could only be considered anti-social if it were uttered towards those in Heaven. The philosophical interests of a poet are of course always more illusive, more indirect than the philosopher, in order to force a meaning out into the world; the responsibility lies only with the imagination and, in the case of this poet, the supernatural and the atomic particles that get scattered by every dislocated word, the way she loosens the senses, and opens the valves of seeing afresh:

‘Rain opens the sleeper’s ears

Rain opens the walker’s shadows

Rain opens hearing, walking, inwards.’

(‘Rain opens the sleeper’s ears’)

She creates of the natural world something akin to what Mallarme termed as being a ‘brutal mirage’, an unreal but compelling rupture in the real world. The ‘ideas’ in her poems overcome quickly the poem’s conception, which creates for the reader the sensation that we are experiencing what the poet is experiencing at exactly the same time. Each poem like a thermal-secret, is squeezed free of ice-enclaves, and is coaxed out by the poet from the discreet syntactical hiding places of her imagination:

‘And the gates open, open-

Purple beaks open, are variations and flute,

Cast-off wings open, rise, are fugue,

Towers tremble, flowing grass

Weaves music from light and water’

(‘Bach’)

Music to this poet is as important as silence, in fact they both at times share the same irrevocable pitch, a superabundant soundtrack played out on the musical scale of trees, grass, and seasons. Mozart and Bach are evoked throughout and appear to re-organize their orchestral arrangements in the tops of trees, beside a river, retuning their instruments in the larynx and throats of birds:

‘tuned birds flutter

laughter in their beaks

drops of Mozart

zart zart'

('counterpoint')

It is like watching nature search in vain for a suitable and transcendental conductor, to play out its successes and failures in language; And that 'conductor' is Eeva –Liisa Manner. One of the most important poetical props used over and over by this poet is the 'mirror', of which she peels back like tinfoil from the surface of stones, hoists up like a sheet of glass from the depths of water, as she locates always a co-object as image. It is a slide-show in which the inanimate and the living cannot be truly separated:

'The bird ascends,

parts from its water-image;

the mirror flies;'

('Mirror images')

This poem from her 1964 collection 'the seasons shifted' is synonymous with how she develops the 'image' in the later collections. Her imagination, like a sundial, learns to activate and control the shadow-movements of her own words, thus revealing the minute shifts in space that occur beyond the natural eyesight of the human. Her poems mirror (literally) the dictum of the French poet Paul Valery when he said, 'I am born on all sides... I am the analogue of what is.' This poet sees, like Blake, from the fixed-centre of her own crystal-ball, where the world, still splintering, still becoming, remains neutral, a place where science, anthropology, politics, and other renderings of humanity appear still barely organized particulars of a planet still reveling in the perfection of its creator's draughtmanship:

'Will you see how everything shifts

Slightly each moment

and becomes more modest and more primitive

(like children's drawings

or protozoa: the ABC of the soul)

(‘Assimilation’)

There is no confusion of thought in her poems, no clunking or irregular philosophy, there is merely the need to uncover the poetical and imaginative motives of the mirror and the object in a reflective world. Reading this selection of her work I am drawn to the conclusion that she seems an unconscious proponent of what Ezra Pound meant when he wrote, ‘Relations between things are more important than the things themselves’ such as in her Rilkean image that concludes one of the finest poems in this book ‘Where is the end of endless days?’:

‘It’s as if an angel-yearning for death

had removed his wounded steps

from the magnet of dust and gone

brushing past so deftly that you do not forget it’

From the earliest collections to the later ones this poet chose to stay close to her original and most accustomed themes, water, echoes, snow, light, landscapes, trees and mortality, but in the later work there does seem (maybe inevitably so) a greater sense of finality, a hardening up of the once shifting syntactical terrain:

‘This heart too will tire, all clocks tire,

now its still throbbing in my wrist,

knocking at my ribs, a boat-shaped coffin’

(‘untitled cycle’)

Waterloo Press have done a fine job in producing this book and bringing it to a larger audience and it is certainly a book to celebrate, and to thank also the translator for producing poems that seem themselves as almost perfect co-objects/ mirrors to the original poems. The imagination of this excellent poet is brought full circle for the reader by this book, the return by ‘other boats’ to a final lone destination:

A weightless and easy departure, a return to the light.

by Paul Stubbs

Waterloo Press

<http://www.waterloopresshove.co.uk/>

Paul Stubbs is the author of three books of poetry *The Theological Museum* (Flambard Press) and *The Icon Maker* (Arc Publications). His latest release, a long poem *Ex Nihilo* has just been published by Black Herald Press as of Sept this year. Another full collection *The End of the Trial of Man* is forthcoming in 2011.

<http://paulstubbspoeet.wordpress.com/>

from 'Sensitive Poems' – Alan Mills –

Posted on October 15, 2010 by thefiendjournal

Translations from the Spanish by Andrew O'Donnell and Michael Lee Rattigan

It's necessary to see, to use
no material stranger,
thus, if we want to speak of children
burst open against the trees,
it will be necessary to say it without excluding
the blood that runs down the bark;
it's not worth the trouble to oust pain
with ideas, better to catch the nervous swellings
brought to the branches;
not to put word and word
where they'll be led to arm an emptiness.
It's necessary to avoid substitutes;
yes the meat burns, strength
growls in each impact, shows the trajectory
of each recoil, the red sap of the trees

~

The lines in that other book you read
tell you that you aren't safe,
that you never were,
that you never will be safe.
Not the lulling flowers,
nor the highest peaks, where flags
wave in slightly foolish pride,
nor the sea that's all desire...
nothing, nothing saves you.
Don't bother re-tuning to the news,

but graffiti your room
with something lovely or something dirty.
but let it say something and mark the walls
that you know so well.
Turn the music up
and decide to set fire to that book,
get up and take the ashes
to Kafka's tomb.

~

This quiet animal
looks a bit like me, in its
pool of blood,
almost floating in red, it has
something of me in it.
This animal that's been crushed,
that's been given it hard,
and no longer knows if it's dog or chicken
or plain martyr or what.
It's silence speaks only to asphalt,
to those eyes that see it while doing nothing;
to those who vomit when they see it.
Something is here,
something of my brightness
in each particle that's pummeled
by passing wheels

~

(Announcement)

This book is a failure...
I feel it.
Not even a post-Vallejo-esque attempt
but simply a test,
a luxury,
a thing put up with.
The light has gone out of these pages,
they have carried on existing without grace.
But who has the authority to say what poetry is?
Who pulls me out of the idiotwreck?
Who is able to weep with words
to a herd of cattle?

or be spliced into all those orgasmic groans
that go on now?
Who?

~

Thanatos

Here, expecting the earthworms
in this land,
surrounded by bones and
consumed hide.
I've amputated my language,
the weak, sinuous muscle;
my eyes melt
into sightlessness
but for three metres that separate out
the dog shitting on the grass.
I go where I'm not,
I feel inaudible,
wasted, buried in this silence
thronged with worms.
They who rise up and are consumed,
they; the great occurrence, who travel through me,
digging their tunnels.

Alan Mills is a Guatemalan poet. His books have been published in both Guatemala, Mexico and France. They are: 'Los Nombres Ocultos', 'Poemas Sensibles', 'Marca de Agua', 'Testamentofuturo', 'Caja Negra XX 2012'. His 'y Escalera a Ninguna Parte' was released this year on Catafixia in Guatemala. His book 'Syncope' is available at the publisher Rouge Inside in French translation.

<http://alanmills.blogspot.com/>

Making Strange – A Note on Translation

Posted on [October 18, 2010](#) by [thefiendjournal](#)

When one language is pressed into another through translation, or the effort at translation to get meaning across, the result is often a vivid or poetic phrase. This happened often with the students I taught in Mexico. Take one student's attempt to describe the Renaissance:

“In the Renaissance the society had been reborn in mind”

That last phrase derives from the Spanish verb “renacer”: to be reborn, and its casual reworking into English here is striking.

The confusion that arises when one language rubs up against another, often produces a kind of poetry- especially where meaning becomes doubtful or various. The effect of this, where there is a genuine effort at expression, can be startling. This is apparent in one student’s description of their home city:

“That city is painfully of flowers!”

Stretching the language in this way, moulding it and remaking it to express an emotional response, lets in an unexpected poetry. I say unexpected, because these children are simply trying to express themselves in the clearest manner possible and are quite happy to manipulate language in a carefree way in order to do so. They manipulate language in the carefree way of a poet. This reminds me of a reflection made by Pessoa (in “The Book of Disquiet”) about children’s forthrightness in saying what they feel, rather than expressing in general terms what they are supposed to feel, as in the case of a child on the point of crying who says: “I feel like tears”.

by Michael Lee Rattigan

[Michael Lee Rattigan](#) is the author of two books: a chapbook of poems “Nature Notes” and the first complete bi-lingual translation of Fernando Pessoa’s Caeiro poems, both published by Rufus Books.

‘108 Moons’ – Jurga Ivanauskaitė

Posted on [October 19, 2010](#) by [thefiendjournal](#)

translation from the Lithuanian by Ruta Suchodolskyte and Paul Perry.

I live as if swinging
on the tongue of a bell
sometimes hating myself loudly
sometimes loving myself quietly

~

108 moons stiffen in a rosary
falling stars stick in the snow
on a dazzled night at the foot of Kailash
time is not passing not passing not passing not passing not passing

~

I often wake up rooted
in the middle of an endless circle
I can feel the horror
there is no place to go

~

A shadow of a butterfly
flies over the earth
I am coming back
as if into mother's womb
into suddenly opening emptiness

~

Asked by an old Master
I am singing about my favourite mountain
he interrupts me:
your love will not be answered

~

I am climbing and climbing
then stop to catch my breath
Kailash yogi is whispering:
I envy the mountain
who made you breathe
with such passion

~

Foaming wine of the sky
in a blue mountain cup
on the New Year morning
while warming hands by the fire

~

In the fog at sunrise
a yak shepherd said to me:
darling if you are looking for enemies

your wish
is an order for everyone

~

On the night of the full moon
on the way to Tingri
the messenger
who passed me by
didn't cast a shadow

~

White Kailash mountain
the egg of the universe
I fall to your feet
I am the one obsessed by lust

~

Butchers' laughter
Lambs' blood
soaking into the first snow
I am leaving Lhasa

~

Skies flow into me
while meditating
I embrace the earth
melt in ecstasy
but you are not here

[Jurga Ivanauskaitė](#) (14 November 1961, Vilnius – 17 February 2007, Vilnius) was a prose writer, essayist, poet, playwright and painter and was probably the most widely read writer in Lithuania. Her most recent books, 'Gone with the Dreams' and 'Placebo' became national bestsellers. In 1994 Ivanauskaitė took her first trip to India and studied Buddhism at Dharamsala, gaining impetus to start a new page in her literary work. Her paintings and photographs, which, like her books, underwent a complete transformation after her travels, always drew crowds when exhibited.

