

Respondings

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The others were originally published online at my blog Exultations & Difficulties, and I can hardly thank myself.

Respondings

Introduction

The reviews and other pieces gathered here date from between around 2004 and 2007. As I said when a previous collection of reviews and essays was published (*Conversations With Myself*, Stride, 1999) reviewing has always been for me a process either of finding out what I think, or asking myself questions about what I think, and often learning more about what I think. Also it's been about sometimes discovering that what I thought I thought is not what I thought it was.

More than one piece here provoked at the time of its first publication what might reasonably be called "ire" in some people. I'll leave you to figure out which pieces those are. I've noticed that honesty is not always welcomed both in the real world and also in Poetry World. But the latter, where poetry careers happen and sometimes seem more important than the poem, is quite small, and in more ways than one. Anyway, I'm reminded of TV's Alan Partridge boasting about having 104 friends. I don't have anything like that many in the real world; in Poetry World I'm not even sure I'm in double figures. And I can't help but smile as I say this.

Responses are really what all this is about, and my response to things can change as years pass, or sometimes just days. Hence: *Respondings*. Having said which, and having recently read these pieces for the first time for a long time, I'm still (as far as I can tell) in agreement with what I said back then. In some cases, I'm astonished by myself. I didn't know I was that smart. Or, as some people might have it, plain stupid. Whichever it is, I think it's interesting, which is better than boring, right?

Martin Stannard
Zhuhai, China
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An Open Letter To Rupert Loydell Concerning Barry MacSweeney's *Selected Poems*

Dear Rupert,

Well, I've been carrying this book around with me for a month or two now. In my head, anyway. Most of the time I left it indoors on my desk under whatever happened to land on top of it. But when I did pick it up with the intention of reading, it's funny how something always seemed to get in the way. One day, I recall, I suddenly remembered I had to cut my toenails. Then, on a day when there was no distraction, and no excuse, it turned out that the book was very difficult to open. It reminded me of when I was supposed to be reading Basil Bunting's big book. In fact, it was exactly the same experience. I began to suspect that demons were at work.

Of course, I know exactly what these suspected demons are. They're not demons at all, really: they're actually quite sun-loving, well-disposed, cheerful, irreverent Maggie Simpson fans who don't very often feel like wading through shit in the name of art.

MacSweeney's poems aren't shit. Not really. Many of the poetic theories and apparent beliefs behind them sound really good. The idea, for example, that you 'cut out all the unnecessary stuff'. And the 'condensing of language...cutting across meaning, not having words next to each other which are supposed to be there'. That's all okay. And as someone who reads in an accent firmly entrenched way south of Watford, I'd be quite open to the suggestion that I'm missing something of MacSweeney's native tongue, although I don't know if I can fully subscribe to the notion that the northern language is longer lasting, durable, harder, springier, more elemental, and comes out of all sorts of historical, geographical and social conflicts, which is what the poet said about it. I suspect that other languages might well make the same claims, and quite justifiably.

The main reason I can't get on with MacSweeney's poetry is that, simply, I find most of it pretty fucking unreadable. By "readable" I mean "able to be read and enjoyed". Let's face it, most of this stuff isn't difficult, in the sense that you have to try and work out what it means. I don't do that with poems, anyway; if I want a word puzzle, I do a crossword. Some of the odes are pretty reader resistant, I suppose, come to think of it, but you can just take them at face value and move on. If that value appears to be zero, fair enough. Usually, though, this poet's heart is usually on his sleeve. Quite a few very upfront and obvious procedures and preoccupations in the poems don't interest me much at all. Such as: his obsession with the idea of the poet as outsider who dies young (which includes the alarming notion that Jim Morrison is worth bothering with). How the ghost of Gerard Manley Hopkins haunts virtually every page. The obviously self-conscious harking back to an earlier tongue. How I'm supposed to be interested in the fact that the bloke had a drink problem.

I can't be doing with that last one at all. One of my best friends is an alcoholic, and I've seen his vomit and I've banged on his door and peered through his window to see him stretched out on a sofa, and I didn't know if he was alive or dead. And I've heard him quite soberly discuss it all with a rationality that's scary as hell. Nothing in MacSweeney's *Book of Demons* poems adds anything to anything. It's just written down in that poetic line that comes from the Americans and into Britain in the 60s and 70s and there's control and lack of control in pretty much equal measure.

But the poet as alcoholic is neither here nor there. He could've been a one-legged dwarf with a Kylie Minogue fixation for all I care. Some of this stuff is just so bloody horrible to read:

Demons, big-hatted and hard-hatted, far as gutter-toppled
squint-eye with grapple-lost spectacles can see, custard brain
head slanty on kerbside perch, vomit ready for a roller ride
into the X-rated, dog arse emptying unlit street...

I don't mean the subject matter is horrible, I just think it's horrible to read, that is, it gives no pleasure, and provokes no stimulating thought—notwithstanding its quality of here's my life laid out on a plate and look at the shit of it all. If anything, that only serves to limit it. And who cares anyway? Get drunk. Be sick. Fall over. Meanwhile, this morning I was reading,

suiivante she was
privy perle without spot

doucement duckdown
they bedded in

Suibhne stroking
his dream of Siobhan

unhooking her bra-clasp
in several great cities
and one Quaker town

Ranter the peacock
armed with strut

and it dawned on me, just as I got to the bra-clasp, that I had intended to cut my toenails and I should do it before I put my socks on—because it's really hard to do with socks on.

All of which has led me to the conclusion that any idea of a long and considered essay about all of this is something I simply can't be bothered with. I think it would just get me down, and what's the point of that? I've only just been given the all clear after a severe bout of Les Murray, and I still feel a little fragile.

Very best,

Martin

Permission to Be Bored:
Michael Laskey's *Permission to Breathe*
(Smith/Doorstop)

One thing I have always thought about reviewing is that it's possible to be the right person or the wrong person to review a particular book. I'm sure it must be pertinent sometimes to say "No"; to say it would be best to give this book to someone else, because I don't feel able to write usefully about it. Other times, one might feel this way, but then reconsider. I sat here with Michael Laskey's new book, and I reconsidered. I reconsidered because it occurred to me I was both the wrong person and the right person to review this book, which made me perfect for the job. And my reasoning is simple. Nobody, not even a much-liked poet, and brilliant advocate of poets and poetry, and a highly respected poetry workshop leader, is owed anything they haven't earned. I felt like this as soon as I'd read the book and the descriptive blurbs accompanying it. I've decided, in the wake of this experience, that some people might think me almost totally deficient when it comes to appreciating other people's emotions, and caring about how they feel, and all that business. I could be seen as a cold robot with no heart. On the other hand, and rather more to the point, I am about to risk losing a friend because I don't like his book of poems, and saying why.

The primary attributes of Michael Laskey's poetry, according to the puffs of praise on the cover, are his writing about what Craig Raine describes as 'wry grief', and what the PBS Bulletin's anonymity calls 'intelligent, feeling writing'. Robert Potts, in *The Guardian*, apparently noted 'originality of thought' as well as 'quality of execution'. I have no argument with the last of these remarks. I've known Michael personally, and been familiar with his work for many years, and there is no question that he writes well, in the way one is encouraged to write well at places like the Arvon Foundation and in writing workshops. This is not disputable. But this robot heartlessness of mine loses patience with the rest of this laudatory flannel.

Nearly half of this book is concerned with the loss of the poet's elderly parents. By "loss" I mean of course "death"—I don't mean losing them in the shopping precinct on a Saturday morning. Although this small retail mishap could actually be quite a good subject for a poem of about four lines, sadly the poems I'm concerned with here are dead parent poems, all of them much longer than four lines. About half of the remaining poems are tied up with the poet's sense of his own advancing age, and with his domestic circumstances. A handful has their genesis in a trip to Australia. (Yes, I yawned too: Go abroad. Write poems. Oh God.) There are a few others, including a couple of somewhat out-of-character list poems, which remind me of better poems by someone else. Yet I have to say (and I mean this as much as I am able to mean anything) if one is keen on poems that are laden with 'wry grief' then it is probably difficult to find anyone better to read than Michael Laskey. He writes well. Not everyone does.

But I don't really like stacks of poems that, let's be honest, have someone's death to thank for being there. They have to be amazing poems to justify their presence, I think. And those poems do exist. Of course they do; but not in this book. The first half of *Permission to Breathe* is overwhelmed by parental loss, and you can have too much of a thing. Poems like 'The New Car' are typical and, I suspect, potentially prize winning. It begins:

Coming in with a bag of windfall Bramleys...

By which time, frankly, I've lost interest. When the end arrives, and the poet is,

Cutting the bruised bits
out of the apples, adding sugar; telling
myself I'm sure he'd approve.

I've already been out of the room to make a cup of tea, and flicked through the TV channels to see what's on. Poetry like this mainly serves the poet's desire to write poems and assuage something in their self that has not been dealt with elsewhere. I'm pretty sure of this, but I'm also certain Laskey would argue with me about it. And let's face it lots of people love to read this stuff, because here they can find sentiments with which to identify. The poet has also managed to make half a book of poems out of the fact of particular deaths, and that link between death and a book of poems sometimes, sometimes, worries the hell out of me. It feels as if this sadness is all little more than so much poetry material. One poem yes, I can understand that. But twenty? Twenty? No, it's too many. My parents are quite elderly, and I suspect that it won't be very long before I have to deal with their passing. This is something like a fact, a sad but undeniable truth. But reading books and poems like this make me swear to God I won't write poems about them when they go. I have trouble enough talking to them now; I'll be damned if I'll talk to them in public when they're dead. If someone can tell me what purpose these twenty poems serve other than to pander to something not unconnected with the poet's ego, then please do. Nothing in these poems is particularly new or original, either by way of thought or execution, no matter what it says in *The Guardian*. They are very good examples of their type. But what, I wonder, exactly is "their type", apart from popular and, I'm sorry to say, easy? And is it good?

Other poems chart unexciting poetic territory. A house tumbles over a cliff because of erosion and a well is discovered—"A well/ we hadn't even known we'd owned" ('Freehold'). The poet falls out with the telephone—"And suddenly see it, feel/ the frown I've become, how I sigh/ whenever it rings, put off/ calling anyone, even Suki" ('On the Phone'). Also, one is asked to suffer the heavy-handed metaphor of 'Past Talking', where the poet and his wife (one has to assume it is the poet and his wife, otherwise the poem is even more tiresome than I thought) are loading their cycles on to the carrier on the car, and 'They don't naturally fit together... Contradictory, they need a good shove/ sometimes to make them lie snug'. One can almost imagine a bunch of people sitting around in a workshop talking about how well-achieved this is.

