

Once, I: on Fleur Adcock and Jane Hirshfield

Fleur Adcock, *The Land Ballot (Bloodaxe Books)*, £9.95; *Jane Hirshfield*, *The Beauty (Bloodaxe Books)*, £9.95

Fleur Adcock, in this her latest collection published to coincide with her eighty-first birthday, tells the emigration story of her Manchester grandparents. Sam and Eva Adcock travelled to New Zealand with their ten year-old son Cyril (the poet's father) at the beginning of the First World War with the intention of becoming dairy farmers. The land ballot of the title was the means by which they were able to bid for a piece of uncleared bush. After several vain attempts they found themselves the owners of 150 acres of indigenous forest, '1,200 feet above sea level / on the chillier side of a mountain'.

This book-length sequence of poems describes not only their efforts to turn this unproductive land into a working farm but also gives an intimate portrait of a small isolated community. Many of the poems have the quality of snapshots. In some the poet is looking at actual photographs – young fostered Beryl 'part of the human baggage they all stowed / as kindly as they could' is 'a smudged face in a family snap, / a bundle of pale skirts on someone's knee'; Eva's consumptive brother James is wittily observed as 'the one with the longest legs, / the centre parting, the fetching moustache, / and no intention of dying celibate'. Sometimes activities like fencing, milking, driving the buggy are described in Cyril's voice (who clearly has aspirations beyond dairy farming). Sam's diary offers 'a flutter of dates...with just enough details to anchor them'. From time to time the poet speaks: 'I am half-occupying the eyes / of my young father' or she offers asides. Other events are recalled in extracts adapted from the local newspaper and from a booklet celebrating the Te Rau-a-moa School Jubilee. There are many voices in these poems.

Adcock is a passionate researcher: 'The Archive' lists sources which include tapes (of interviews with her father), letters, postcards, papers and a box of glass negatives but she is also acutely aware of 'a line called Trespass, not to be crossed'. Some poems raise questions about the relationship between fact and story-telling, about remembering itself. 'I can't get it to knit' she writes of her two images of Eva, they won't 'graft'. In 'This Lovely Glen', in which Eva first dreams of going to New Zealand, the poet wonders '(or is that me, tidying up her dream / to match the scene on the postcard? If so / I take it back. Let her dream her own dreams.)' But where life rolls on unrecorded, she fills in from her own imagination as she tries to think herself back into that vanished community.

Adcock, born in New Zealand but now settled in England, has always been interested in roots, gender and identity. She is acutely aware of those women whose stories have disappeared: women who have been marginalised or forgotten and symbolised perhaps by the anonymous 'aproned figure' in 'Settlers' Museum', 'posed

/ amid the props ('Farmhouse Interior') /... visible only in half profile...It's not possible / to view her from another angle, or / tiptoe around behind the barrier / to ask her name and peer into her face'. Lives are decoded here with extraordinary psychological insight and intimacy.

These vivid, deeply moving poems demonstrate Adcock's characteristic mixture of playfulness, questioning and deprecation in a tone that is always restrained, rational, conversational. The poems have all the freshness of thinking aloud and demonstrate a wry wit that never conflicts with seriousness or humanity.

Like Adcock, the American poet Jane Hirshfield is concerned with the transient, 'You eat. You look. / Then you look back and it's over. / This life'. 'Poems allow us' Hirshfield writes 'not only to bear the tally and toll of our transience, but to perceive, within their continually surprising abundance, a path through the grief of that insult into joy.'

The graceful, spare and mysterious poems that make up *The Beauty*, Hirshfield's eighth collection, invite us to think again how we might live ('like a painting' perhaps 'looked into from more than one angle at once'). Although Hirshfield is interested in science, culture and language these poems are deeply rooted in the living world. Her language (which might be drawn from common speech) and imagery (offered without judgement) are deceptively simple as she hints at the unspoken truths that lie just beyond our perception. In one of a series of 'My' poems she observes and celebrates her own skeleton, 'You who held me all your life / in your hands / as a new mother holds / her own unblanketed child, / not thinking at all.' In another, 'Her Proteins', she considers how 'ninety percent of my cells ... / are not my own person'. The things of this world – inanimate and animate – are given her thoughtful attention. 'I have at times wanted to be you: / something looked through and past' she writes of cellophane.