Ruta Suchodolskyte is a Lithuanian writer and translator based in Vilnius. She writes for the Veidas Periodical Press and has published her own poetry and translations in a

variety of journals in Europe. A graduate of Vilnius Pedagogical University, she also holds a Masters Degree from the University of Ulster.

[Paul Perry](#) is the author, editor and translator of several books including 'The Drowning of the Saints', 'Goldsmith's Ghost', and 'The Orchid Keeper'. 'The Last Falcon and Small Ordinance' appeared from [The Dedalus Press](#) in 2010. Based in Dublin, he teaches for the Creative Writing Programme at Kingston University, London.

Two Poems – Paul Perry

Posted on [October 19, 2010](#) by [thefiendjournal](#)

Promise

You get off the train
in another no-where town
and are welcomed home.

The wind leads you
to a road and you start
to walk.

Where you came from
is no where like this.

A man is pushing
a bike. He tells you
the rain is on its way,
but you don't see.

He offers you
a place to sleep.

You keep going
to where there are fields.

Not far from a river,
someone is calling out.

A woman is standing in
the doorway of a house.
She sees through you.

In her silence,
there is something
of a promise,

something
which suggests
you could
if you wanted
become again
the person
you wished to be.

You can hear the voices
of children,
their laughter.
You can choose to walk on.

You've been travelling
a long time.

Before you speak
the first words of the day
you can rest.

The world is waking.
And the morning is welling onto your lips.

Speak.
Say something.
You can still be healed.

On The Way To Three-Rock

What it was that lead me
through the fields and into forest
I can't say, but whatever it was
it felt like a compulsion;

in other words, I had no choice
in the matter. This may have
happened before, but somewhere else.
In the forest there was the dense

smell of pine, underfoot the crunch
of kindle and out of it like smoke
rising from a dead fire
came the fluttering of birds and

their voices above me in the trees.
Suddenly I was there in the clearing,
high up, watching a boy pitch a tent
and a girl watch him. They fumbled

together in the dark, they held
each other like first-time lovers.
They did not see me; I was not
to be seen. Besides what would

I have said to myself: that the mist
in the morning will be cold and
the moon, it will stay
hanging in the sky at least until dawn?

Paul Perry is the author, editor and translator of several books including 'The Drowning of the Saints', 'Goldsmith's Ghost', and 'The Orchid Keeper'. 'The Last Falcon and Small Ordinance' appeared from [The Dedalus Press](#) in 2010. Based in Dublin, he teaches for the Creative Writing Programme at Kingston University, London.

Versions of Rimbaud's "L'Orgie Parisienne" and "Le Dormeur du Val"

Posted on [October 24, 2010](#) by [thefiendjournal](#)

Translations from the French by Andrew O'Donnell

The Orgy

O cowards, here we are! Vomited out into the stations!
The sun, with its burning lungs, turning arid
along the streets where the night brims with barbarians.
Here is the martyred city, sitting in The West!

Come on! We won't bother with the rebirth of fire,
here are the quays, here are the streets, here are
the houses under a vegetable blue that still radiates
inside a night that took those bombs, and bled stars!

Hide the dead palaces in nests of planks!
The ancient horrified day renews all you see.
Here come the red-headed dancers wriggling their hips:
Go mad, go insane ... I can see it in your eyes!

Packs of dogs in heat, eating from your bandages.
The howl from these gold houses reclaims you. Steal!
Eat! Watch the ecstatic night in its deepest spasms
flow down onto the streets. O you sorry drinkers,

Drink! When the light arrives, intense and mad,
piercing your side with its rippling luxuries,
will you end up drooling, without a gesture or a word,
into your glasses, your eyes lost to white distances?

Swallow, for the fetid Queen's cascading arse!
Listen to the movements of these idiotic tearing
hiccups! In burning nights, listen to the panting pricks,
the old farts, the puppets, the lackeys... leaping about!

O hearts full of shit, petrifying mouths,
work harder, you stinking mouths!
Some wine for these depraved visions, at these tables...
your stomachs melt with disgrace, O Conquerors!

Open your nostrils to these glorious sicknesses!
Engulf the cords of every neck with your poisons!
With hands crossed on the napes of these young necks,
The Poet whispers: "O cowards, go insane!"

Because you've explored the womb of Woman,
you dread any more of her convulsions
crying out and suffocating your efforts, as they settle
on her breast, where a horrible pressure is.

Syphilitics, fools, kings, puppets, ventriloquists,
does the whore of this city really care for
your souls or your bodies, your poisons or your rags?
She'll be rid of you all... you putrid yellow bastards!

And when you're down, as you moan unto your guts,
your sides aching, waiting on money, confused,

the red courtesan with her breasts grown fat on war –
far away from all of this – will clench her fists!”

When your feet danced so hard in your rage,
city! When you took so many knife wounds,
when you stretched out, to keep your eyes peeled
for something resembling the bounty of spring...

O mournful city! O half-dead city,
your head and your breasts pointing towards the future,
they open on your pallor and its ten million doors,
city, where our dark pasts could have been blessed:

your body recharged for enormous pain,
you drink in this despicable life again! You sense its
flood of ashen worms rising in your veins
and, on your clear love, you feel its glacial fingers.

And this won't hurt. The worms, the ashen worms
won't stop the breath of Progress any more than
when the Stryx put out the eyes of the Caryatides,
their astral tears falling from the blue heights.

Even though its horrific to see you covered
like this... even though you couldn't conjure a city
as ulcerous and as rotten from verdant nature
The Poet whispers: “Your Beauty is glorious!”

The storm's sanctity gave you supreme poetry;
a strength in the massive movements that courted you;
your work boils, and death moans, to our city!
Crowd your heart with the blasts of the trumpet.

The Poet absorbs the tears of the Infamous,
the hate of the prisoners, the clamour of the Damned;
And the light of his love plagues the Women.
His poems jump out: This is it! This is it! Bandits!

Society, everything is put back where it was:- the orgies
weep their ancient tears in ancient whorehouses
while the gaslights wreak havoc on reddened walls,
each flaring up ominously toward the dying blue ether.

Not Waking the Dead Man

It's a green hollow at the mantra of a river,
caught in an insane wilderness that hails
silver rags where mountains free the sun's fire.
This small valley, thrust into frothing rays.

A young soldier, mouth open, head bowed,
his neck bathing in fresh blue cress sown
as he sleeps stretched out on grass, under clouds
pale on his green bed where light rains down.

The feet rest among the gladioli. He's smiling
like a sick child would smile. He's having
a nap. Nature, take him in your arms: he's cold.

Perfumes, don't force one scent on those nostrils.
He sleeps in the sun with a hand on his chest,
quiet. He has two red holes in his right side.

'The One Rule is Never to Fall in Love' – Niall McDevitt

Posted on [November 14, 2010](#) by [thefiendjournal](#)

In this secret world, caught between the confusions,
my superiors have made me feel too self-important,
underpaid but with theoretical blank cheque
in the cosmos within the country within the city.
In the circus of deception the audience faces the tent
applauding the shadows of the acts within the ring
where the lion-tamer is—in fact—a taxidermist
who'll never admit that the lions he tames are stuffed.
The skeleton in my flesh has been somehow turned.
I walk in the public world like a guillotined ghost.
Charm's the veneer. Inside is a tissue of lies
nourished by barium meals and by chickenfeed.

The skeleton in my flesh has been somehow turned

~

Niall McDevitt is an Irish poet living in London. His debut collection 'b/w' (reviewed at [The Fiend](#)) is available from [Waterloo Press](#).

The Alchemy of Love – Guido Cavalcanti; Then and Now

Posted on November 14, 2010 by [thefiendjournal](#)

Complete Poems – Guido Cavalcanti translated by Anthony Mortimer, [OneWorld Classics](#), 2010. Cavalcanti Poems (1912) in *Translations of Ezra Pound*, [Faber](#), 1953, 1984.

Guido Cavalcanti should be a household name in the canon of world poetry. He was Dante's 'first friend' in *La Vita Nuova* and one of the leading members of the *dolce stil novo* ('sweet new style') group of poets. His importance to Dante alone should make him, if not one of the 'masters', then one of the 'inventors' of a literary style (to use Pound's terminology in *ABC of Reading*). In one of his sonnets Dante compares Guido's Lady Vanna to 'John the Baptist' in relation to Beatrice, suggesting that he felt that Cavalcanti was a 'forerunner' to his own messianic-poetic incarnation. Guido is mentioned



Guido Cavalcanti

It is chiefly through the translations of Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Ezra Pound that the English-speaking world has been made aware of Cavalcanti. I can still remember the shockwave of Pound's translations when I first read them as a fresh-faced student back in 1994. Pound's heady mix of archaic medieval idioms welded to his ultra-modernity made reading this short book much like 'having a small ball of fire in my hand' (to use Pound's phrase). The fact that this version has been the undisputed and chief 'Cavalcanti' point-of-entry for the past century is testament to Pound's uncanny ability to don the persona of any literary figure in history he wanted to and then to breathe his own essence into them. How much ventriloquy there had been was not a question I wanted, or needed, to ask at that point. As Hugh Kenner states Pound always 'invents a new form in English' when he translates a foreign poet in order to

show the 'otherness' of that strange culture. Added to this was the luminous mysticism of Guido's courtly love, his stylistic use of personification and dark infusion of natural philosophy; all serving to conjure-up a veritable, Rimbaudian 'alchemy of the word'. And all this, compounded by Pound's alchemical act of translation, made Cavalcanti not only one of the most intense of poets I'd read but also one of the most unputdownable.

Almost a hundred years on from Pound's 'rosetta stone version' (to quote one reviewer) it certainly is time that another translator took Cavalcanti on. Anthony Mortimer's new

translation published by independent publisher *OneWorld* is certainly to be welcomed. The real problem, for any aspiring translator, is that when you have had such a trailblazing and touchstone version available for so many years there is a lot to live up to. Mortimer has previously translated Dante, Petrarch and Michelangelo and is therefore no stranger to Italian literature. In this new translation he has chosen to follow the Italian edition which appears to print Cavalcanti's poems chronologically. In contrast Pound's version starts with the sonnets, followed by the ballads and finally climaxes with the philosophical canzone (*Donna mi prega*) which is arguably Cavalcanti's masterwork. Mortimer's alternate approach actually allows us to see the development of Cavalcanti's technique. However, the downside is that he ends up with some of the minor sonnets and exchanges with other poets such as Dante and Guido Orlandi (Mortimer chooses to translate their sonnets as well). This makes the climax of his book both bitty and slightly bathetic. Nevertheless it is certainly valuable to finally have a bilingual edition of all of Cavalcanti's corpus (in effect, 52 poems).