I am also annoyed by how well-behaved these poems are. And now I have written that, I know I'm faced with the challenge of explaining what I mean by it. It has a little to do with the tone of poems that begin 'Met him first I thought at Pete's fortieth/ and we got on well...' ('Old School Tie'), which is neither a true speaking voice nor quite a believable written voice (it is, in fact, a poetry voice: take a moment to consider the grammar and construction of it) but this is only part of the cause of my annoyance. It's also to do with how the poems are neat and tidy, well-worked and resolved, with none of the loose ends and ragged edges and unsettling disjunctions real life entails. Upset is what nearly all these poems are about but it comes so neatly packaged my interest is no more than if the guy had told me Sainsbury's were out of his favourite coffee. In one poem a chap (it may be the poet, it may not be: let's guess) is alone for an evening and is set to treat himself to a meat pie he wouldn't eat if his wife were home. Then she comes home unexpectedly. Big deal; I shrug my shoulders. I couldn't care less. Here, in this poetic world, upset even of the most mundane kind, minor psychological discomforts and middle-aged disquiet are all material for a poem. I am somewhat uneasy with this notion. These are not poems that set out to stretch language to make it somehow tally with our lives, nor are they poems to particularly exercise the imagination. They are polite and decent and may well win, and may well already have won poetry prizes for being well-behaved and well-presented. And I know this is exactly why I am the right person to review these poems. I know these are the kind of poems that dominate the most read and popular parts of poetry world at the moment. They are easy to digest. They are well-written and educated. They are awfully polite. They never shock. They threaten to say the

unspeakable, but don't. They probably mirror the stifled and pent-up emotions and sentiments of lots of people. And they bore me so much I could lose the will to live, but I know better than to let them get the better of me.

The New York Poets: An Anthology
Edited by Mark Ford
(Carcanet)

Frank O'Hara, Kenneth Koch and John Ashbery changed my life. I need to say that at the outset because it's an important fact that will colour everything else I may say here. At the moment, as I sit here writing this on the coldest and wettest of June days (I've just put the heating on, for God's sake), at this exact moment I don't know what I'm going to write.

There was a time when I wrote poems and the only agenda I can recall having for writing those poems was some kind of hazy idea that poems could be good. But I also thought that most if not all the modern poets who were famous at the time were dull and boring, and that my friends and I could upset the applecart and replace the cloudy and the dull with zip and zest. It was a naïve, somewhat ignorant, probably stupid, notion, and it was also an unoriginal notion. But it's also one I would now regard as healthy and almost necessary for a young poet to have, with passion and fire.

My introduction to the New York poets (as I'll call them for convenience's sake—the whole thing about labels is just done to death) was haphazard and somewhat bemused. I think I saw Kenneth Koch read at Cambridge in 1977 or 1978. But all I can remember is Allen Ginsberg and Peter Orlovsky and Anne Waldman. So he must not have made a big impression on me, unless he wasn't there and my memory and misinformation is so fogged that this is all nonsense. But around the same time Rupert Mallin suggested I read O'Hara's 'Easter', and I did. I didn't get it at all, but since it seemed to be somewhat surreal and nonsensical and I quite liked the idea of being what I thought was surreal and nonsensical I took it on board, sort of. But not entirely. It wasn't until I picked up a copy of Marjorie Perloff's *Frank O'Hara: Poet Among Painters* in London's Compendium Bookshop in, I think, 1981 or 1982, that things became clearer.

I sat in my friends Stuart and Angie's flat in Crouch End reading Perloff's book when I should have been talking to them. And I began to realise I had found something in poetry that wasn't admiration or awe but some kind of understanding that went deeper than the academic or the analytical. Perloff made me feel like I'd just got out of a cab with her outside 441 East 9th Street and she said this is where we go and see Frank and Joe, and that's what she did that afternoon for me. There were things she said about the poets and their general attitude to poetry and life that I felt very comfortable with. It made no difference that it was pretty obvious these guys were geniuses and I was some klutz from England. I knew there was, somewhere, a wavelength we were all on. Somewhere. But I couldn't articulate it. I knew, though, that where I felt, say, I had been trained at school almost as though T. S. Eliot came from another planet and was a strange alien being, these guys inhabited a world I recognised and sort of knew. They went in bars and had messy lives! They used yellow cabs! And they also had what I knew to be a healthy disrespect for the dominant poetry of their time. This was crucial.

This was over twenty years ago. A lot has happened in the meantime. I know Eliot wasn't an alien (give or take) and that most poets have messy lives. And I know I don't want poetry to tell me information I already know. And I've read the poetry of Frank O'Hara, Kenneth Koch and John Ashbery over and over again. Not all of it, but lots of it. And I discovered the poetry of James Schuyler, and am glad I did. And I've written about them and reviewed them. And I can now count a younger generation of New York poets, people like Paul Violi, Charles North and Tony Towle, as friends. We've sat at dinner tables together and laughed and talked. And I feel privileged because they are lovely people, and great poets, but this is not really my point. What I'm working toward is something vaguer and yet so crucial to me I know I'm not sure how to say it.

I was in the pub a week or so ago with a friend, and we were talking poetry, and he mentioned (for the zillionth time) a poem of Ashbery's that I introduced him to a long time ago, which mentions "the pudding people". It's a poem from *Can You Hear, Bird ...*

I knew we should have stopped back there
by the pudding station
but the pudding people were so—well—
full of themselves.

And my friend always laughs and asks me who the pudding people are, and what it all means. And we got to talking about how someone recently said to me they don't find Ashbery interesting. They don't find what he has to say very interesting, and how what he has to say about life is just more or less one narrow thing, which precludes him from being "great". Now, I have no idea if Ashbery will, in time, be considered "a great poet". I don't care much. Sometimes, but not all the time, Ashbery's poetry absolutely touches some kind of node or button in me, and awakens my sleepy dormant parts into realising and noticing that life, this "life", is this and that and the other. And I don't know what it all means but this is how it is—difficult and confusing, swathed in ignorance and folly, and blessed by moments of sharp insight and wonder. And he awakens in me a way of knowing the world, which is the way I want to know the world but often forget about in my waking walking life. Ashbery doesn't tell us how to live, he tells us how we live. Or, rather, shows us. It's not instruction or information. It's not "meaning" in the conventional sense. It certainly isn't meaning in the same way a poem has meaning when it tells you how sad it is someone died, or how mean it is that people are mean.

There is something subliminally revelatory about this poetry when it works, which is not all the time. But when it does it's a remarkable thing. There is also the sense that these people wrote good things, honest and good things, with no regard for what the people who run the poetry world thought about it all. My first real introduction to Kenneth Koch was through the famous poem 'Fresh Air', with its timeless and still pertinent, 'It is time to strangle several bad poets'.

Then I found how remarkable and dazzling his world of poetry was. How his expectations of poetry and his sense of the world were so huge. I'm not sure I've ever quite recovered. I've told this story before, but in 1990—something I drove Koch from the Aldeburgh Poetry Festival to catch a plane from Heathrow back to the US. It was a mad drive. Kenneth came off stage at three, and his plane was at something like 5:30. I broke every speed limit in the book until as we finally hit the approach to Heathrow on the M4 and joined the airport traffic he turned to me and asked if it would be okay if we slowed down now. And he gave me some work that I would later publish in *joe soap's canoe*. As he handed it to me he said something to the effect of, "Ok Stannard, tell me what it is you like about my work". And my whole life flashed before me, and then I said, 'It makes me want to be alive'. And he said, 'I guess that'll do'. Or something like that.

Koch could be a pain in the arse. In 1992, when I was working in Ipswich for the local council as their one and only community arts worker, I worked alongside Rebecca Weaver, who curated the prestigious Wolsey Art Gallery in Ipswich. We asked Paul Violi to curate an exhibition of Koch's collaborations with artists. And then we managed to get Koch and Violi over to England for the show. After the opening of that (at which they both read) I took them off on a brief reading tour of the UK. And Kenneth could be a pain in the arse. He wanted to be the centre of attention. He wanted sometimes the moon when all he could have was Ipswich, or a reading in a room at the top of a very long and steep flight of stairs in Huddersfield. But he was also lovely, and genuine and true, and I feel honoured to have spent time with him. This afternoon I reread the poem 'Marina'. It's a wonderful example of how Koch's exuberance and vitality is wonderfully controlled and emotional. You should read it. You really

should. The poem is ten pages or so of doomed but inspiring and exultant love. The way the language and the line is used, how the so personal reference opens up into the universal marvellousness (and its opposite) of being in love—this is how words can be:

I read
Tolstoy. You said
I don't like the way it turns out (*Anna
Karenina*) I had just liked the strength
Of the feeling you thought
About the end. I wanted
To I don't know what never leave you
Five flights up the June
Street emptied of fans, cups, kites, cops, eats, nights, no
The night was there
And something like air I love you Marina
Eighty-five days
Four thousand three hundred and sixty—
Two minutes all poetry was changed
For me what did I do in exchange
I am selfish, afraid you are
Overwhelmingly parade, back, sunshine, dreams
Later thousands of dreams

Koch isn't, of course, renowned for the emotional. Yet he is often emotional. He is more famous because so many of his poems are the poet at play. But the poet at play allows in so much, and expands the notion of the poem so much, that everything eventually comes in: happy and sad, silly and serious, everything. It makes me want to be alive.

James Schuyler wrote beautiful poems. And I am only now coming to realise how beautiful and wonderful they are. I'm not sure yet that he touches me the way his friends do. But one of the things one learns from reading poems is that wakefulness comes at odd times. One may perhaps only begin to fully appreciate a poet after an unusual long time of acquaintance. I have not, until lately, been altogether ready in my head for the still and monumental exactitude of Schuyler's beauty. Then, reading these poems again for the first time in a while, I was stunned. 'Hymn To Life' is amazing. Nine pages or so of amazing—'One gull coasts by, unexpected as a kiss on the nape of the neck'. If you would not give your life to be able to write like that then you do not want to write. I am sorry. That's what I think. And I am not sorry at all.

And then there's Frank O'Hara. It's Frank O'Hara people usually mean when they say that so-and-so writes poems influenced by New York School poetry, like if so-and-so writes poems that are kind of diary-like occasions, and have a lot of the everyday in them, and are thus unpoetic in a conventional unconventional way. O'Hara is perhaps the most misread and misconstrued New York poet. He is mainly known as the poet of the "I do this, I do that" poem, knocking off poems at parties, and giving them to friends, and forgetting about them. Then those poems are discovered in their several hundreds after his death and they make a huge Collected Poems, big enough to stun more than a single ox. And it has to be said that they are not all good poems. The word "slight" comes to mind. But the good poems are so good. The somewhat over-anthologised O'Hara poems ('Why I Am Not A Painter', 'The Day Lady Died' etc....) are not all of O'Hara. One has to read more widely, and even beyond the startling 'In Memory of My Feelings', to get a true sense of this remarkable poet, the melancholy and sadness, and the beauty:

and soon I am rising for the less than average day, I have coffee
I prepare calmly to face almost everything that will come up I am calm
but not as my bed was calm as it softly declined to become a ship
I borrow Joe's seersucker jacket though he is still asleep I start out
when I last borrowed it I was leaving there it was on my Spanish plaza back
and hid my shoulders from San Marco's pigeons was jostled on the

Kurfürstendamm

and sat opposite Ashes in an enormous leather chair in the Continental
it is all enormity and life it has protected me and kept me here on
many occasions as a symbol does when the heart is full and risks no speech
a precaution I loathe as the pheasant loathes the season and is preserved
it will not be need, it will just be what it is and just what happens

(‘Joe’s Jacket’)

The poetry lesson that can be learned from these poets is an immense one. This has to do with a permission to be yourself—bubbling, melancholy, daft, whatever, and to use poetry and not let poetry use you. In other words, the New York School poets know and knew all about traditional forms and where it all comes from, but utilize the knowledge to move forward into a realm that is completely individual and self-contained. Let the world catch up, is what they say. But writing of this kind requires enormous self-belief and trust. It's also a recipe for disaster, of course. Finally, I guess, you can't wilfully write "New York School poetry". For one thing, there is no such thing. The poets are too various for it to be only one thing. For another, it would be like writing to please your workshop tutor, which is a crock. New York School poets write out of themselves to please themselves, and for the one or two people who understand them. Any other people who get it are a marvellous bonus. And, of course, the joy is that when one writes like this, so freely and truly and purely, then lots of people get it. They are not bored by it, as they may be bored by the latest workshop fixated magazine page-sized competition aimed effusion.

When I read this poetry I am amazed by life. I think that's a pretty cool thing for poetry to achieve. For me, the poetry touches something true about the world that I can only understand somewhat through the nervous system. Not through the academic, literary critical analytical system, or poetry as some kind of fine pastime of the chattering classes. It touches what I sometimes laughingly call my soul. The very processes by which it is made and conjured are so closely aligned with the only reason I can find that makes it worth being alive—how, notwithstanding the sadnesses and the heartbreaks and the catastrophes, life is, somehow, remarkable, and it's the remarkable which makes it worth being alive and ploughing on, and finding those moments of, to use a word favoured by Frank O'Hara, grace. Which perhaps sounds like a load of hogwash, but it isn't. There's not a hell of a lot of poetry I've read written in the last 100 years that makes me happy to be here. This poetry does exactly that, though.

This anthology, published by Carcanet (who have published these guys over recent years and should be thanked for that) and edited by Mark Ford, who is a chum of John Ashbery's and knows what he is talking about, is ideal for the reader new to these poets. It brings together many of the most familiar and anthologised poems, as well as some of the less well-known ones. Ford's articulate and lucid but mercifully brief introductions to the book as a whole and to the individual poet's selections are as good as one could ask for. He says what needs to be said, but by being brief lets the poems do the talking.

Which Way to Turn

My friend Nigel was around here Friday after we'd been to see *The Darjeeling Limited* which, incidentally, is a wonderful movie. Wes Anderson movies are just brilliant. (That was a review, by the way. Short and to the point.) Anyways, Nigel was browsing through the books on my table while we started in on the red wine and I knocked up a quick chilli. We got to talking about just how much poetry there is around and how, with the Internet at our fingertips, it's all available but also, somehow, not available at all. There's a weight of numbers that is almost overwhelming and there's no way (is there?) that you can even begin to approach the half of it. Of course, this has always been the case even before the Internet. Mimeo'd magazines abounded years ago, and there were loads and loads of poets in those, too. Maybe it's the case that there are always loads and loads of poets. Too many? I'm guilty as hell, of course, because I'm one of them. But it's easier to get to their work now, or it's easier to get to their names. You don't have to write a letter to someone and enclose a cheque and wait for the postman. So how do you sort out who to read, and how do you read? Do you stick with the few websites you know, and follow their recommendations? Do you, for example, trust Stride or Shearsman, and stick with them and only them because there are only so many hours in the day, and days in the week? And do you spend backbreaking hours in an uncomfortable chair in front of your computer reading poems online? My back aches just thinking about doing that.

Without going into too many personal details, I like to go to bed and read. I like to have stuff pile up on what passes as my bedside table (it's a floor, actually) and I read a bit of something then listen to the midnight news and fall asleep. But I can't do that with what's on the Internet, so *Dusie* Issue 6 is loitering in cyberspace, untouched by me now, and I haven't looked at it anything like as much as I would have done had it been something I could take to bed. I look at what I take to bed. Honestly, I do.

Perhaps it's my being back into teaching creative writing, albeit in a smallish kind of a way and already, even after only a few weeks, shying away from the questions that always creep into my head whenever I do that. Maybe I should just ignore all those questions and get on with whatever it is I get on with. I know writing this is a waste of time. I know even thinking about this is a waste of time. So much of what I do is a waste of time.

But if I stay mildly bothered and troubled, the logical conclusion to all this of course—which I think boils down to a more than slightly confused mix of 'There is too much of this stuff, and how the hell do you even begin to read the half of it?' (which is stupid, because I'd never argue for less making) & "Does poetry on the internet make for comfortable reading?" (poetry armchair & bed lovers of the world, I am one of you)—is that a) I should stop writing poems, to reduce the number of poets by one; b) I should shut down my website, to reduce the number of websites by one; c) I should buy printed books and magazines of poetry to take to bed, which I almost never do; and d) I should come up with a reason for even talking about this in the first place. I know this is ridiculously circular, somewhat rambling, and not asking any particular question, and only an expression of a certain unease with Poetry World that's always with me but usually remains reasonably well suppressed (albeit not wonderfully suppressed.) So forgive me. But anyway: d) is very difficult, because I don't really know what my point is, except one of feeling just mildly troubled about something.

But while d) is very difficult, a), b) and c) are really easy to do.

poem is followed by more words about where each line came from:

Title from Sr. Martinez Ruiz' Latin American History lecture on Thursday, May 9th, 1968 at noon. I was so impressed I stopped listening.

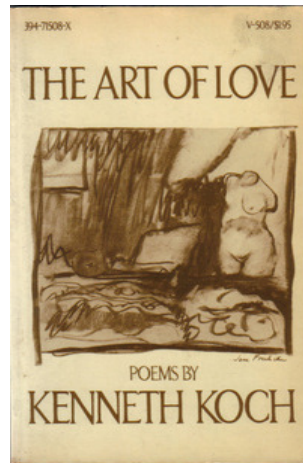
Four lines from a Spanish Vocabulary, Sunday, May 12th, about 4. p.m. Something else Roy pointed out in the same book: in a list of words to do with crime, police, the law, etc. was the Spanish for "tapered trousers".

And, of course, these "notes" are part of the poem. Probably. They are, at least, on the same page and under the same title and go towards making up the experience of reading the poem. (I've just realised how boring this statement is. The poems deserve better.)

This stuff's quick. It looks like what he does is write down just about anything, and it becomes "a poem". But it's also considered, and considered carefully. You've only got to try this method yourself and see what a mess you make. Rereading and re-rereading reveals (slowly) how carefully these poems are made. Someone has probably already written a thesis about it.

I just spent this afternoon with 'Ace', and it strikes me how I feel very relaxed reading these poems: I'm not struggling to understand them, and I'm not trying to find a narrative line, or even a reason for any of it at all. What I'm doing is surrounding myself with the words. Enjoying being with them. Reading a few lines and getting one "meaning", then reading them again and finding something else. And enjoying it. Okay, I might be missing loads, but there's lots of time left to read it again. And again. I think Tom would rather we enjoy the process of reading poems than be able to explain it.

The Art of Love



This afternoon I was reading (again; I've read it many times before) Kenneth Koch's poem 'The Art of Love', to figure out if I can use it as part of a talk I'm going to give in a couple of places about poetry and humour. (It's been christened "The Poisoned Chalice Lecture".) I've got to be able to use Koch somehow, I'm sure.

Anyway, I think he would be more than happy for me to quote a couple of chunks of 'The Art of Love' here. I'd quote it all, but it's 40 pages...

Love between living beings was unknown in Ming
China. All passion was centered on material things.
This accounts for the vases.

and,

Ten things an older man must never say to a younger woman:
1) I'm dying! 2) I can't hear what you're saying! 3) How many fingers are you holding up?
4) Listen to my heart. 5) Take my pulse. 6) What's your name?
7) Is it cold in here? 8) Is it hot in here? 9) Are you in here?
10) What wings are those beating at the window?
Not that a man should stress his youth in a dishonest way
But that he should not unduly emphasize his age.

Koch once asked me what it was I liked about his poetry. I told him it made me want to be alive. Nothing's changed.

**Poems (second edition) by J. H. Prynne
(Bloodaxe)**

1.

I pretended I had never read any Prynne before. Which wasn't difficult. I had not read much.

I also pretended I didn't know that Prynne was what it says on the back of the book: 'Britain's leading late Modernist poet'. Is he dead? No. Not at all. It's not that kind of late. Reading can be so tricky sometimes; it's easy to misunderstand.

And I opened the book at random and read this. It happens to be almost exactly at the halfway point of thirty-six years of poetry, page 248 out of nearly six hundred:

Pink star of the languid
settles by a low window
lap to flit, give the life
too quickly, the storm
a mere levelled gaze.

And count the hook by the water,
rely on modest delay;
it is I who say this, not to
fade or shine out,
to be trusted and played.

There: heat rises now
with the bank speckled,
going down to the point
of noon. Take stock, be
fair while there's room.

Which is one section of *High Pink On Chrome* (1975). This is quite nice. An A-level Literature student could probably do a decent job on it, and tell you what it means. For me, I have no idea if I should side with whatever the student comes up with (probably not) or with someone with more jargon at their disposal, who might argue that Prynne's poetry is about "the simultaneous processes and viewpoints of the worlds created in language", as Robert Potts has put it. This is mainly because I don't know what Robert Potts means, exactly.

But I do know I think the poem is elegant; perhaps it is even beautiful. And I know I enjoy reading it.

2.

I took a break, and headed for *The Times* crossword...