OneWorld Press have published, and are proposing to publish, lesser-known classics in the world canon and their choice of Cavalcanti is a notable one as his literary importance is certainly overdue for re-evaluation. Rossetti wrote that Guido 'has more individual life of his own than belongs to any of his predecessors'. Just as Giotto and Duccio were starting to bring in a more humanistic and naturalistic style in painting so Guido Cavalcanti, building on the poetry of the Provençal Troubadours and the early Italian Guido Guinicelli, was doing something very similar in poetry. With Cavalcanti we hear the seed-stirrings of Renaissance, for we read lines that echo Dante's later use of them in the *Commedia* which marks the inception of the Renaissance:

*Then sighs and sorrows seized on me apace,
Seeing how fear already held my heart.
Without respite, they promptly haled me off
To where I found a host of grieving men,
Each loud lamenting the strong pains of love.*
(from V. Tr. Mortimer)

This imagery brings to mind the Lovers' circle in Canto V of *Inferno*. We can also see here Cavalcanti's trademark use of personification. In his poetry 'heart', 'soul', 'mind', 'eyes', 'sighs', 'Love', 'Death' and 'the spirits' have become personalities in their own right. This keys in with Cavalcanti's natural philosophy and the Scholastic thinking of the 13th Century. 'The spirits' denote the scientific, or physiological reality, of certain 'vapours' that rose from the body's organs when intellectually aroused. As Pound was right in asserting there is 'not only proof by reason, but also proof by experiment'. Cavalcanti achieves fantastic literary mileage from this use of personification and it is one of his main claims to literary inventiveness. Pound wrote of Guido that 'no psychologist of the emotions is more keen in his understanding, more precise in his expression.' 'The spirits' are often depicted being routed or fleeing when the beauty of the poet's lady is

intellectually perceived. In some of the stronger poems the poet's body is seen often as a claustrophobic battle-field where he suffers acute agony:

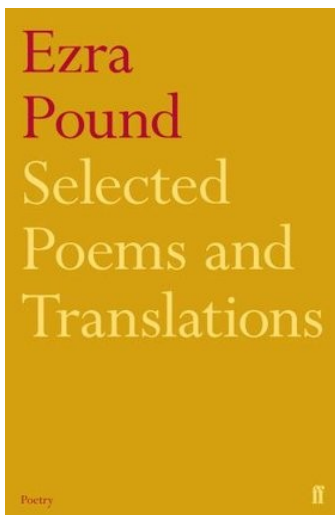
*Let all those to whom great sufferings come
Look on this man, and they will see his heart
Borne in Death's hand and carved into a cross.*

(From *XII* tr. Mortimer)

In Pound's version we have:

*Whoever knoweth
Pain's depth, let him look on this man whose heart
Death beareth in his hand cut cruciform.*

(From *Sonetto VIII* tr, Pound)



Translations

Although more archaic than Mortimer's translation there is no extra padding here. The lines slice with no unnecessary words. Mortimer may be more 'faithful' or literal to the original text, but he loses vitality and ends up with a flatter rendering than Pound's. Pound's archaisms are an intentional ploy to re-imagine the English equivalent of the *Duecento* Cavalcanti. So we have echoes of Chaucer and D'Orleans's syntax ('vertu' for instance). What makes Pound's versions so much more lively, apart from their unexpected medievalisms, is their exquisite melopoeia allied with their innate modernist language and sensibility. However, Mortimer does capture some of Cavalcanti's 'lightness' of touch which Italo Calvino recognised when he wrote of Guido: 'with all his gravity, he has the secret of lightness'. In one of Guido's most famous ballads (*Perch'io non spero*) we have:

*Since there's no hope I ever shall return
To Tuscany, my little song,
Go for me, light and swift, along
To where my lady dwells, and she,
Of her great courtesy,
Will greet you with all honour.*
(from 'XXXV' tr. Mortimer)

Mortimer captures the fresh and light 'swiftness' of the early Italian in a way which Pound, with his firmly-defined 'medieval line', doesn't:

*Because no hope is left me, Ballatetta,
Of return to Tuscany,
Light-foot go thou some fleet way*

*Unto my Lady straightway,
And out of her courtesy
Great honour will she do thee.*
(from 'Ballata XI' tr. Pound)

This 'lightness' (or should we say 'magic realism' after Calvino?) is perhaps Mortimer's only advance on Pound and Rossetti.

For Ezra Pound Cavalcanti and his Tuscan contemporaries emerged in an epoch and locality which Pound names 'the Mediterranean sanity' which also included the Provençal troubadours. Intelligence was given its proper place in a 'radiant world where one thought cuts through another with clean edge, a world of moving energies'. This was opposed to asceticism and the idea that the body and its intelligences are evil. For instance, Cavalcanti leaned towards Averroist philosophy as well as the Aristotelian. This makes him a fascinating foil to Dante who was more rigidly orthodox and, certainly, more 'hell-obsessed' than Guido was. The falling out between the two poets later in their lives may have been philosophical/theological more than anything else. Although both were White Guelfs Dante was partially responsible for Guido's final exile where the latter was infected by a fatal malarial disease which would eventually kill him. The difference between them can be seen in the direct contrast of Guido's masterwork 'Donna mi prega' with Dante's *Commedia*. Guido's philosophical canzone, the only time he attempted this particular form, is, at first reading, impenetrable. Mortimer admits in his notes that, with its internal rhyme schemes, it 'cannot be satisfactorily reproduced in English'. I am not sure whether this concession would have entirely washed with Pound. Having said that Pound did re-translate the canzone in the 1930s. This new version would eventually be embedded, or rather enshrined, within *The Cantos* as *Canto 36*. Anyway, back to Guido's 'Donna mi prega'. After a few close readings it starts to become clearer. So much so that, despite its complexity, it dazzles the reader with luminous shards of philosophical insight. In Mortimer's version of it, concerning the dwelling place and creation of love, we have:

*In that part where the memory resides
Love comes, and as the diaphane is brought
To form by light so love is given form
By dark from Mars; with memory it abides.*
(from XXVII tr. Mortimer)

Here Guido opines that Love is defined by darkness (mental blindness) even as an opaque body is defined by light. The mention of a malign 'Mars' is also in contradistinction to a Dantescan or Christian reading of Love's origin. For Guido 'the light' comes after. Later in the canzone we have:

*Love is not something to be known by seeing,
Nor by perceiving whiteness in what's white;
Since (listen well) form is not seen, the same*

Is true of love proceeding from the form.

(from XXVII tr. Mortimer)

If the form is invisible (an abstraction in the intellect) then the resultant love will also be invisible. The poet's beloved lady has become an 'ideal form' in the poet's intellect, universalized into an Averroist nominalism. This is a far cry from Dante's ascetic journey from *The Inferno* to a Christian Paradise where Beatrice certainly retains her 'form' even if she doesn't keep it substantially. One could think of Donne's *The Extacie* for a nearer equivalent to *Donna mi prega*, although a 'metaphysical' reading of Guido does him a disservice I believe.

Guido Cavalcanti's claim to literary greatness is built on the foundation of *Donna mi prega*. Philosophy, theology, science, psychology, art and logic are all brought together in this stupendous canzone with no verbal rhetoric or 'decoration'. The definite superiority of Guido and Dante to the florid Petrarch in the latter Renaissance is precisely because of this 'clear line' (Pound's phrase). *OneWorld* are to be commended for this brave publication of an underrated Italian great. Nevertheless, I will give Pound's respiratory-miraculous revival in 1912 of Cavalcanti's immaculate, medieval voice the last word (*Sonetto VII*):

*Who is she that comes, makyng turn every man's eye
And makyng the air to tremble with a bright clearnesse
That leadeth with her Love, in such nearnesse
No man may proffer of speech more than a sigh?*

*Ah God, what she is like when her owne eye turneth, is
Fit for Amor to speake, for I cannot at all;
Such is her modesty, I would call
Every woman else but an useless uneasiness.*

*No one could tell all of her pleasauntness
In that every high noble vertu leaneth to herward,
So Beauty sheweth her forth as her Godhede;*

*Never before was our mind so high led,
Nor have we so much of heal as will afford
That our thought may take her immediate in its embrace.*

Mark Wilson, November 2010.

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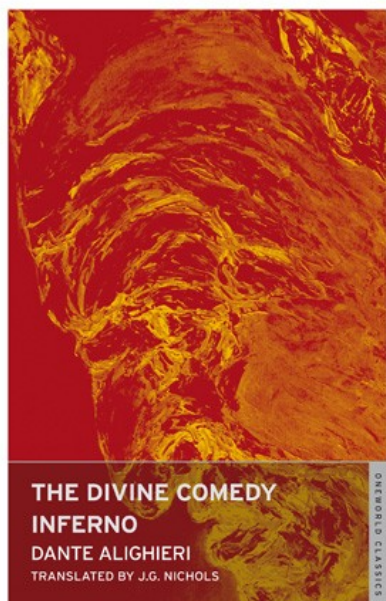
Dante's Inferno – A New Bilingual Edition

Posted on November 14, 2010 by [thefiendjournal](#)

Translated by J.G. Nichols and published by [OneWorld Classics](#)

An article on a new reissue of Dante's *Inferno* seems, at first, to be redundant in two senses; firstly one might presume that, with the multitude of translations already offered to us over the last century, another one thrown in front of an unsuspecting public may not also be next to useless. One also might presume that, with the standard of school literature courses at such a low, particularly when it comes to the study of epic works originally presented in languages other than English, another volume may well fall on deaf ears.

In general terms I'll try to emphasize why both these approaches might be refuted. To begin, one would have to look into the publishing history of *The Divine Comedy* in English in the twentieth century. It would also be useful to initially point out that Dante has been read in mass market forms over the last hundred years or so, and is not as arcane or as 'literary' a pursuit as we sometimes imagine. First we have the immensely popular (for their time) Temple Editions of the *Commedia* which were read across the first half of the twentieth century and the latter half of the previous century, translated by Israel Gollancz more recently, then, up through mid-nineteenth century by John Carlyle, who was later revised for *Temple* by H.Oelsner... in many ways these are names long gone to today's modern reader of Dante.



Dante

But what made Temple so successful, and so profusely read, it seems, is the approach that Dante simply could be enjoyed by many, rather than left to the scholars. Temple's publishing remit also covered a series of Primers for the *Commedia* edited by the Dante scholar P.H Wicksteed (whose *Life of Dante* translation is re-printed in the current *OneWorld* series). The closest thing to the Temple approach in our time might be Allen Mandelbaum's well known translation across the pond.