1 across: Satisfied in the Kodak gantry
3 across: The rail is interfered with
4 across: Thanks to the lurid airways
7 across: Go ahead to the plant rally

15 across: The sick man polishes his shoes

I wasn't getting very far, so I tried the *Down* clues...

2 down: A limit spark under water

4 down: Amy's lurch gives true colour

5 down: Chill to the neck

8 down: This time, the relics turn out in force

...I don't know if you ever do *The Times* crossword. I enjoy it, and if there are enough hours in the day I can sometimes finish it. Or at least get pretty close. Other days I have trouble even getting started. The clues can sound like lines out of Prynne poems: you understand the individual words, they even seem to be strung together in an apparently sensible way, but your brain refuses to engage with them or make any kind of sense out of the phrases. And you feel kind of inadequate and, strangely, a little guilty, because you know you're trying to make sense of them *in absolutely the wrong way*. The frustrating thing is, you sort of know what the right way is but your brain won't go there.

(Oh, and yes, I'm cheating a little here. All the "clues" above are lines from Prynne's poems, from the collection *Down Where Changed*. I wasn't sure if I should mention this or not, but I decided to err on the side of, um, caution.)

3.

Poems are not puzzles, of course. Poems are like horses. They have a life of their own, and challenge you to encounter them on terms about which you cannot be altogether clear. Having said that, once upon a time I was in a field with a horse and he looked at me and I looked at him and it was pretty clear whose field it was.

4.

The poem on page 248 is not the most representative of Prynne's poems, of course. There is this kind of thing here, in bewildering plenty.

Suddenly in salt water, some hopeful equine lustre
Folds under enquiry. Purist's watery bus route
And the bored plank salesman. Some elite estranged bole,
Slippery on holiday. Don't touch this. Don't even begin
To touch this. The movement is easy to the highest temple.

Please note: I said "this kind of thing". This is not Prynne I just quoted. I stumbled across it in a dusty corner of the thing I call my mind.

5.

You know that thing where someone stands in an art gallery and looks at a piece of abstract art and says, very loudly, "My two year old could do better than that?"

Don't you just hate it when you hear someone say that? It's terribly annoying.

6.

‘It has mostly been my own aspiration, for example, to establish relations not personally with the reader, but with the world and its layers of shifted but recognisable usage; and thereby with the reader’s own position within this world’. (J. H. Prynne, September 1985)

7.

The poem on page 248 is not the most representative of Prynne’s poems, of course. There is this kind of thing here, in bewildering plenty.

Ready hands sanction their new ebb, the especial
oratory shunt attachment. Overstock digit perverse
deployment adds a pungent new flavour, stepping
forward to claim the spoilage; that ragged applause
is for the assembled strollers with reverse anklets,
their part in the passion play at consent, on the valve
monitor. The grading is recognised, no doubts

assail the ready-to-eat counters of the absentees...

Which is from *Unanswering Rational Shore* (2001), which just happens to be the only Prynne book(let) I own, apart from this huge *Collected*. Mind, it’s probably necessary to say this isn’t wholly representative either, because several poems (and some of them are even in prose) bear much closer resemblance to conventional methods of discourse. By which I mean, they seem, almost, to make sense in a conventional way. But Prynne is mainly this: words strung together in ways that will disorient you, Dear Reader. Oh, and lots of words you won’t know the meaning of without recourse to a dictionary.

8.

I will admit it now. I feel somewhat ambivalent towards these poems. Some days I warm to the experience they offer, other days I think “Fuck off”. Perhaps that’s good. I have no idea.

9.

There is, I think, much in Prynne to like. And if not like, admire. The epigraph to *Down Where Changed* says, ‘Anyone who takes up this book will, we expect, have done so because at the back of the mind he has a half formed belief that there is something in it’. A friend of mine who likes Prynne’s work a lot told me that he thought this was a good way into the poems, and I think he’s right. I kind of think there is something in it. I’m not always sure I know what it is; I’m not always sure I’m even interested. But even at those times, I’m kind of interested in my own disinterest, and so the poems have done some sort of a job in spite of me.

I know, for instance, that Prynne’s poetry can be argued for on political grounds, which I’m not too bothered about doing. There is an argument that goes something like: how by saying things the way he does, how by not sticking to any regular or even consistent way of saying, then he is resisting oppressive systems of discourse, systems that use language to wield their power, or such like. Perhaps this is so. I tend to think that even laying this down as one way of dealing with the poems is itself a pinning down of poems that actually don’t want to be pinned down at all. They rather prefer to release you from whatever it is ties *you* down when it comes to words and language and thinking.

I approach the poems in the only way I know how. I walk into an art gallery and stand in front of an

George Oppen
New Collected Poems
(Carcenet)

I don't know the poetry of George Oppen well. I almost don't know it at all. I've only had the more than 400 page *New Collected Poems* for three or four weeks, and I've only read half of it, and since reading a book of poetry entails a bit more than just turning the pages to get to the end to see what happens, this almost amounts to not having read it at all.

While I waited around for the book to arrive (smoking, drinking, loafing) I prepared myself a little. I'm also not much of an expert on the Objectivists (of whom Oppen is/was nominally one) but I did a bit of brushing up, which served at least to remind me how in the past I've often found that stuff kind of dry, but my tastes are changing (albeit slowly) and perhaps it's time to have another look. Which I haven't yet. My somewhat limited refresher course also reminded me (in more detail than before) of Oppen's personal history.

And I immediately took to him. This was initially and primarily on the level of an immense respect, because I figured that anyone who could be serious enough about poetry and about social and political concerns to give up the former because he wasn't going to rope poetry in to the service of social causes, to fall into the trap of writing slogans and doggerel, was someone worth thinking about. And for this refusal to write poetry and commit oneself to social and political work to last 25 years... Well, 25 years is a long time, and he obviously meant it. As for the poetry he did write, there's also a nice line in the Preface by Eliot Weinberger to the *Collected* which is worth taking note of:

A product of the 1930s, Oppen had spent the first years of that decade attempting to rally a second generation of American modernism, relocated from Europe to the American city, that would continue and modify the poetic principles of its immediate predecessors while rejecting their political principles: *a poetry that might not be for the masses, but one that did not loathe them.* (Italics added)

This combination of what I perceived to be a decent human being (which is not always the case with poets) had me more than a little inclined to be sympathetic and receptive when I eventually got to the poems themselves. But before I get to them, there's Ezra Pound, who wrote the Preface to Oppen's first book, *Discrete Series*, (1934) and said, among other things, 'I salute a serious craftsman, a sensibility which is not every man's sensibility and which has not been got out of any other man's books'. As ever, Pound manages to say something that we forget all too easily or, to put it around another way, something we should remember more than we do, almost all the time: poetry *is* (or should be, when it's the genuine article) another person's sensibility, not necessarily a comforting reflection of one's own. And not got out of books but, by a process of elimination, out of life.

And "life"—in inverted commas here, but out there it doesn't have inverted commas, it simply has factories and conveyor belts and long hours and not enough money and all those life things—is hanging all around George Oppen's poems. As the first poem posits, by way of Henry James (and I quote it here in full, because it says it all, and is, anyway, quite beautiful):

The knowledge not of sorrow, you were
saying, but of boredom
Is—aside from reading speaking
Smoking—

Of what, Maude Blessingbourne it was,
wished to know when, having risen,
“approached the window as if to see
what really was going on”;
And saw rain falling, in the distance
more slowly,
The road clear from her past the window—
Glass—
Of the world, weather-swept, with which
one shares the century.

What goes on goes on outside the window. It's weather, but a weather that stands for every kind of ray of sun and blast of wind that rocks or soothes a life. And it's the century, *our* time. We share it. And it matters. And this underpins Oppen's poetry, but it's not an easy poetry to read, for me, and it almost certainly won't be easy for anyone wholeheartedly unused to reading a poetry that denies our expectations of conventional poetics and gives us, instead, fragments, disassociated phrases, sometimes part-utterances...but which also, in spite of that, often (very often) gives moments of pure beauty, elegance, recognition, wisdom. It's sometimes hard to relinquish the quest for total comprehension in favour of a few seized moments of great pleasure or revelation, but I swear it's worth it. When I think of how often reading and “getting” a whole poem can be a very much less than pleasant reading experience, I'm thankful for a few lines that give pleasure and add something to my world.

One can read one of these poems and it might feel like a cold and unforgiving gemstone: it looks great, feels great, but it's not exactly yielding anything up to you. You're very much outside it and separate from it. But it's okay to read a poem more than once, and largely these poems have that about them which suggests you do that. Attempt One wasn't altogether bad, even if perhaps you didn't get much from it in the way of meaning but there was some reading pleasure; Attempt Two may yield something else. And as readers, we can work a little, can't we? A poem with only a couple of dozen words in it, and the first time it resisted you, but you liked it enough to read it again—and again—and again several days later. For example:

This land:
The hills, round under straw;
A house

With rigid trees

And flaunts
A family laundry,
And the glass of windows

I admit I still can't make anything very interesting out of that 'round under straw' bit. I may be being blind and dense. But for the rest, each time I read this poem, I see a picture in my mind's eye but, more importantly, I sense a celebration (if that's the right word, which it perhaps isn't) of the very ordinary washing flapping on the washing line, and those windows, which one can look in to, and out of. And think and imagine. “Rigid” is an interesting word in the middle of the poem, don't you think? And it doesn't matter if I'm right or if I'm wrong, because it really doesn't. I'm not being marked on this.

Occasionally, a poem will be much simpler:

Civil war photo:
Grass near the lens;
Man in the field
In silk hat. Daylight.
The cannon of that day
In our parks.

Which is, I think, and to be frank, damn fine.

Having read “around” Oppen in my preparation for reading the poems, I came across some pretty finely tuned intellectual ideas, not all of which made complete sense to me. I can just about live with his concern with the little words, what the Objectivists termed “the lyric valuables” that make up the world, what a note in the notes to *Collected Poems* refers to as his ‘lifelong concern with the primary elements of experience, those “little nouns that he [liked] the most”’. And I’ve read a couple of analyses of a couple of poems that concentrate, for example, on how the word “thus” is used twice in a poem, and how its use and placing, and the space around it resonates...

...which is all very well, and I’m not underestimating any of that in any way, but there are a few reasons why quite a lot of what I read in my reading so far of *The Collected Poems of George Oppen* left me a little uneasy, for example the major sequence that opens *Of Being Numerous*, which contains some absolute gems, pearls, but its being a sequence of 40 short pieces stretching over 25 pages rather suggests you should be able to see the connections at once (and the notes, and Oppen’s own comments, don’t always help towards this) and you can feel a little inadequate, and so much “modern poetry” does this to you—but there’s some cracking stuff here, so let me tell you now: don’t be put off. Get this:

It is the air of atrocity,
An event as ordinary
As a President.

A plume of smoke, visible at a distance
In which people burn.

‘An event as ordinary as a President’. Wow!

But after all this, I’ve forgotten to mention the warmth. And I don’t get it from every poem but I get it lots, and the only way I can describe what I mean is to quote another poem entire, which to me sums up the humanity that is in Oppen’s best poems, and probably in all of them, but I’m still getting to know him. This is ‘The Men of Sheepshead’. One could go on about the knowledge and empathy in this poem, the calm assurance of it or how the world is these things, the mauls, the piers, the tenons, the rules of thumb and cams and levers. Or you could take another angle and try and find some way of accounting for how ‘Speaking of things’ works, and why it is placed the way it is; or you could write an essay about “self-contained”. Or then again, how the joining, the dovetailing, apparently about wood, could and probably is about people, too. Or you could let the poem speak for itself:

Eric—we used to call him Eric—
And Charlie Weber: I knew them well,
Men of another century. And still at Sheepshead
If a man carries pliers
Or maul down these rambling piers he is a man who fetches
Power into the afternoon

Speaking of things

End-for-end, butted to each other,
Dove-tailed, tenoned, doveled—Who is not at home
Among these men? who make a home
Of half truth, rules of thumb
Of cam and lever and whose docks and piers
Extend into the sea so self-contained.

On Barnaby Tage

I've been reading *The Biography of Barnaby Tage*, the Victorian explorer (as it proclaims on the back cover) most famous for discovering the real Borrioboola-Gha famously mentioned in Dickens's *Bleak House* as the object of Mrs. Jellyby's philanthropic enthusiasm. Tage was the son of a milliner and a milliner's wife, and grew up not far from his home in Berkshire, and within spitting distance of the River Thames. He witnessed the first steam train to run on what was then the Great Western railway; before that, it had been a railway staffed by horse-drawn donkeys.



It was the sound of the steam engine's coughing and spluttering, and other equally galling sounds coming from the construction site of what is now The Royal Berkshire Hospital, that inspired the young Barnaby Tage to think about getting out of what he called 'the rat-hole of home' and go looking for somewhere if not better then at least different. But he first had these thoughts at the age of eight, and was forced to wait until he was much older before his parents would allow him to leave home unaccompanied.

That day finally arrived on his 39th birthday. He had been dressed and ready for several hours when the omnibus that was to take him beyond the boundary of his village for the first time in his life broke down outside the blacksmith's half a mile from his home. But, to cut a long story short, he eventually reached Southampton and went looking for a boat for to take him o'er the sea.

To continue cutting the story, and to get quickly to the bit that I'm itching to tell you about, one day he finally reached what was then known as Darkest Africa. It's not surprising that someone of Tage's background and limited education should have thought that Darkest Africa was called that because it was, well, dark. He was very surprised to find it was very light.



Throwing away his torch, he found a road rarely travelled by anyone, and went to the very end of it. Then he went a bit further, and found Borrioboola-Gha lurking behind what is now a thriving industrial complex but was then a jungle. It was very small, but very interesting, and ripe for exploitation by the first huge colonial power that might come along.

Tage couldn't wait to phone home and tell his parents about it, but the telephone hadn't been invented so he wrote the first of a series of letters that have since become famous as "The Tage Letters". To judge from the very brief extracts in this excellent biography by Sheldon Orr, the eagerly anticipated publication of a 4-volume edition of the complete letters is deservedly eagerly anticipated. Here is an extract from a letter Tage wrote to his mother:

The rash on the inside of my upper thighs has now spread to the skin under my pubic hair. The doctors here have seen nothing like it and want me to have daily baths in the local river. But the local river is always infested with young native *lads and lasses cavorting in nakedness, and I know that it is better to suffer than to run the risk of contamination.* Hence I am here on my bed of bark, thinking of you and father and ignoring the burning and itching around my private parts that would drive a lesser man insane. (Italics added)

They don't make men like Barnaby Tage anymore. I can't imagine why. Plus, I've always been fond of the epistolary form, and would rather read letters than books, especially if they are from someone else to someone else, and none of my business.

***Cadenza* by Charles North
(Hanging Loose Press)**

What do poems mean?

‘One of the more disturbing ideas, at least in my view,
is that all thinking entails something like
“triage” among competing ideas,
such that the contents of mind
at any given moment aren’t,
and can’t be, an accurate representation
of the mental process involved—and moreover,
that they mask equally significant mental activity
which hasn’t (for reasons
that are plainly unavailable)
been selected, but which could equally have been so,
given even miniscule variation in our complex mental life’.

If this extract from the title poem of Charles North’s *Cadenza* suggests to you that it’s a philosophical poem, you may be right. You may be wrong. No one may care either way. It’s a poem that thinks, and makes you (the reader) think too. I’m not sure one can ask for more. Actually, one can ask for much more. You can ask not just for a thinking poem but a poem which also is at the same time a delight and a pleasure to read, a poem that makes you feel you are doing something decent and intelligent with your brain and your time. And that the something you are doing is happening because you are a person who actually enjoys doing something decent and intelligent with their brain for no reason other than the doing’s sake. Perhaps poetry makes nothing happen except to make the world a richer place and the people who are touched by it a little richer also. If you ask any or all of that of a poem, you need look no further than ‘Cadenza’ or any other of North’s poems.

“Baseballically speaking,”
as former Red Sox slugger Ted Williams
once began a response to a TV interviewer...

(‘Cadenza’)

Footballlically speaking, I have to admire poems that make me feel smart when I’m not. Poets from the same neck of the poetry woods as North, whose poetic lineage and milieu is pure first-hand New York School (they knew those guys), wear their erudition lightly, sometimes almost humorously, which is liberatingly democratic. Even when I have no idea what North is talking about I’m enjoying myself, and I think that’s ok.

And cricketically speaking I have to admire poems that remind me how to enjoy life. Lead by example. And you enjoy life by taking risks, not by staying within the confines of your basket. (Okay, I know this is open to debate, but just at the moment debate is not an option. Life, full and rewarding life, entails risk.) And poems, real poems, entail risk—which suggests that poems are like life, but that’s a whole other argument, and one that one of us would lose.

North’s poems often remind me of balancing acts:

It can't be the imbalances
Yet if it has to be – I'm not saying it has to but if

(‘Duets’)

in that there is a constant balancing going on between, for example, colloquialism,

Do bowling alleys sell beer? [laughs]

(‘Boul’Mich’)

And artifice that reminds you of Language Poetry stuff,

Slipping its height as per the aspirin of
your fullest sleep, the perennial spine.

O the angels of arrant tempo fold graves
for the brandishing, under the gravity

misnaming looks – as well as avid and filled
to print away honey on what abandoned.

(‘October’)

and it's not a tension; far from it. Then there is lyric grace,

There would be wasps and roses all over.
Late afternoon bells. Grapes transparent as stones
Asleep in sun and warm shadow.

(‘Clip From Francis Jammes’)

and recognisable so-called New York School tones,

The tone poem left the door open.
Well, close it.

(‘Sonnet’)

as well as equally recognisable New York School strategies: part 5 of the prose ‘Vetoed’ is a page-long list of imagined proposed buildings, and (oh, I already said this) prose,

Mozart is easinesses found, Brahms difficulties overcome. In the clarinet sonatas (if not in the viola versions) the performer personifies struggle. The craftiness of Odysseus, beleaguered and homesick, aiming at whatever is in the way of beauty shining forth. As against single-minded Achilles, too spear-like to be true, underpinned (and-mined) by darkness and the chalumeau.

(‘Five Notes’)

which all goes some small way towards indicating North's range but goes absolutely nowhere near describing what this book is really like. The reviewer is beginning to think about going to do something else but there isn't anything else to do here at the moment so I'll carry on. So how to describe what this book is like?—not in looks (it has pages and words), or form of poems (I've half-covered that one), or type of poem ("type of poem"? what on earth am I talking about?) but as an experience, a standing (or sitting or sprawling or whatever) with a piece of art and being altered by it (as you can be altered by, say, meeting a beautiful girl or not quite being run over by a bus.)

Here is a small section of 'Summer Of Living Dangerously':

The pair of cardinals that zip around like flying drops of blood...let's make that like ice-dancers, especially when compared to the deliberate hawks. The latter have a continuous relationship but a continually shifting one, so that a straight line connecting them at any given moment is one of an infinite number of variables. Neither is what we mean by chaos, but each has a somewhat unsettling if partly pleasing randomness. A blood bank of cardinals. A plane geometry of hawks.

Wary as I am of plucking a phrase from a book and finding in it some way of saying something smart about what the poems mean (ok—shoot me now) here goes: North's poems are full of things that are connected because the poet connects them but they may at first appear to you and me as unconnected but they are connected and the more you read the poems the more connections you see, and you begin to see (perhaps) the potentially 'infinite number of variables', and you take pleasure (oh my god!) in the 'somewhat unsettling if partly pleasing randomness' of it all. Except I think the randomness (if that's what it is) becomes more than partly pleasing; it becomes a delight. (Ok, that's the end of that paragraph. Did I pass the exam? Oh...)

To take this whatever it is I'm trying to say one step further, I'm tempted, but I won't give in to the temptation, to tell you about rigid designators:

...The following are rigid designators: Johnny Van der Meer, Johnny Friendly, Peter Unger, Marjorie Perloff, *The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg*, the Widow Wadman, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Julie Schwarz, Ken Schwarz, the Sears Tower. The man who wrote *Sven Types of Ambiguity* isn't a rigid designator, as there is nothing necessary about his having written that book...

('Summer Of Living Dangerously')

I didn't know anything about rigid designators until I read this book, but now I've got it all figured out. I looked it up on the Internet. Come to think of it, I might just be someone who thinks he has it figured out. I am certainly someone who is not sure if he has it figured out or not. But I think I'm right in saying that the chap who wrote this review is not a rigid designator but Martin Stannard is. This is both somewhat unsettling and more than partly pleasing.