So it is incredibly important to note that very few paperbacks of the *Commedia*, within our time, have been bilingual. After the Mandelbaum, in bilingual editions, we only have John D.Sinclair's translation available to us; begun during the second world war and completed in the mid-sixties... still, I'd reckon, the de facto affordable and well used crib for many students of Dante (in a Q + A session a few years ago Ciaran Carson

mentioned to this author that the Sinclair was the crib that led him to make his own rhymed translation of *The Inferno*).

Both Sinclair and the Temple editions emphasized faithfulness to the original with plainness of phrasal expression... the Temple asserts an even closer link to the original by 1/trying to mirror the grammatical constructs of Dante's Italian in English and 2/mirroring archaisms... an interesting and intriguing approach, which sometimes comes off and sometimes doesn't.

So, while we've been festooned with translations over the intervening time it is interesting to note that, to this reader's knowledge, only three bilingual cribs with English translation are now currently on the market (the Sinclair translation really came of age in the mid to late sixties with the Mandelbaum put out as a mass market paperback by Bantam in the mid-eighties). So it seems to me that *OneWorld's* new edition, originally put out on Hesperus Press in 2005, is really aiming for the reader who wants a bilingual edition with a readable, up-to-date rendering of the Italian in English verse (ostensibly the reason why I haven't mentioned the myriad of names previously involved in translations of the *Commedia*, of whom it may be worth noting Mark Musa's translation, now available on Penguin, given it's large swathe of influence, and, by a fluke, also an edition I own and will quote from later).

With the Temple editions long gone and Sinclair's edition in prose (by no means a bad option for the first timer to the *Commedia*) it's only the Mandelbaum that can really compare with this present edition in terms of the formal presentations of the two texts. One would also guess that it may have been an influence on Nichols, whose translations do mirror some of the features of Mandelbaum's presentation.

First of all Nichols is working at using rhyme when he can but in no way is he after copying the tricky terza rima rhyme form of Dante's original (a b c b c d c d e d e f... etc, for those uninitiated. If you're in need of the rhyme replication in English I'd refer you to Peter Dale, John Ciardi or Ciaran Carson's *Inferno* for these).

With only a very bare bones Italian I won't attempt to pass judgement on the faithfulness of Nichol's work in depth, but WILL contrast and compare the tone of his style with other translations I've come across.

To begin, let's simply delve into a few quotes to give us a feel for what Nichols seems to be shooting for. The very famous and oft-quoted opening:

*Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita
mi ritrovai per una selva oscura,
ché la diritta via era smarrita.*

*Ah, quanto a dir qual era è cosa dura
esta selva selvaggia e aspra e forte
che nel pensier rinnova la paura!*

The long-line poesy version of Carlyle's Temple edition has:

*In the middle of the journey of our life I came
to myself in a dark wood where the straight
way was lost.*

*Ah! how hard a thing it is to tell what a wild,
and rough, and stubborn wood this was, which
in my thought renews the fear!*

Musa has:

*Midway along the journey of our life
I woke to find myself in a dark wood,
For I had wandered off from the straight path.*

*How hard it is to tell what it was like,
this wood of wilderness, savage and stubborn
(the thought of it brings back all my old fears),*

Nichols has:

*Halfway along our journey to life's end
I found myself astray in a dark wood,
Since the right way was nowhere to be found.*

*How hard a thing it is to express the horror
Of that wild wood, so difficult, so dense!
Even to think of it renews my terror.*

Hopefully these comparisons will firstly, trace a vague lineage in translation but also exemplify what a random sample of approaches might be. Knowing the Italian for this section, it's slightly easier to judge. The Temple is more faithful to the Italian and does not attempt to explain the literality of the Italian "ritrovai", Musa explains more with two verbs... and Nichols treads the middle ground with the verb 'found' which strikes one as modern but not as effusive as Musa. Musa loses a little rhythm/music, however, in: *For I had wandered off from the straight path.*

Of course, Nichols' "end", in the first line, is reaching to half-rhyme, for the terza rima, with the word "found" in the third line. This is what comes of rhyming, and it is the same

issue one might one might take up with Mandelbaum, mildly, and more comprehensively with rhymed translations (of which I'm aware John Ciardi is, perhaps, the most well known recent example). The word 'end' is, in no way, present in the original... with 'mezzo' (literally: middle) as the only place-specification.

Further down, the Italian proceeds: *ch'ï fur per ritornar più volte vòlto...* while Nichols has: *I kept on turning round to turn and flee*. The question being: is this possibly-more-literal rendering adding to the quality of the English? Possibly not, I'd venture. It's simply an awkward construction.

Having said that, the very beginning of the *Inferno* is perhaps where Nichols is at his clunkiest. Canto XI has him striding out more confidently, with a tone that is both consistent, and believably Dante's:

– [...] *it follows that mankind
Should make its way in the world, and make a living
That's not the method of the usurer,*

*For he must slight both nature and her pupil,
Hard human work, placing his hopes elsewhere.*

The sporadic half-rhyme or specified echoes in vowel sounds can open up a certain rhythm that is more appealing. Nichols, it seems, is not so adamant on modernizing or explaining the language, and, if in doubt, he plumps for choices that reinforce clarity over total faithfulness. All these definitions are, in a translation of a well-known text, up for grabs... and we've now had plenty of time to make up our minds on Dante. The focus on rendering the time of Dante's verse can be, however, problematic of course.

In Canto XV line 20, a description a group of *The Inferno's* various sinners, Nichols has: *They knit their eyebrows and squinnied up at us...* from *e si ver noi aguzzavan le ciglia / come 'l vecchio sartor fa nella cruna*. The verb *squinnied* might grate, and yet may also have some accurate historical echo. The 'old Temple' responds in a much plainer fashion: *towards us sharpened their vision...* while Musa waxes: *They strained their eyebrows, squinting hard at us*. One would be hard put to not prefer the Musa, here, modernized though it seems.

The more arcane plain language of Nichols (half-Musa-half-Mandelbaum?), though, has its very interesting uses, particularly in the episodes of the travelers coming upon Bertran de Born and Ugolino, some of the scariest, dramatic moments in the *Inferno*, firstly the entrance of De Born, felled in the Guelf/Ghibelline feud of Dante's day;

*I really saw, and still I seem to see,
A trunk without a head, moving along
With all the others in that company;*

*It held its severed head up by the hair,
Swinging it in one hand just like a lantern;
The head saw us and moaned in its despair.*

...a great improvement on Carlyle's very awkward *And it was holding by the hair the severed head, swinging in his hand like a lantern; and that looked at us and said: "Oh me!"* Nichols phrasing perfectly captures the shock of the image, while retaining, for good or ill, the rhyme at "despair" rather than translating the spoken exasperation itself. Translator's license? The reader is left to decide for themselves (again, a nice benefit of the bilingual edition is that the translator is always leaving the last word up to us, in offering up the en face original for judgement).

And then we come to Ugolino, munching on the head of one of those who betrayed him:

*He raised his mouth from his barbaric feed,
That sinner, and he wiped it on what hair
There still remained on the half-eaten head.*

Where Musa has:

*Lifting his head from his horrendous meal,
this sinner first wiped off his messy lips
on the hair remaining on the chewed-up skull,*

...the 'messy lips' don't altogether convince in making plain acted and acted-upon, while the Nichols might be accused of straying in his faith to the text and 'explaining' the action. Here, I'd still plump for the Nichols in rendering up the inherent drama of the image more viscerally.

In summation there's much to weigh up. As I've mentioned any bilingual edition of the *Commedia* is welcome, particularly as a study mechanism for students, and as a way into the study of other languages, also. The *OneWorld Classics* series, by all stretches of the imagination, are most probably working on quite a tight budget in a field stuffed with options in translation so it is good to see such dedication to Italian literature in translation. It looks as though Nichols will be following up his *Inferno* with the release of the *Purgatorio* next year and it's to be hoped very much that he'll complete the cycle... a very necessary task in competing with the more established Mandelbaum edition.

One would hope that this edition could be the one used in schools/universities in years to come, rather than the usual knee-jerk response of many places (those looking into Dante at least) in picking up the most well known complete edition of the *Inferno*, or the complete *Commedia*. What's also pleasing, as mentioned, is that Nichols has seemed to render a certain amount of rhythm and music in the English of this newest release.

Any competition between this edition and the well-established Sinclair prose edition may well hinge on the notes each provides. The notes, in Sinclair, are, without doubt, more comprehensive, while all of the *OneWorld Classics* editions are much more precise and perfunctory (with short bunches of footnotes included and a general background to its authors at the backs of the books)... possibly a plus for the student already wading through a great morass of waffly introductions to cumbersome and inaccessible ‘masterpieces’. To these eyes, it is the clarity and music of Dante that is more important in perfecting than the quality of notes. I’m also glad to see footnotes over endnotes in this series, saving the reader from rooting through the rest of the book at each moment of confusion.

Time will also tell if, amongst these knackered out economies of ours, a pioneering publisher could muster an all-purpose one volume hardcover bilingual edition of Dante’s great work (perhaps on thin paper?) Maybe this is something that these most current translations might find themselves in, within the next decade or so? Who knows.

Andrew O’Donnell

Late Article by Pier Paolo Pasolini – “Is this a Military Coup D’Etat? I Know...”

Posted on [December 4, 2010](#) by [thefiendjournal](#)

[This prose journalism was written in Italy’s “Corriere della Sera” (a major left-leaning newspaper) on 14th November 1974. Pasolini died just under a year later, on 2nd November 1975. The mystery as to the motives behind his murder, and those involved, have never been fully explained. The piece is translated from the Italian by Aindriú Ó Domhnaill. Updated April ’11]

I know.

I know the names of those responsible for what will come to be known as a “military coup d’etat” (and this, in reality, is a series of “instituted military coups d’etats” systematized for the protection of power).

I know the names of those responsible for the massacre of Milan on 12th December 1969.

I know the names of those responsible for the massacres of Brescia and Bologna in the first months of 1974.

I know the names of the “apex” that has maneuvered it thus, they are the old original fascists of this “military coup”, they are the neo-fascist materialist authors of the first massacres, they are, lastly, the “unknown” materialist authors of the more recent massacres.

I know the names of those who have managed the two different sides, indeed, the two opposites. It is made up of a tension: firstly, an anti-communist phase (Milan 1969) and a second anti-fascist phase (Brescia and Bologna 1974).

I know the names of the powerful group who, with the aid of the CIA (and a second-rate group of Greek colonels in the mafia) they'd created previously (the rest failed badly), with one crusading anti-communist, the plug in the dam of '68, and later on, always with the aid and the inspiration of the CIA, reconstituted anti-fascist virginity, and plugged up the disaster of the "referendum".