But there's one other thing I want to say, and it only just occurred to me to say it. I think there is a smile in all of these poems, or at the back of these poems. Perhaps "smile" is not the right word, but I think the poet takes pleasure in the poems, and smiles, and I love that. There is a set of "translations" here, which are new versions of some poems that appeared in North's earlier books. (The earlier versions—the originals, as it were— are also included here, at the back of the book.) They are a form of rewrite but they are not what we would normally regard as rewrites. A rewrite suggests that the poet is unhappy with the earlier form or some of the words of the original poem and has tinkered with it;

with North's "translations" we have a different situation. For example, the first stanza of the original 'Song' (a poem that appeared in his 1999 *New & Selected*) is:

I am pressed up against you
Like air pressed up against the sky
The carpenter ants are at work on the bearing beams
O bearing beams

The "translation" renders this stanza as follows:

I feel you very close to me
In the same way that the sky and air seem not two things but one
Those termite-like pests are attacking the two-by-fours
O two-by-fours

In some respects what North does with these translations is examine the language; he is looking for another way of saying 'Which has nothing on confusion itself' (from 'Song'), which becomes 'Though that doesn't hold a candle to out-and-out mental disarray' (from 'Translation'). But consider those 'termite-like pests'—they are carpenter ants, and that is what they are. I even think "carpenter ant" may be some kind of rigid designator but I'm not sure. By calling them termite-like pests the voice of the poem belongs, if you will, to someone not quite as smart as that other guy. In something like the same way, in another translation, what was a simple "building" becomes a 'windowed construction'...ok, let's say North is having serious fun here at the expense of translations in general and the naming of things. But he's also once again dealing in possibilities, and poetry, whatever it means and is about, is surely about possibilities.

Since I first encountered North's poetry back in the early 1980s, I've been entranced and amazed by it. In those early days I admit to being worried about how I didn't understand most of it, and I busied myself also trying to figure out how come I was enjoying something I didn't understand. Boy, those were the days!

So anyway, what do poems mean?

The Complete Poems of Kenneth Rexroth
(Copper Canyon Press)

The relationship between poetry and philosophy, I suppose it is more or less superfluous to say, is very complex. I'm sure one could spend three or four years at University looking at the subject through a telescope, and come away with a sort of grasp of it, but it may not be a firm grip. A poet may be a philosopher, and the other way around. On the other hand, the poet may be no philosopher at all and the other way around. And if, as a reader, we go hunting philosophy in poems, we may get into all sorts of trouble. Or, it could be really good. I think what I mean to say here is that the relationship between poetry and philosophy is very complex. Except, of course, sometimes it's really simple.

For example, Coleridge was as much a philosopher as a poet. Or, and perhaps to be more exact, he was a sometimes great poet who, for reasons not our concern here, came to give his greater attention to philosophy and was regarded by many as one of the leading thinkers of his time. But in his greatest poems, whatever philosophy or worldview or religious sentiment is its foundation, it's what we regard as "poetry" that takes up all our attention. Even when a line posits some kind of central thesis ('No sound is dissonant which tells of Life') there is a poetic grace and power which at once complements the idea, and stops it sounding like a philosophic text or pulpit voice. Blake and his mysticism I'm sure is another case in point, but I don't really know enough about Blake to go into it. I may take a week off in February and consider it further.

The reason I raise all this is *The Complete Poems of Kenneth Rexroth*. There is a lot of philosophy and mysticism in this book, some of it like this:

Value and fact are polar aspects
Of organic process. As plus
Is to minus a value: "virtue"
And minus is privative "fact";
So minus is to virtue, "sin".
That is, quality is the aspect
Assumed in perspective of polar
Antitheses of achievement.
How comfortable, and how verbal.

I think this, from the long (30 page) 1940s poem 'The Phoenix and The Tortoise', is philosophy or something very much like philosophy. I think also that no matter how many times I read it I will never have a clue what it means. Which for a lot of poetry is absolutely fine, but I think this is philosophy or something very much like it and intended to be understood. So it fails. Or I fail. One of us fails, that's for sure. A lot of this long poem is of this nature, but there is also this:

One more Spring, and after the bees go,
The soft moths stagger in the firelight;
And silent, vertiginous, sliding,
The great owls hunt low in the air;
And the dwarf owls speak at their burrows.
We walk under setting Orion,
Once more in the dim boom of the sea,
Between bearded, dying apple trees,
In the shadows of the Easter moon;

And silent, vertiginous, the stars
Slide over us past the equinox.
The flowers whirl away in the wind like snow.
The thing that falls always is myself.
The moonlight of the Resurrection,
The moon of Amida on the sea,
Glitters on the wings of the bombers,
Illuminates the darkened cities.
The motion of Egyptian chisels
Dissolves slowly in the desert moon.

I would claim elegance and readability and rewarding substance for this, even though I lose its thread around mention of the moon of Amida, which I should maybe go and look up in a book. A good deal of Rexroth could make you want to go and look up something in a book. In this respect he is a lot like Pound. He is not much like Pound, to be honest, but the long poems which act as kind of huge cornerstones to his career have something of the methodology of *The Cantos*, in that they collage elements of various philosophies, histories and other texts into what I'm sure are coherent wholes, even though it's very difficult for a new reader to read them as such. One long poem, the later 'The Dragon and The Unicorn', stretches to a couple of hundred pages. It is beyond me at the moment, but with a decent slice of luck I may live another twenty years or so, so I have time on my side.

The thing is, I like this book a lot. For starters, it's very intelligent. Rexroth is very intelligent, and it's a very intelligent book. I don't think you can say this about a lot of books of poetry. Poets may be clever (in varying degrees) but clever isn't the same as intelligent. Reading some of these poems is (to invoke Pound again) a bit like reading *The Cantos*: you often don't get it, but it's as if something good is rubbing off on you, and you're partaking of, and sensing some idea of life that is spiritually and intellectually good. It's an enervating experience, and it doesn't hurt at all, even though you thought it might.

But I really like this book for a simple reason above any other: it has some good poems in it. Here's one I like a lot. It's a section from 'The Lights In The Sky Are Stars', which is dedicated to one of his daughters:

Lying under the stars,
In the summer night,
Late, while the autumn
Constellations climb the sky,
As the Cluster of Hercules
Falls down the west
I put the telescope by
And watch Deneb
Move towards the zenith.
My body is asleep. Only
My eyes and brain are awake.
The stars stand around me
Like gold eyes. I can no longer
Tell where I begin and leave off.
The faint breeze in the dark pines,
And the invisible grass,
The tipping earth, the swarming stars

Have an eye that sees itself.

(‘The Heart of Herakles’)

I love that bit where he can’t tell where he begins and leaves off. What’s more, for Rexroth, this ‘lying under the stars’ business isn’t some literary conceit written for effect. This is someone who spent a lot of time out in the woods, living and trekking and, it seems, making a lot of love in the open air. (It can be good, I’ve heard.) With Rexroth, you get a hundred per cent genuine self, and once you bypass the occasional philosophy textbook language of the earlier poems you read an authentic human voice: ‘I have spent my life striving to write the way I talk’, he said. And he strove also to write a poetry that would be available to and understood by any reader. In this, he was simply carrying through his lifelong political belief in community. He wrote a poem called ‘Toward An Organic Philosophy’, and with a title like that you hardly need to read the poem to figure what it means and where the poet is coming from. Plus, he stands in a historical and poetic territory that has left him an almost forgotten figure in our current received knowledge of twentieth century literature.

In politics, he comes from the era between the world wars when American radicals were truly radical, and when a socialist vision seemed achievable and realistic. Rexroth was completely a part of that movement, but like many others of his generation he believed you couldn’t be a radical without having studied the past, found out about the world, lived life to the full and formed your own views about it all. Radicalism wasn’t some kind of fashionable movement, or a fad. It’s this that distanced him from the later cultural trends of the 1960s, where to his way of thinking what was going on was lazy sloganeering with little or no background and foundation in serious thought and experience. In other words, it wasn’t his kind of radicalism. He was one of the main movers behind the San Francisco Renaissance of the 1950s, and was an authentic political and literary activist, who believed it was the beginning of a utopian society. Instead, the vision of the world he’d held and fought for over many years fell apart:

There are few of us now, soon
There will be none. We were comrades
Together, we believed we
Would see with our own eyes the new
World where man was no longer
Wolf to man, but men and women
Were all brothers and lovers
Together. We will not see it.
We will not see it, none of us.
It is farther off than we thought.

(‘For Eli Jacobson’)

And when the sixties came along, and the Beats and others of a similar mind began to occupy some of the foreground of cultural life, Rexroth was sidelined partly by them and partly as a result of his own convictions. But, nevertheless, it’s all slightly paradoxical how the story has panned out. The way Rexroth is scarcely mentioned in the histories is even more curious because, at the same time, he is sometimes called “the father of the Beats”. He M-Ced the reading where Allen Ginsberg read ‘Howl’ in public for the first time, and many consider Rexroth’s poem ‘Thou Shalt Not Kill’ was as much if not more of an inspiration for ‘Howl’ than anything Walt Whitman wrote (although both he and Ginsberg refuted the notion):

They are murdering all the young men.
For half a century now, every day,
They have hunted them down and killed them.
They are killing them now,
At this minute, all over the world,
They are killing the young men...

(‘Thou Shalt Not Kill’)

Reading Rexroth, and reading around Rexroth, one is looking at an enormous chunk of literary history. But this is not the main reason I like this book. As I said, it has a lot of good poems in it. The ones I like best are those where the poet reminds himself and us of the vision of wholeness and the world around us. They are not “nature poems”; they are more about the transcendent experience of being a part of the world, and a celebration of life. He has the clarity of the Oriental poet:

Young, in Spring, I gathered
Flowers on the mountain.
Old, in Autumn, I pick
Sedges by the river.
Positive – negative.
Negative – positive.
Ordinary people
Never understand me.
As long as I have lovely
Children I have nothing
To be sorry about.

(‘Elegy on Encountering the Trouble of the World’)

One has to mention Chinese and Japanese poetry when speaking of Kenneth Rexroth, because his knowledge of it was extensive, and it was a major influence upon his own work. Along with a lot of other people, he first discovered the Chinese through Pound’s *Cathay*, and for a while was in prolonged correspondence with Pound about poetry and politics. They fell out over politics, not surprisingly. Rexroth subsequently translated widely, and the tone and flavour of Eastern writing became more and more apparent in his later work. Remarkably, his very later work includes a series of poems attributed to one “Marichiko”. *The Love Poems of Marichiko* were presented as translations of poems written by ‘a contemporary young woman’ poet from Japan, and they are quite lovely:

Because I dream
Of you every night,
My lonely days
Are only dreams.

It was only when Rexroth was nominated for a translation prize that he revealed he had written the poems himself. They are almost worth the price of the book alone.

In truth, *The Complete Poems of Kenneth Rexroth* is too big for me at the moment. I haven’t read anything like all its 750 or so pages, and there is way too much of it for me to take in. I found myself so interested in Rexroth I had a look on the Internet, and discovered even more things to read. He wrote lots of essays and literary journalism, and an autobiography, and there’s lots of it available online. So I

got diverted from the book in hand and found myself reading some of the other things he'd written, and I don't regret it at all. I have no idea what this book costs in the UK: it says \$24 on the cover. I suggest you just use your credit card and not worry. In principle, I don't like huge massive enormous books of poems: they are too heavy to hold up comfortably and read (this one is), they look somewhat daunting (this one does), and they lack the sense of excitement a slim volume produced in the heat of creativity might (I say "might") have. And this one does lack that. But sometimes you have to have big books because that's the only way you are going to get the poems and recover a poet's work. I notice from the press release this one was originally published in hardback. Goodness knows what it must have weighed. It probably came with a health warning, or advice on how to lift heavy objects safely. Whatever—this is a good and interesting book. I think I already said that.

Being Alive
Edited by Neil Astley
(Bloodaxe)

I have a copy of the original Grove Press *The New American Poetry*. The reason I mention this is the word “anthology”. And how even now, even today, when I hold this book and open it and browse its pages I fall in love all over again with poetry, with the adrenalin rush of holding in my hands poetry that calls out to me to wake up and be alive, and wanting to write poetry that will in turn generate another adrenalin rush somewhere else. I have no idea how to explain the feeling but it’s a marvellous feeling. I know it involves romance and possibility and dream and myth; I know it also involves recognition, voices I understand and don’t understand talking to me, and a refusal to be bored. It also has something to do, I know, with the fact that the book doesn’t assume anything about me at all, and the book’s poems don’t make any assumptions about me either, beyond the fact that if I’m reading them then I am, presumably, a reader of poetry and therefore interested. And, with that given, the poems are there, and that’s it. They’d be there anyway. It’s that word “anthology” that started me thinking about this. Oh, and this thing I’m supposed to be writing about being alive. I mean, *Being Alive*, the new anthology from Bloodaxe, the sequel to *Staying Alive*.

Staying Alive, published in 2002, apparently sold thousands of copies and, if we are to believe Bloodaxe publicity, ‘introduced thousands of new readers to modern poetry, offering an international gathering of poems of great personal force, poems with emotional power, intellectual edge and playful wit. It brought many readers back to poetry, people who hadn’t read poetry for years because it hadn’t held their interest’. Among the anthology’s readers you can count Mia Farrow and Meryl Streep. Meryl, she tells us (in her own words; it’s not a script!), runs home to the book to argue with it, find solace in it and locate herself in the world again. It’s a beautiful image, I think, and not one I am going to ridicule.

I have no idea if the book did what Mr. Bloodaxe says it did. The only people I know who even know of it are people who know poetry anyway, but I have no way of checking if non-poetry readers were suddenly somehow grasped in a mysterious way by the reviews they didn’t read or the word of mouth from people they didn’t know, and flocked to the local bookshop they no longer have to buy their first poetry book for years, if not for ever. I hope they didn’t, because if people have to be introduced to modern poetry (and, of course, they don’t) then they deserved much better than *Staying Alive* was offering. They deserved much better than the several hundred somewhat flaccid and mind-numbing poems Neil Astley told them were ‘exceptional’. Of course, there were some good things in it, and some poetry staples, but in the main it was solidly dull fare.

Perhaps one cause of my disquiet was the premise that poetry is good for you. No, let me re-phrase that, because it might be a slightly unfair interpretation. I will quote, rather, from Astley’s Introduction: ‘Many people turn to poetry only at unreal times, whether for consolation in grief or affirmation in love’. Actually, this is probably true, now I come to think of it. Four weddings and a cremation. But poetry isn’t that for me, and never has been. Poetry isn’t “for” anything, as far as I know, notwithstanding that “many people” think it is. That’s okay. I am not many people. But if I try and imagine myself turning to poems to sustain me in grief or justify me in love—um, no, I can’t imagine that.

New poetry readers also deserved better than the commentary Astley provided to accompany the poems, a commentary that reminded me strongly of the tones my old English teacher used to adopt when he told us what poetry was. Never mind how great swathes and styles and methods of modern

poetry were ignored by it—you kind of expect anthologies to be exercises in exclusion, I think. But you might expect them to be a bit more open and honest about it. Does Neil Astley know how much power he wields?

Astley has, to give him his due, mastered the tone of the teacher who knows best. His Introduction to *Staying Alive* makes so many statements claiming to be facts within its opening paragraphs he ought to be ashamed of himself. For instance, ‘most of us could only name one or two modern poems which have moved us profoundly and unforgettably’. I suspect the truth is that whoever the hell this “us” is, and I assume Astley means the world of non-poetry readers who are now reading his book, then most of “us” couldn’t name *any* poems that have done this, except perhaps that...what was it? That poem in *Four Weddings* again, that was okay, wasn’t it? Astley’s assumed identification with ordinary non-poetry reading people is sickly enough. But we are immediately expected to accept as fact that certain poems he names have ‘unnerving power’. My English teacher used to tell us that certain things were great, and certain things were not great. He neglected to tell us we could make up our own minds.

‘Most people [Are these the same people as “many people”? I just wondered.] think contemporary poetry is either boring and irrelevant or pretentious and superficial’. That’s another Astley fact. I would suggest that “most people” have no clue what contemporary poetry might be, but if “most people” read his selection of poems they might well think what he thinks they already think. (If nothing else, I can match his daft generalisation with one of my own.) And he’s absolutely dishonest when he says to his supposed audience of poetry innocents that his book will show them ‘the wide range of contemporary poetry from the past three decades, much of which is closer to Shakespeare than to Modernism in its address to concerns shared by the reader’. What is this rubbish? Do the poets he calls Modernist not have the concerns of, who? Ordinary people? Neil Astley can’t be such an idiot, or think that the people who read what he’s written are idiots on the same scale.

There are other Astley facts that bother me. They can best be described by quoting them:

Another Frost poem, ‘The Road Not Taken’, became America’s favourite poem because...

Canada’s favourite modern poet, Alden Nowlan...

Oh, and I’ll throw in:

A great modern poem like...

There is more than one way of approaching the issue that bothers me here. One approach requires that I accept the premise that these books are going to reach new poetry reading audiences. If I accept this, then I may have to accept also that these poetry new people will lap up the teaching tone Astley adopts and try to share his tastes. In other words, they might believe him. And they might wonder, when they read a particular poem they’ve been told is great, and they don’t think it’s great, what’s wrong with them! This doesn’t attract people to poetry; it puts them off. If, on the other hand, I grant that these people will make up their own minds, might they be disappointed as much as they are enthralled and excited? I wish, rather, they’d been given the chance to make up their own minds about a wider range of poetry than Bloodaxe settled for.

If I reject the premise and see all this thick anthologising as some fine marketing strategy, then the new reader becomes an irrelevance and one is driven to the “Further Reading” lists at the back of the book to see how many more Bloodaxe books one needs to buy to enjoy even more thrilling poems etc. Whatever. Marketing isn’t exactly a sin, although marketing such overwhelmingly dull poems on the

back of phrases like 'poems that touch the heart, stir the mind and fire the spirit' may well be. It's enormously unfair to quote one poem out of several hundred to make a point, but the first poem in the book after the Introduction that uses that phrase begins:

This poem is dangerous; it should not be left
Within the reach of children, or even of adults
Who might swallow it whole, with possibly
Undesirable side-effects...

Oh well, only another 500 unnerving pages to go. Of course, as with its precursor, *Being Alive* has some good poems in it but they tend to be the poems you can find easily elsewhere. Eliot and Auden and Bishop and so on aren't exactly hidden mysteries.

Of course, I haven't read every poem in either of these two door-stopping anthologies. But I have spent several hours with these books and became increasingly dispirited. And, perversely, weighed down by a heavy heart and almost broken in spirit, I turned to poems to brighten me up. The poems I like in other books! But the poems I like aren't there to cheer you up after you've read some crappy poems! That's silly.

I've lately become reconciled to the fact that lots of people like things, including poems, which I don't like. This condition co-exists with its opposite, that lots of people like what I like and don't like what I don't like. And the edges of all these things are blurred, and the world is big enough for all of us. And I try not to get too hot under the collar when the thing we are focussing on in particular is poetry, and I come across things about Poetry World I don't like much, or even loathe. In other words, I try to be mellow. But, of course, it doesn't work very well because when I walk in Waterstones and into their Poetry section all I can see is this damn book. Lately, I've been chatting over with a friend how we should maybe do an anthology of our own, and put the world to rights.

On First Looking into Samuel Taylor Coleridge

First, I have to say it's necessary for me to cheat a little, because I suspect that the first time I looked into Coleridge was at school, and I'm sure I would rather have been looking out of the window. And I suspect I did look out; the girl's school was next door. But later, much much later, a friend mentioned his own regard for Coleridge's poems and, feeling pretty ignorant, I made fresh enquiry.

I was so pleased I did. For example, he said something I loved to hear a poet have the straightforwardness and honesty to say, crack at the start of a poem:

Thus far my scanty brain hath built the rhyme
Elaborate and swelling, yet the heart
Not owns it.

There's lots to find in Coleridge, and several years on I haven't found the half of it. For one thing, there's lots of his poetry I haven't read. Some of it I've read and don't feel dreadfully mad about reading again: *Religious Musings* is a worthy read, but perhaps not the most invigorating. At least, I've not found it so—yet. But, to compensate, I've read quite a lot of his prose, although I haven't managed *Biographia Literaria* from cover to cover; I cherry picked the famous and pertinent bits. But yes, there's lots to find in Coleridge, and the first thing I'd always mention is that there is a man in there, a true and human being you can hear. And he's one I like, which is not something I can say about a lot of poets. He is brilliant and brash, fragile and uncertain, gives in to his weaknesses, overcomes his weaknesses, succumbs again, and fails to recognise his own genius, pointing everyone instead toward that other bloke, Wordsworth. There's the real genius over there, says Coleridge. Don't read me, read him!

Oh dear. He is even able, in 'Dejection: An Ode' to write a marvellous poem about...um, not being able to write poems, about losing touch with his sense of life, about losing the Imagination:

Yon crescent Moon, as fixed as if it grew
In it's own cloudless, starless Lake of Blue,
A Boat becalm'd! dear William's Sky-Canoe!
I see them all, so excellently fair,
I *see*, not *feel*, how beautiful they are!