Pier Paolo Pasolini

I know the names of those who, between themselves, have given dispositions and assured political protection to the elders that looked after them (in order to keep in place, and to reserve, the potential organization for this coup d'état), from the young neo-fascists, even neo-nazis (in order to create, in concrete, the anti-communist tension) and finally the ordinary criminals, down to this moment, and perhaps forever, those who are without name (in order to create the successive anti-fascist tension). I know the names of this sequence of important people, and that they are behind the comic personages like that general of the forest, the one who was engaged somewhat operatically, in the city of Ducale (while the Italian forests burned), or the dull personages organized purely by the likes of General Miceli.

I know the names of the sequence of important people who are behind the tragic boys who have chosen atrocious fascist suicides, and the common criminals, Sicilian or not, those who thus have the propensity to arrange them, as if killers and hired assassins.

I know all these names and know all the facts (the attempts on the institutions, and the slaughters) of which they've become guilty of.

I know. But I do not have the proof. I don't even have clues.

I know because I am an intellectual, a writer, one who tries to follow all whom he succeeds, to know all that is written in some way, to imagine all that is unknown or concealed; all that which is also coordinated from afar, to put the disorganized and fragmentary pieces into an entirely coherent political picture, to re-establish logic where arbitrariness, madness and mystery seem to reign.

All of this makes up part of my trade, and is the instinct of my trade. This faith is difficult, this faith that is my one “novel plan”, whether in error or not, in that it is not schooled in a connection with reality, and that its real references to facts and persons are inexact. It’s a faith, moreover, that many other intellectuals and novelists know well... since I know many of these intellectuals and novelists. Because the reconstruction of the truth proposes itself in what has happened in Italy after ’68, and therefore isn’t that difficult.

Such truth – she savours herself with absolute precision – is also behind a great amount of journalistic and political participation: what’s not of imagination or of fiction has for itself my own nature. Last example: it is clear that the truth was urged, in all its names, behind the editorial of the “The Evening Courier” on the 1st November 1974.

The journalists and the politicians probably also have the proof or, at least, clues.

Now the problem is this: the journalists and the politicians, perhaps also having the proof, and, sure of the clues, do not give out the names.

Who, therefore, is competent to give out these names? Evidently one who not only has the necessary courage but, at the same time, one who will not be compromised by those accustomed to power, and, furthermore, one who doesn’t have, by definition, anything to lose: that is; an intellectual.

An intellectual therefore could very well make public those names: but they do not have either proof or clues.

The power and the world that, not being of this power, also holds practical relationships with the power, has excluded these free intellectuals – for this is simply the way in which it is made – from the chance to have proof and clues.

Me, it could be objected that I, as an example, am like an intellectual, and an inventor of history, could enter into that explicitly political world (of the power, or close to the power), compromise with it, and therefore I would participate in the right to having, with one sure high probability, proof and clues.

But to such objections I would answer that this is not possible, because it is simply that I would loathe entering into a similar political world which identifies itself with my potential intellectual courage to tell the truth: that is, to name names.

The intellectual courage for truth and practical politics are two irreconcilable things in Italy.

To the intellectual – deeply and viscerally despised by all the Italian bourgeoisie – this deference to a high command is submitted falsely and is noble, yet in reality you serve them: they who debate moral and ideological problems.

If he puts much more to this command he becomes considered a traitor in his role: the screams undergone by the “treachery of the clerics” (as if no one expected otherwise) is an alibi, and a gratification for the politicians and the servants of power.

But power does not exist alone: an opposition to this power exists also. In Italy this opposition is therefore immense and as strong as the power that resembles it: naturally, I refer to the Italian Communist Party.

At this moment, it's certain that the presence of a great party in opposition, as it is, to the Italian Communist Party is the salvation of Italy and its poor democratic institutions.

The Italian Communist Party is a clean country within a dirty country, an honest country within a dishonest country, an intelligent country within an idiotic country, a cultured country within an ignorant country, a humanistic country within a consumerist country. In the past few years between the Italian Communist Party, meant in an authentically unitary sense – “jointly” in compact with its leaders, its base and its voters – and the rest of Italy, an applied exchange has been opened: for which the Italian Communist Party has become exactly a “country separated”, an island. And, today, it is just because of this that it can, like never before, have an intimate relationship with the effective power, corrupt, inept, degraded: but the extent of this diplomatic relationship falls to us, almost from nation to nation.

In truth the two moral realities are incommensurabilities, understandings in their own concreteness, their own totality. It is possible, just on these bases, to face that “compromise”, realistically, perhaps this would suitably save Italy from decay: a “compromise” that would in reality be an “alliance” between two adjacent States, or two States embedded one in the other.

But for all that I've just said in the positive, on the Italian Communist Party, the moment also constitutes what is relatively negative.

With the division of the country into two countries, one sunk up to its neck in degradation and degeneration, the other intact and without compromise, there is no one reason for construction and for peace.

Furthermore, the conception that I have delineated here; my faith's objective, is like a Country within the Country, it's the opposition to what I identify as an other power: a power that is, nevertheless, always power.

Consequently the political men of such an opposition cannot even behave like men of power. In this specific case, at this moment therefore... we look over it again dramatically, to have also deferred to the intellectual mandate established by them.

And, if the intellectual appeals less to this mandate – the purely moral and ideological – it's here that they are a traitor, to the sum satisfaction of all.

Now, why is it that not even the political men of the opposition, if they have – as probably they have – proof or at least clues, do not produce the names of those really responsible, politically, for the actors' military coup and the frightful massacres of these years? It is simple: they do not produce them to the extent that they don't differentiate – with the exception of how much this would become an intellectual – political truth in practical politics. And hence, naturally, the non functionary intellectual is not at all exposed to the current of proofs and clues: not even in their dreams, like the ordinary others, can they date an objective situation of fact.

An intellectual must continue to cling onto themselves, onto what duty must fall to each of them, to just repeat the codified mode of participation.

I know well that it is not the case – at this particular moment of Italian history – that the public make one motion of distrust against the entire political class. This is not diplomatic, it is not opportune. But these categories of politics, not the political truth: are the ones which – when he can and as he can – the impotent intellectual is obliged to serve.

Well, just because I cannot produce the names of those responsible for the attempts of the coup d'état and the slaughters (and in place of this) I cannot articulate my weak self and its ideal accusation against the entire Italian political class.

And I face how much I believe in politics, my faith in the “formal” principles of democracy, my faith in Parliament and faith in parties. And naturally through my own particular optical view this is the Communist one.

Others will only be ready to retract my motion of distrust (this standpoint or others) when a political man – not for an opportunity, not because the moment has come, but rather in order to create the possibility of such a moment – will decide to produce the names of those responsible for the coups d'état and the slaughters, one who evidently knows, like me, they cannot not have proof, or at least clues.

Probably – if American power concurs with this – if it even “diplomatically” decides to grant another democracy, whom American democracy has purposely accepted in the form of Nixon – these names sooner or later will come out. But those that produce them will be men who have shared in this power: as those least responsible against those more

responsible (and not when saying, as in the American case, that they are better). This would after all be the true Coup d'état.

“Cos'è questo golpe? Io so...”

Io so.

Io so i nomi dei responsabili di quello che viene chiamato “golpe” (e che in realtà è una serie di “golpe” istituitasi a sistema di protezione del potere).

Io so i nomi dei responsabili della strage di Milano del 12 dicembre 1969.

Io so i nomi dei responsabili delle stragi di Brescia e di Bologna dei primi mesi del 1974.

Io so i nomi del “vertice” che ha manovrato, dunque, sia i vecchi fascisti ideatori di “golpe”, sia i neo-fascisti autori materiali delle prime stragi, sia infine, gli “ignoti” autori materiali delle stragi più recenti.

Io so i nomi che hanno gestito le due differenti, anzi, opposte, fasi della tensione: una prima fase anticomunista (Milano 1969) e una seconda fase antifascista (Brescia e Bologna 1974).

Io so i nomi del gruppo di potenti, che, con l'aiuto della Cia (e in second'ordine dei colonnelli greci della mafia), hanno prima creato (del resto miseramente fallendo) una crociata anticomunista, a tamponare il '68, e in seguito, sempre con l'aiuto e per ispirazione della Cia, si sono ricostituiti una verginità antifascista, a tamponare il disastro del “referendum”.

Io so i nomi di coloro che, tra una Messa e l'altra, hanno dato le disposizioni e assicurato la protezione politica a vecchi generali (per tenere in piedi, di riserva, l'organizzazione di un potenziale colpo di Stato), a giovani neo-fascisti, anzi neo-nazisti (per creare in concreto la tensione anticomunista) e infine criminali comuni, fino a questo momento, e forse per sempre, senza nome (per creare la successiva tensione antifascista). Io so i nomi delle persone serie e importanti che stanno dietro a dei personaggi comici come quel generale della Forestale che operava, alquanto operettisticamente, a Città Ducale (mentre i boschi italiani bruciavano), o a dei personaggio grigi e puramente organizzativi come il generale Miceli.

Io so i nomi delle persone serie e importanti che stanno dietro ai tragici ragazzi che hanno scelto le suicide atrocità fasciste e ai malfattori comuni, siciliani o no, che si sono messi a disposizione, come killer e sicari.

Io so tutti questi nomi e so tutti i fatti (attentati alle istituzioni e stragi) di cui si sono resi colpevoli.

Io so. Ma non ho le prove. Non ho nemmeno indizi.

Io so perché sono un intellettuale, uno scrittore, che cerca di seguire tutto ciò che succede, di conoscere tutto ciò che se ne scrive, di immaginare tutto ciò che non si sa o che si tace; che coordina fatti anche lontani, che mette insieme i pezzi disorganizzati e frammentari di un intero coerente quadro politico, che ristabilisce la logica là dove sembrano regnare l'arbitrarietà, la follia e il mistero.

Tutto ciò fa parte del mio mestiere e dell'istinto del mio mestiere. Credo che sia difficile che il mio "progetto di romanzo", sia sbagliato, che non abbia cioè attinenza con la realtà, e che i suoi riferimenti a fatti e persone reali siano inesatti. Credo inoltre che molti altri intellettuali e romanzieri sappiano ciò che so io in quanto intellettuale e romanziere. Perché la ricostruzione della verità a proposito di ciò che è successo in Italia dopo il '68 non è poi così difficile.

Tale verità – lo si sente con assoluta precisione – sta dietro una grande quantità di interventi anche giornalistici e politici: cioè non di immaginazione o di finzione come è per sua natura il mio. Ultimo esempio: è chiaro che la verità urgeva, con tutti i suoi nomi, dietro all'editoriale del "Corriere della Sera", del 1° novembre 1974.

Probabilmente i giornalisti e i politici hanno anche delle prove o, almeno, degli indizi.

Ora il problema è questo: i giornalisti e i politici, pur avendo forse delle prove e certamente degli indizi, non fanno i nomi.

A chi dunque compete fare questi nomi? Evidentemente a chi non solo ha il necessario coraggio, ma, insieme, non è compromesso nella pratica col potere, e, inoltre, non ha, per definizione, niente da perdere: cioè un intellettuale.

Un intellettuale dunque potrebbe benissimo fare pubblicamente quei nomi: ma egli non ha né prove né indizi.

Il potere e il mondo che, pur non essendo del potere, tiene rapporti pratici col potere, ha escluso gli intellettuali liberi – proprio per il modo in cui è fatto – dalla possibilità di avere prove ed indizi.

Mi si potrebbe obiettare che io, per esempio, come intellettuale, e inventore di storie, potrei entrare in quel mondo esplicitamente politico (del potere o intorno al potere), compromettermi con esso, e quindi partecipare del diritto ad avere, con una certa alta probabilità, prove ed indizi.

Ma a tale obiezione io risponderei che ciò non è possibile, perché è proprio la ripugnanza ad entrare in un simile mondo politico che si identifica col mio potenziale coraggio intellettuale a dire la verità: cioè a fare i nomi.

Il coraggio intellettuale della verità e la pratica politica sono due cose inconciliabili in Italia.

All'intellettuale – profondamente e visceralmente disprezzato da tutta la borghesia italiana – si deferisce un mandato falsamente alto e nobile, in realtà servile: quello di dibattere i problemi morali e ideologici.

Se egli vien messo a questo mandato viene considerato traditore del suo ruolo: si grida subito (come se non si aspettasse altro che questo) al “tradimento dei chierici” è un alibi e una gratificazione per i politici e per i servi del potere.

Ma non esiste solo il potere: esiste anche un'opposizione al potere. In Italia questa opposizione è così vasta e forte da essere un potere essa stessa: mi riferisco naturalmente al Partito comunista italiano.

È certo che in questo momento la presenza di un grande partito all'opposizione come è il Partito comunista italiano è la salvezza dell'Italia e delle sue povere istituzioni democratiche.

Il Partito comunista italiano è un Paese pulito in un Paese sporco, un Paese onesto in un Paese disonesto, un Paese intelligente in un Paese idiota, un Paese colto in un Paese ignorante, un Paese umanistico in un Paese consumistico. In questi ultimi anni tra il Partito comunista italiano, inteso in senso autenticamente unitario – in un compatto “insieme” di dirigenti, base e votanti – e il resto dell'Italia, si è aperto un baratto: per cui il Partito comunista italiano è divenuto appunto un “Paese separato”, un'isola. Ed è proprio per questo che esso può oggi avere rapporti stretti come non mai col potere effettivo, corrotto, inetto, degradato: ma si tratta di rapporti diplomatici, quasi da nazione a nazione. In realtà le due morali sono incommensurabili, intese nella loro concretezza, nella loro totalità. È possibile, proprio su queste basi, prospettare quel “compromesso”, realistico, che forse salverebbe l'Italia dal completo sfacelo: “compromesso” che sarebbe però in realtà una “alleanza” tra due Stati confinanti, o tra due Stati incastrati uno nell'altro.

Ma proprio tutto ciò che di positivo ho detto sul Partito comunista italiano ne costituisce anche il momento relativamente negativo.

La divisione del Paese in due Paesi, uno affondato fino al collo nella degradazione e nella degenerazione, l'altro intatto e non compromesso, non può essere una ragione di pace e di costruttività.

Inoltre, concepita così come io l'ho qui delineata, credo oggettivamente, cioè come un Paese nel Paese, l'opposizione si identifica con un altro potere: che tuttavia è sempre potere.

Di conseguenza gli uomini politici di tale opposizione non possono non comportarsi anch'essi come uomini di potere.

Nel caso specifico, che in questo momento così drammaticamente ci riguarda, anch'essi hanno deferito all'intellettuale un mandato stabilito da loro. E, se l'intellettuale viene meno a questo mandato – puramente morale e ideologico – ecco che è, con somma soddisfazione di tutti, un traditore.

Ora, perché neanche gli uomini politici dell'opposizione, se hanno – come probabilmente hanno – prove o almeno indizi, non fanno i nomi dei responsabili reali, cioè politici, dei comici golpe e delle spaventose stragi di questi anni? È semplice: essi non li fanno nella misura in cui distinguono – a differenza di quanto farebbe un intellettuale – verità politica da pratica politica. E quindi, naturalmente, neanche essi mettono al corrente di prove e indizi l'intellettuale non funzionario: non se lo sognano nemmeno, com'è del resto normale, data l'oggettiva situazione di fatto.

L'intellettuale deve continuare ad attenersi a quello che gli viene imposto come suo dovere, a iterare il proprio modo codificato di intervento.

Lo so bene che non è il caso – in questo particolare momento della storia italiana – di fare pubblicamente una mozione di sfiducia contro l'intera classe politica. Non è diplomatico, non è opportuno. Ma queste categorie della politica, non della verità politica: quella che – quando può e come può – l'impotente intellettuale è tenuto a servire.

Ebbene, proprio perché io non posso fare i nomi dei responsabili dei tentativi di colpo di Stato e delle stragi (e non al posto di questo) io non posso pronunciare la mia debole e ideale accusa contro l'intera classe politica italiana.

E io faccio in quanto io credo alla politica, credo nei principi “formali” della democrazia, credo nel Parlamento e credo nei partiti. E naturalmente attraverso la mia particolare ottica che è quella di un comunista.

Sono pronto a ritirare la mia mozione di sfiducia (anzi non aspetto altro che questo) solo quando un uomo politico – non per opportunità, cioè non perché sia venuto il momento, ma piuttosto per creare la possibilità di tale momento – deciderà di fare i nomi dei responsabili dei colpi di Stato e delle stragi, che evidentemente egli sa, come me, non può non avere prove, o almeno indizi.

Probabilmente – se il potere americano lo consentirà – magari decidendo “diplomaticamente” di concedere a un’altra democrazia ciò che la democrazia americana si è concessa a proposito di Nixon – questi nomi prima o poi saranno detti. Ma a dirli saranno uomini che hanno condiviso con essi il potere: come minori responsabili contro maggiori responsabili (e non è detto, come nel caso americano, che siano migliori). Questo sarebbe in definitiva il vero Colpo di Stato.

The Death of the Gods – Review of ‘The Icon Maker’ by Paul Stubbs

Posted on [December 3, 2010](#) by [thefiendjournal](#)

by Andrew O'Donnell, Dec 2010

The journey of Paul Stubbs’s second book of poems *The Icon Maker* is the journey that awaits us on the other side of our conventional religious and atheistic faiths, it is a book that deals with the inevitable communal emotional fallout that attends such realizations, and a book of the future, in that it apprehends and overcomes the subtle flexing of dogmas, as they present themselves to us in the 20th century world.

Over a century and a quarter after Nietzsche’s well known “God is dead” expression it could well be that such material, at first glance, may seem less than current.

It was just

after the announcement,

over the tannoy

that religion had ended,

that I felt

the overwhelming

compulsion to depart

it, heaven.

And why, still, today,

in this chair

I descend.

But whose voice was it

bellowed out such an edict?

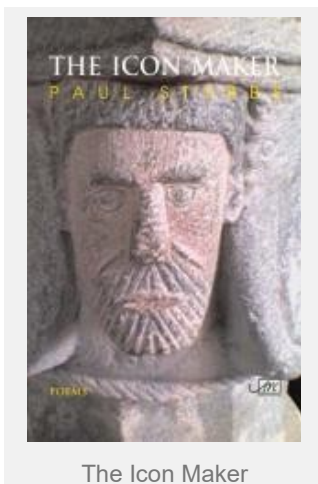
nobody knows;

only that, to a man,

like sheep, the majority

of us concurred;

(The Pope departs his Heaven)



What Stubbs seems to be able to subvert is Nietzsche's overtly intellectual call to arms, burrowing into his theme via intuition and emotion rather than hard logic, or being too bombastic or didactic in terms of actual philosophical lineages.

Having said that it would be a little overly reductive to deem this to be overtly philosophical poetry in the normal narrative manner. It is a long way from the system building of a Lucretius and more closely responds to the realizational and emotional accretions of a mid-period Holderlin. But this is purely to speak of the tonal texture of the poetry as it wafts over you.

The book seems to deal in both societal types or moments of ideological access to religious experience of some order, as well as rolling around in a much more complex (or much more simple?) open-hearted-ness in the face of the eternal. Stubbs's quote from Ungaretti seems significant in relation to the latter:

My every moment

I've lived

another time

in a deep period

outside me

...important because, given this 'way in' the whole narrativizing element of the poetic 'I' will nowhere be found in the book. The 'I' is self and 'infinite selves', which best exemplifies the difficulty a reader steeped in the post-Larkin voices of modern British poetry may have. In fact, it may be that the standard singularity of the poetic voice is simply sidetracked and given up for good in the particular methodology of *The Icon Maker*.

We are in a land of anonymities, types and archetypes and the eternal flow of the infinite. Accessing this kind of poetry is less like listening to a person talk and more like seeing the watermark on the hull of a boat where tides come in and out... or, as Stubbs himself writes in 'The Mirage of Poetic Evolution Since Eliot', like watching the needle of a seismograph tracking the aftershocks from our societally unwinding psycho-religious earthquakes. Its proto-narrativizing selves seem to live in the gap between the calmness of a natural spiritual process unfolding and the hard sharp jabs and wails of an ideological muscle dying. So we have the finality of *Head II*:

*You no longer need to salivate, or even again
mouth the shape of a tyrant's last word before*

*his extinction. –Post-world images alone have
concerned you enough to no longer imagine bone.*

...combined with the expectance of *Imagining a Body*:

*With an as yet indefinable movement,
behind each shimmering veil of self;*

*at the altitude always of a God's eye,
where the mind it clears, bone recedes,*

*and all visible flesh it falls away;
a body that no longer clings onto any*

precipice,

While creating types to exemplify the post-religious spiritual evolution the modern world is experiencing Stubbs is by no means using the types that the poems represent as closed loops of prediction or analysis, as it were. They seem more like experiential and emotional orbs that probe the future with questions or poetical energetic pulses. In *Without Philosophy* he questions the role of that arch-displayer of argument and debate; philosophy... and the paradigm of how philosophy should move forward post-Nietzsche and post-Freud (which, if you think about it, has only a thin stream of analytical lineage in poetry)...