There's lots to find in Coleridge. They say he'd read every book around, and if a pamphlet or tract was published in the morning, he would be quoting passages from it at dinner that evening. So it's perhaps not surprising there's lots to find in Coleridge. Anyone who's ever read John Livingston Lowes' *The Road To Xanadu* will know there's more than lots, apparently.

But it strikes me, re-reading some of the poems again over recent weeks to come at this afresh, that the best thing about Coleridge is what should always be the best thing about a poet. That is, he wrote some really first-rate, cracking poems. Over and over again I'm astonished by them. And the best thing about the poems is they are great to read. It's wonderfully strong and readable writing, and it has the man I already described in it. He's there, examining himself, examining the world. In "conversation" with his friends. Writing a great poem in a Somerset garden with his foot in bandages. Leaving other poems unfinished, and even the fragments we have are...Oh, I'm falling into the trap of using the word "great" too much. All I really want to do is quote favourite bits at you, for several pages. You see, I read Coleridge, and read about chunks of his life, when I feel crap about poetry and crap about being a

poet. So I read him, and then I don't feel like that anymore, because I know it's okay. Crap is part of the recipe, part of the deal.

And I think Coleridge is absolutely modern. He was modern in the innovative sense when he was alive, and I think he still is. Other than the unavoidable fact of the poems being written in the language of some 200 years ago, they are otherwise (the best of them) startlingly modern. And this goes even for those that appear absolutely archaic.

It's not difficult to claim modernity for the Conversation Poems, or even the epistolary 'Letter to Sara Hutchinson'. Read them, and they are a poet talking to someone, a couple of centuries before Frank O'Hara talked about using the telephone instead of writing a poem. They sound like someone, yes, using a poem to speak *to*, not *at*.

My gentle-hearted Charles! when the last rook
Beat its straight path along the dusky air
Homewards, I blest it! deeming its black wing
(Now a dim speck, now vanishing in light)
Had cross'd the mighty Orb's dilated glory,
While thou stood gazing; or, when all was still,
Flew creaking o'er thy head, and had a charm
For thee, my gentle-hearted Charles, to whom
No sound is dissonant which tells of life.

But one does not think of 'The Ancient Mariner', or the unfinished 'Christabel', as modern, particularly. Unless you read them, which I doubt many people do these days. Their concerns are modern concerns, if you care to look, and the poet is treating of them with a poetry that was radical in its day and is radical still. The 'Mariner' continues to do my head in, no matter how often I read it. Forget scholarly analysis; you can just go along for the ride:

An orphan's curse would drag to hell
A spirit from on high;
But oh! more horrible than that
Is the curse in a dead man's eye!
Seven days, seven nights, I saw that curse,
And yet I could not die.

'Christabel' is astonishing from its first stanza of castle clock, crowing cock, and owls. It's remarkably sensual and erotic; I refer you (coyly) to lines 245-278 as an example. You will have to look them up yourself, because I'm coy. On the other hand, surely any poet worth his or her salt would die for lines and imagery like this:

'... that there and then
I may dislodge their reptile souls
From the bodies and forms of men!
He spake: his eye in lightning rolls!

Speaking of snakes:

I stooped, methought, the dove to take,
When lo! I saw a bright green snake

Coiled around its wings and neck,
Green as the herbs on which it couched,
Close by the dove's its head it crouched;
And with the dove it heaves and stirs,
Swelling its neck as she swelled hers!

I have to stop quoting. There's too much. This is poetry you can almost chew; that it and the other ballads deal with huge questions of good and evil, psychological states, neuroses, obsessions, guilt and sex...yes, this is tasty. At the story level it's pretty damn good. At the meaty level (and I speak here as a vegetarian more than familiar with the pleasures of the flesh) it has blood oozing out from between the lines.

All this, and I haven't mentioned Coleridge's touch when it comes to describing the natural world, whether it be the Quantock Hills or the Lake District. All this, and I haven't mentioned 'Kubla Khan', the pure beauty and mouth-wateriness of it. Or the way he writes about his children, the love and delight, the sadness and the hope.

But I will quote one last thing, perhaps somewhat at a tangent but perhaps not. Coleridge was, after all, very much of the world. He may have lived sometimes a long way from a town; the Romantics may have a vague reputation of being dreamy and remote. They weren't. He wasn't. There's a lot of politics in Coleridge, and wisdom. When Bush and Blair invaded Iraq on our behalf, I had a passage from 'Fears in Solitude' Xeroxed and pinned up above my desk at work:

We send our mandates for the certain death
Of thousands and ten thousands! Boys and girls,
And women, that would groan to see a child
Pull off an insect's leg, all read of war,
The best amusement for our morning meal!
The poor wretch, who has learnt his only prayers
From curses, who knows scarcely words enough
To ask a blessing from his Heavenly Father,
Becomes a fluent phraseman, absolute
And technical in victories and defeats,
And all our dainty terms for fratricide;
Terms which we trundle smoothly o'er our tongues
Like mere abstractions, empty sounds to which
We join no feeling and attach no form!

I had to take it down after a few days, because the company issued an edict that nobody should have anything at all political displayed, on the grounds that it could offend or be divisive. Quite. Coleridge would have had something to say about that.

Of course, he always gets swamped by Wordsworth when it comes to literary histories or tour guides to the Lake District. But there are many who would argue that he was the greater poet, the true genius. Such debates, of course, are pretty pointless. But I'd certainly argue that reading Coleridge is one of the most startling and stimulating experiences poetry has to offer.

It's That Axeman Again

Bloodaxe's Neil Astley has been at it again, stating the case (if it can be called a case) for publishing the poetry that readers want rather than what the elitist avant-garde want. Or something like that. You can read it all in *The New Statesman*. Astley begins badly and goes on from there:

Poetry in Britain is both thriving and struggling: it is flourishing at grass-roots level while poetry publishing is floundering. Bookshops have drastically reduced their ranges of poetry. Publishers have scrapped or shortened their poetry lists and are taking on very few new authors. Small presses have folded. Yet, paradoxically, public interest in poetry has never been higher.

One look on the Internet will show you that poetry publishing is not floundering. If anything, it's healthier than it's been for a long time, thanks to the Web and the way it allows people to find out about things and order online from even the tiniest bed-sit based small press. So have small presses folded? Of course they have, lots of the paper-based ones. They always do. Now they are being replaced by web-based things. He's right about bookshops of course, but more of that later...

Astley continues:

When poetry publishers and reviewers ignore their readership...

What does this mean? I really don't understand it. Poetry is not meat. A poetry publisher is not like a butcher who insists on selling week-old road-kill. (I just thought of something really funny, but it would be a digression; I'll save it for a review sometime.) What exactly constituted the general readership of poetry when Wordsworth and Coleridge wrote the *Lyrical Ballads*? For sure, there was neither a Waterstones nor a Bloodaxe around...

Publishers publish books and want to sell them. Anything else doesn't make sense unless you run a few hundred things off on the photocopier at work and give them away. Shearsman wants to sell books; they believe in their poets. Salt wants to sell books. They believe in their poets too, and like Shearsman and countless other publishers large and small also believe in their readers, in their intelligence and discrimination and ability to choose. Neil Astley also believes in his poets, I guess. I hope so. But sadly, when he says things about publishers, like 'continuing to package their books to appeal only to an intellectual elite has severely disadvantaged them. If readers find a book visually unappealing, they won't pick it up. And if the back-cover blurb is a piece of turgid literary criticism, new readers will be scared off' he is talking palpable nonsense, and it's nonsense because it's based on a disregarding of the facts (I see lots of those books, and they look pretty attractive a lot of the time) and it also posits a readership with neither the intelligence nor the savvy to see past a book's cover. Poetry publishers usually have a mission. It's to publish and sell the poetry they believe in. They do it on behalf of their poets, who can't or won't do it for themselves. They believe a public exists for the work, and it does—somewhere, if the two things, work and public, can find each other.

I'm on record more than once of being critical of the Bloodaxe anthologies. They are bland, and patronizing toward whatever readership they are aimed at, and they also manage to include dull poems by even the good poets. And they have a school teacher-ish air about their commentaries which may be ok for some but is unworthy of what is possibly the country's leading (or at least biggest) poetry publisher.

Here is more Astley:

Readers don't have access to the diverse range of work being produced, not just in Britain, but from around the world, because much of the poetry establishment is narrowly based, male-dominated, white Anglocentric and skewed by factions and vested interests.

This is such nonsense it's almost embarrassing, because pretty much everyone has access to everything, thanks to the Internet. People are not barred from buying a poetry book because of who it's by or where it comes from. And this, of course, presupposes you accept Astley's description of 'the poetry establishment'...whatever the poetry establishment is. A lot of people would see Bloodaxe as part of that establishment, with huge displays in huge bookstores while other poetry publishers, to use Astley's word, 'flounder'. (Come to think of it, if he is such a champion of "diversity" maybe Bloodaxe should take on board some of the avant-garde university-based...oh no, he can't do that because nobody wants to read them. Silly me. I forgot.

But Astley is entitled to publish what the hell he likes. Why he seems to want to keep taking these potshots at what he sees as other poetry factions is beyond me, unless it's merely a way of getting into print and advertising Bloodaxe again. And stuff like,

Contemporary poetry has never been more varied, but what the public gets to hear about are the new post-Larkin "mainstream" and the "postmodern avant-gardists" (with their academic strongholds in Oxford and Cambridge respectively). More broad-based poetry expressing spiritual wisdom, emotional truth or social and political engagement is of little interest to either camp. Exciting new work by major American, European and Caribbean writers, from Martin Carter, Galway Kinnell and Yusef Komunyakaa to Jane Hirshfield, Mary Oliver and Adam Zagajewski, has been almost totally ignored by national-press poetry reviewers.

surely can only impress people who know nothing about poetry. This must be the case, because Astley knows his audience, that's for sure.

But it's not really about Neil Astley. It's about books in shops and where to buy books and find out about what is available and where. In Nottingham, where I used to live, a huge Waterstones is around the corner from where the little and independent Mushroom Books used to be; you could buy poetry there, poetry that Waterstones not only does not touch but almost certainly doesn't even know about. So much for your local bookshop. Thank the Lord for the Internet, I guess.

Complaining about Neil Astley is kind of fun but it's missing the point. He isn't the enemy. He may be an annoying bit of the symptom but he isn't the illness. Surely things go deeper than that. Aren't 3 blockbusters for the price of 2 in Waterstones, or the crappy selection of CDs in your local gigantic Tesco, which also sells Corn Flakes, more like the problem? And records sell by the cartload on the web, and poetry won't sell by the ton but it will sell, somehow.

If you believe in your poetry, write and publish and hang in there.