[...] 'being' itself it is reduced

to no more here than a slogan; sacrilegious

and apodictic, the pious they

listen out only for the sound

of Satan's skeleton shattering

against a wall, for the world

now it can only be an act of semiotic creation,

an impossible message for all those still unable

to imagine anything other than

bone;

...perhaps the indication for new approaches to philosophy, the key to it, is to focus on language itself, and how language moves, manipulates and controls the human mind (surely linguistic etymology should be highly prioritized in any poet's list of required reading just as, when, as a Westerner in Asia, one is asked what one's name means. Within semantics is it fair to say pressure is not put on the right places regarding this whole area of our cultural lineage, and thus our understanding of the present?)

The book's approach is a multi-faceted and mature series of debates and self debates, in this way illumination treads interesting middle ground between religion and anti-religion, and shuns oppositional thinking and easy mental opt-outs or extras. In *The Atheist*:

But what if it was proved finally

beyond any shadow of a doubt that

God he does in fact exist? What icon

would you apologize to first? what cosmic body would you get

to repair it your still

damaged rib? But no, nothing for

you to do now then go back

to them, your beliefs, to be in

your mind what, in truth, you have

never been here in life: a man;

Even the notion of beliefs and faiths are called into question here, and so the book dares to go further than Nietzsche's critiques in that all forms of oppositional thinking, whether in poetry, philosophy or other discipline (even the notion of 'discipline' or 'area of thought' infuses our fractured mental approaches to how we communicate with each other; what better way to show how we objectify in our wrestlings with our chosen spiritual paths, surely Everything is what interests the human mind?) Regardless, the philosopher Robert Anton Wilson would call this reticence toward any form of dogmatism a dialectic, or line, of consciousness that deals in Maybes, rather than the Yes or the No. We now live in a thoughtful maybe-ish world, in which proselytizing gets little done, and dogmatizing is repellant to the average individual. The newer generations mental lives exist somewhere in between. With the acceleration of knowledge the older generations can mistake this for apathy in the young, as compared with the knowledge available to them in previous cycles, and possibly mistakenly cheer on the overly dogmatic poetic tone as a result. In this way Stubbs is putting pressure on the notions inherent in the tone of Pound's imagist protocols (definite images, clear lines of narrative thought) and trying to strike balances between abstraction and conventional narrativization, the high lyric voice, and the hard-headed and (ironically, in this case?) Biblical tone.

What comes across in *The Icon Maker*, as in the poetry of James Byrne, is the confidence in which stalwart optimism and a certain cheerfulness of intellect overrides dogmatism.

Stubbs has already attacked the Eliot lineage in print, and other alternatives to the apocalyptic and the catholic conservatism which he finds most nauseating in this line (coming down to us as far as Larkin), and poems like *Elegy for Satan* exemplify the complex and mature emphasis on finding positive and insightful alternatives to religious and ideological dogmas:

You could have been another you if

we'd have wanted you to have been;

–But by clenching in two angry

fists a clod of our inner earth,

you ploughed and ploughed at the core of

a world where no human gene can be resown;

So, instead, you mimicked us,

Using the foreskin of Isaac?

by creating a million finger-puppets of

yourself! A God, enslaved by our own flesh!

which, whenever you looked up,

could be seen hanging there like

a pair of silk stockings from between your

teeth! As then, in the trial of your existence,

you lost your only true alibi;

beauty from you faded, the stars

as if silver-fluff they dropped from the skies;

[...]

Apart from the insightful concentration on experiential concepts against the usual objectification and popular reference (a focus incredibly unique to this book) it also correlates with a quote from Northrop Frye I re-uncover, written in a copy of Blake:

There is a real hell in the human mind, and it achieves the physical form of dungeons, whips, racks, and all the miserable panoply of fear. Such a hell consolidates a moral virtue founded on terror with a moral evil founded on cruelty, and it exists because it is believed to be a part of "necessity". The more degenerate the society, the more obvious this alliance of moral good and evil against the power of genius becomes. Those who

*know better can see that, as evil is a negation, this hell would be, in the spiritual world,
nothingness, a monstrous multiple of zero*

Stubbs is a person who knows better. In this, there is a great absence at the heart of *The Icon Maker*, no prefiguring references to, or reverence of the material world as it stands, or as it has been projected by a poetry that is not aware that it is self-and-world fulfilling.

Stubbs, in this poem, knows that Satan, as in all mythological constructs, and as Frye points out, is a product of the mind... but only a product insofar as this mind-icon sits in an oppositional zone; to cure us from Satan we mentally construct The Priest who, in turn, affirms Satan as a present necessity (in order to maintain the societal position/manifestation we have invented for him)... the lowest sociological rung on this same ladder, in our present reality, might be the figure of the social worker or the policeman. These figures exist because we do not have the self discipline to govern ourselves, indeed they are felt 'natural' and even comforting to a society with difficulties in changing self-government, and therefore, as a result, exteriorizing its own individual governing forces.

Satan is the arch-construct of a collective mind ill at ease with itself, while at the same time fostering immense potentialities, and Stubbs's poem gives credence to the notion that this is simply a temporarily immature psychic disorder, to be gone beyond and not promoted (as in the most dogmatic elegiac atmospheres of *The Waste Land*, for instance).

But believers are not the only one's to feel the wrath of Stubbs's book:

While the church merely it waits, waits, for say a haruspex

to reinspect man's

entrails and predict another Christ;

for as a member of a race fit only

for extinction, simply you will not

now even contemplate it will you?

that our lives here on earth might

not necessarily be our last? no; so, instead, in the mirror

each morning you ignore it,

(The Atheist)

Vigilance, here, is the watchword. While the imaginations of the Jonathan Edwards's of this world are harangued, so is the directionless poverty of the mind of the Atheist (both religious and atheistic principles are oppositionally dependant on the same tired belief structures... the loss of individual spirit that occurs in icon worship is the same loss of individual spirit directed away from the icon, unfortunately in our current, and dying reality, the materiality of the icon; the fact that it is not a valid spiritual gateway is the indication that our communal psychological inclinations need cleansing). The vigilance promoted here is of a kind endeavouring to find a balance among these unhelpful spiritual oppositions, the religious man and the atheist need to be lampooned because they represent a loss of individual spirituality, and a blinkering in relation to the entire cosmos (a spiritual reality can only be observed communally if individual spirit is not lessened by the worship of the religious God OR man in relationship to religious iconography... again, as Anton Wilson quips: "a disciple is an asshole looking for a human being to attach itself to").

Finally, how do we deal with the book on a stylistic level? In my way of looking at poetry tone is perhaps all important, perhaps the defining factor in assessing how nourishing a work of poetry is. In many ways *The Icon Maker*, through all its assured psychological insights and the ramifications therein, is, in small ways, a book still finding its stylistic feet. Out of syntax and grammar comes the book's tonal atmospheres, though it's hard to tell if all the constructions fit, or please:

[...] *when the eye of your next*

deity opens, you will be

forced to plunge it your hand

back into nothingness

(Religious Man (in our time))

In "plunge it your hand" (as in "it, heaven" in my first quote) I'm caught between imagining Stubbs is 1/affirming the slipperiness of the grammatical object in language (as it is messed with and optioned-out by media-speak) or 2/feeling mildly condescended to. Perhaps 3/is this simply an indication that the constructions come from the pen of someone on the outset of a spiritual seach? 4/Someone still developing and assessing? 5/An attempt to intercut the visionary biblical tone with humour/irony? 6/an undermining of the whole process of creating narratives, or a lampooning of the archetype? Maybe it's all of this. Only there is possibly a danger, here, of falling into arrogance when observing and critiquing arrogance or ignorance in others .

In *Ancestral Man* we have these curious double nouns: *for his shadow // it billows still like a canopy at my ear*. Some are hard to quantify, and perhaps are simply a minor quibble, others work well (as in “it, heaven”) in building up rhythm and narrative tension. In as much as the line breaks are original and daring some lines seem to stall or at least not totally serve the incredibly unique conceptual engines of their narrators. In certain isolated instances, attempts at more personal and conversational structures might serve to aid the mighty critiques Stubbs is attempting, particularly given that pseudo-religious faiths in all their myriad forms take a battering. Is it possible that Stubbs, at times, betrays his overall optimistic conceptual charges with the language of the accuser? Perhaps. Tone is maybe the hardest aspect of poetry for a poet to master. *The Icon Maker*, regardless of these final concerns, is a book that takes no prisoners nor flatters any egos. It seems, for any faults, to absolutely be riding its own wave, and it will be interesting to see how Stubbs’s language and methods sharpen and deepen.

‘*The Icon Maker*’ by [Paul Stubbs](#) is available through [Arc Publications](#).

The Mirage of Poetic Evolution in Britain Since Eliot

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by Paul Stubbs (article first published in [3:AM magazine](#), August 2009, re-printed here with minor amendments)

When does poetry begin to capitulate? turn back in on itself? When it fails to assimilate the new, the foreign, when in the words of Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy*, the human remains in a perpetual state of individuation; or what in this country, England, has always been its burden, the totality of the influence of one poet: T.S. Eliot. The Russian futurist poet Vladimir Mayakovsky playfully opened the door on “influence” in 1917 by saying: “*we mustn’t squabble with the poetry of the past – it provides us with a textbook to study.*” All too true, but to the detriment of British poetry today Eliot’s “textbook” is still read with the same kind of reverence usually reserved for the Old Testament; and so what of those who still believe in Eliot’s work today? Well, the critic, with an hourglass in one hand, and a metronome in the other, bears down on those poets of too weak an imagination to free themselves from the destructiveness of his influence, which is amplified by each reviewer’s need for self-replication, transparency, or worse, literary objectivism.

The influence of *The Waste Land* on British poetry today need be no more than a simple genetic modification of what, in a genealogical sense, is already burnt-down; for Eliot of course achieved his purpose early by making himself despair of the world, and soon after, us also. In a recent book of philosophy/economics, *Straw Dogs*, John Gray writes:

“Humans are the most adventitious of creatures – a result of blind evolutionary drift. Yet, with the power of genetic engineering, we need no longer be ruled by chance. Humankind – so we are told – can shape its own future.”

So surely the question must be, after Eliot, can poetry? Yes, if it does what it has so far never done, and pull away from the crippling hold on its imagination by those principal culprits of poetical atrophy in this country, Eliot, Auden and Larkin; three poets who have left English poetry with an infertile and barren womb, and a poetry that has no great or imperative subject matter, but which through a series of fractious vignettes of domesticity, love, and personal history, strives in vain for one.

Maybe only “nature” (a hundred and fifty years after the death of Wordsworth) exists still today as any kind of a notable “theme” in the work of British poets, but it is an already unsustainable one; today especially when little, if any, of that nature poetry deals with the natural world edifice that is itself beginning to crumble. Over a hundred years ago, at the beginning of the last century, the Futurists deemed “nature” even then as being “not-up-to-date-enough” to be suitable subject matter for literature, preferring as they did to write of more modern concepts, such as electricity, the engine and the machine. The notion of writing today of anything approaching the modern age is, in this country, still an act of imaginative aridity, the “de-potentialization” of a language still in the process of what Heidegger described as “a process of deformation and decay.”

The last hundred years of British poetry consist (in comparison to the major European movements, *Modernism, Symbolism, Futurism, Expressionism*) of very minor movements: *Pre-War, Post-War, The Movement, Scottish Poets, Liverpool Poets, Belfast Poets*; but what remains active is the populist and careerist atmosphere of these very old literary schools, the petty concerns of malevolent coteries, the mutual back-scratching; for language itself, of any country, can only ever be subjugated, enfeebled and made redundant, if the poet using it constructs his or her poems from an already existing tradition, those unable to throw it off the scent of stagnation and decay, or step free suddenly of the rubble-heaps of mediocrities that surround us. This brings us to what has always been the great problem for British poetry, influence, or the lack of it, reading of the great literatures of Europe, the assimilation of its poetries into our own; and ironically Eliot knew this. This self-evident truism is best described by Michael Hamburger in his seminal book *The Truth of Poetry*:

“It still seems self-evident to me that in trying to understand what poetry does, can and cannot do, one must draw one’s exemplars from as wide a range of it as possible.”

It sounds obvious, yet British poetry has always failed, either willingly or unwillingly, to acknowledge this sane poetic truth. But what a different outlook, approach, and reality our poetry might have had today if, notwithstanding the always trite and facile English arguments concerning translation, our main poetic influences in this country were all of a European or world variety? If say instead of *The Waste Land*, we had fully absorbed *The*

Twelve by Aleksandr Blok or (the poem that kick-started the 20th century for me) *A Cloud in Trousers* by Mayakovsky, or instead of say W.H. Auden we had turned to the poetry of Austrian poet Georg Trakl for our reports from a declining world empire, and then (and even more impossible to believe) in times of conflict and war we turned not to the poetry of Siegfried Sassoon or Wilfred Owen, but to the poetry of say August Stramm, Apollinaire or the strong chiliastic visions of the German Expressionist poet Georg Heym? A deliberately provocative fantasy it's true, but I am daring to imagine an alternative poetic terrain for these shores; and while it is also true that "influence" of any kind, at best, can become a hindrance, at worst, as in the case of Eliot, a cataclysmic unfolding of an inner irrational cancer. This is why thirty years after Larkin, poets in this country still feel drawn to the safety of an English librarian in a raincoat, in bicycle-clips, and of a sensibility so doom-ridden it's a surprise that he ever managed to get out of bed in the morning, let alone write those insufferably beautiful poems of the Everyman.

I am of course being deliberately provocative, simplifying, laying bare what can't be, but so what? A correct approach of course when writing this would be to evaluate all "styles" and modish concerns, yet innovation is still the undreamed-of truth in British poetry; hence we are forced to endure long and verbose two-part essays on the importance of the lyric (Don Paterson, *Poetry Review*), another "old" revolution that began as a whisper, and still, today, is passed on, from ear to ear, by those either too old, or too used to repetition to clamber up onto the scaffold of any one new construct of language. I say that the "forms" of the future will become no more than irregular scaffolds, sturdy enough only to withstand the poet's bodyweight above the rising sea-levels.

The poet of the 21st century will, like any animal, be subject only to the continuing process of adapting to his own biological environment, a poetry that must strive in its imagination to actually affect the planetary balance. So what of our own poets today? Well, after the work of the "New Generation" had inevitably fragmented, re-isolated itself, drew back to its (always) disparate earlier parts, we find ourselves, amid the cheerful hubbub of literary tittle-tattle, back in the classroom, the creative workshop. The majority of the *fin-de-siècle* poets here in Britain, and those so far of the new millennium have dealt, ostensibly, in "minor things," its authors contaminated with the need to sound universal, but with the obsession always of trying to condense their metaphysical condition, or attitude, or both, into the necessary British mould.

Two poets, often cited as the leading poets of their respective sexes, Simon Armitage and Carol Ann Duffy, (currently being taught at G.C.S.E. Level at a school near you) are classic examples of what happens to poets when nearly all influence from abroad is obliterated, forgotten, leaving us either, in Duffy's case, with an award-winning book of conventional love poems (with a tincture of Éluard and a dollop of regurgitated Neruda) or in the case of Armitage, an ever-ready stock of extraordinarily fixed metaphors, demystified verbal snapshots, of a poet too long used to posturing to produce anything immortality might want ever to get its teeth into: (from a series of poems on dogs)

“Well, beginning tomorrow
You can feed for free at the butcher’s bin
On festering meat and sickening marrow”

Yes, well, quite; Armitage of course is a symptom of his age who, like the pseudo-artist Damien Hirst, sees eternity in the diamond, the dollar, the cheap fix, the exaltation of witnessing their own names flash up in neon. But it is a cold and uninviting fame for a writer or artist who edits and bowdlerizes another century’s work and then decides himself as the “author” of that work. The pen in the poet’s hand today, need be no more than the needle of the seismograph, recording and tracing across the page, the polysemic tremors of the mind of the modern man, especially now when living on a planet of such incomparable fragility, a planet so rubbished by impurities, and eschatological palpitations, when “right” and “wrong” feel now like some dialectical disease of the heart. I desire only, at the beginning of this new century, to talk about (and read) poetry not as a pedagogical need or want, but as a biological necessity. And Mayakovsky again said it well at the beginning of the last century:

“Protectors of the old hid from new art behind the
backsides of their favourite monuments”

Which brings us conveniently back to Eliot, and to a poetry that neither lives nor dies, but merely exists inside all of us, like some unapproachable bacteria, and whose seed still causes the germination of a quite devastating attitude towards our poetry in the minds of poet and critic alike; we mourn his loss, and the loss of eternities in his mind that will never now get to wrinkle the imaginative flesh of the critic in this country. I am being again contentious, foolhardy, irreverent? Yet I am merely struck by an always unrelenting boredom when stood before the pre-determined cathedral of his work, likewise Auden and Larkin. The tragedy of Eliot of course both as a man and poet was the wrong choice he made. An American Modernist with the whole of European poetry in his pen-nib who chose England and, worse still, the crumbling structures of the English Church-system. True, he started out radically with *Prufrock* and to some extent *The Waste Land*, but ended his literary journey in the Anglican insularity of *The Rock* and *Four Quartets*, and the mostly uninspiring verse dramas. A comparison with his American and Modernist compatriot Ezra Pound wouldn’t go amiss here, for while Pound stuck to the Mediterranean and became a truly European poet (despite at times his wrong-headed passion and idiotic fervour), Eliot seemed content to revert back to his static and always provincial tendencies. The outcome of this “tragedy” for modern literature of course is that the English-speaking poetry world chose Eliot, not Pound, thus cementing the creative and teleological milieu in this country for the rest of the century. So then, the poet today needs to decide, Eliot, a clay-like deity still moulding our every poetical thought, or rather the unbearable melodious agitation of our nerve-ends by the mutilation of his “music”? I say only that English poetry must find a great subject matter again before it is too late, which is out there awaiting us. In these dark times, we would do well to recall the still prophetic words of W.B. Yeats:

“The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity”

So I place a spirit-level filled with the ink of the British pen alongside the supine form of Eliot and regain some new and quite alien equilibrium. A new modernity? But did we ever have the first one? Modernity being in this country a movement that could only ever have fleetingly existed, for its heroes are always (even today) lumped together in imitation of someone either from Medieval literature, Latin, Greek or more recently, through a plethora of uninspiring versions of Dante. And thus modernity for British writers is a constant giving away, an ongoing rejection of a prevailing world-view. Of course, great European poetries are still translated in this country (check out the fantastic *Arc* list) but never learned from. And so maybe the French poet Paul Valery was correct when in 1920, he wrote:

“Nothing so pure can co-exist with the circumstances of life.
We only traverse the idea of perfection as a hand passes with
impurity through a flame; but the flame is uninhabitable”

I have talked at length on this subject, in all manner of literary discussions, to myself, and to anyone who'll listen, in conversations with poets, editors, in reprisals against both critic and poet alike, in which I have felt the incessant need, if not to dismantle, or smash apart, then at least to dislodge this Eliot-like millstone around our necks, to entertain the occasional and inappropriate fiction of a poetical terrain without Eliot, and to allow this transition from the old to the new to be renovated by a new world insight, perspicacity, but never by using the *lingua franca* of the intellect, only the soul. And so today, as English poetry moves on effortlessly into the vacuum of its own concerns, and its energies dissipate and interchange, we can only hope for some kind of a turnaround; for I say English poetry must stop recoiling from the horrors and quite inscrutable realities of the world, and instead of self-dramatizing itself by creating an always domestic enclave, in which the religious, cosmological and eschatological are squeezed out, it must learn to embrace something other than the infliction of the banality of the everyday and the personal. The “I” in English poetry today that seems no more than a dusty old hat-stand on which to hang the masks of the faces of the poets too long dead. Let us abandon the workshop, the poetry schools, the egotistical concretion of the poetical “facilitators,” the editors of our most important periodicals whose own “likes” and “dislikes” hold too tyrannical a bearing on a reader's ability in this country to make up their own minds on who or what they should be reading. Let them separate the good from the bad for themselves.

The great innovative poetry of the 21st century will be forced to assimilate new religions, genetics, nanotechnologies, robotics – I hope, for its own survival, that British poetry can learn to un-roped itself from its own (always) island-bound verbiage, to become for the first time, what it has never been, in any era, a truly *World* poetry; for our poets to become (how Ted Hughes described Eastern European poets to be) “*the most wide-awake of*

poets”. And then, only then, might English poetry learn to become unfamiliar again with itself. “*To either dissolve self-consciousness, and lose oneself forever in animal innocence or liberate oneself from history*” – Octavio Paz noted this after a lifetime’s search for the poetical self. Let us hope that the British poet, susceptible finally to the ills and ultimate catastrophes of the world, learns himself to develop such a poetical affront.

Paul Stubbs is the author of three books of poetry, ‘The Theological Museum’ (Flambard Press), ‘The Icon Maker’ (Arc Publications) and ‘Ex Nihilo’, a long poem (Black Herald Press, September 2010). Another full collection, ‘The End of the Trial of Man’ is forthcoming in 2011.

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