In the series 'Twelve pebbles' some of the poems have the imagistic quality of haiku 'but today / in rain / without coat without hat'. Others are paradoxical like koan, puzzling like riddles. Meaning is not what matters. These, like the other poems in the book, reflect Hirshfield's deep interest in Zen: awareness, consciousness, compassion, the vicissitudes of perception, the importance of the singular moment and silence – all are present as well as ideas related to the nature of the self, the meaning of a life. In 'My life Was the Size of My Life' she writes 'Once, I grew moody and distant. / I told my life I would like some time, / ... / In a week, my empty suitcase and I returned. / I was hungry, then ... / my life, too, was hungry'. The conversations she remembers most 'are the ones that were interrupted. / Wait, you say, running after them'. In Zen, nothing is ever finished.

There is generosity in these poems, 'I profess the uncertain / with gratitude' she writes and 'How rarely I have stopped to thank / the steady effort of the world to stay the world'. There is also wisdom and joy. And of course, beauty, "This is your house", / said my bird heart to my heart of the cricket, and I entered'.

To think harder in verse

Philip Coleman, *John Berryman's Public Vision: Relocating the Scene of Disorder (UCD Press)* £32.50/€40

At one point in a critical essay in defence of art's intellectualism, Berryman rambunctiously exclaims, 'the popular boys cannot understand this.' In wrenching Berryman's poetry free from the cant of solipsistic "confessionalism" ('the C-word', as Michael Hofmann terms it), locating it at the heart of a public poetics, Philip Coleman's timely study seems destined to infuriate two cliques of 'popular boys'. Some might be unwilling to give up their egotistical straw man of seedy intimacy, the kind who beckons (as Berryman mordantly puts it), 'Come here, Reader, look in my pocket.' Still others, fan-boys of the louche slurrer on Alvarez's 1967 BBC documentary, macho braggart and *poète maudit*, will find this portrait of a publicly-engaged intellectual unrecognisable. Coleman's study aims at a major rehabilitation of Berryman's critical standing (coinciding with *Berryman's Fate: a Centenary Celebration in Verse*, edited by Coleman). Notwithstanding the 'communicative deficit' that always dogged the idea of "confessional" poetry (as well as Rosenthal's forgotten caveats in the watershed 1959 review of Lowell), Coleman convincingly establishes the pervasive currency of the term. The first chapter is an exposé of the obtuseness (and at times, critical laziness) involved in its persistence; his assessment of Marjorie Perloff's influence in 'the critical marginalisation of Berryman [...] is respectful but trenchant.

If the space-clearing task of Coleman's book is to render virtually indisputable the redundancy of "confessionalism" as a critical shibboleth, its constructive objective is to '[relocate] the scene of disorder', from the tortured individual psyche indecently exposed, to the disquieting fractures of American public life – the nightmarish Eden of Bradstreet's New England through to the paranoid Cold War. The theme of dislocation and dispossession is central, exacerbated by war, the bomb, and capitalism; nor is the 'ruin-prone proud national / mind' (Dream Song 77) of the poems cut adrift from global contextures, political and literary: the motif of travel features in the latter part of the book – India, Japan, the Vietnam war – and Coleman's test case for the public aspirations of Berryman's poetry – 'Formal Elegy' on the death of JFK – is seen as owing debts to Geoffrey Hill's 'Two Formal Elegies'.

In a sustained analysis of 'Formal Elegy', Coleman makes the case that Berryman's poetry is 'saturated' in a political consciousness without ever becoming reductively documentary or limiting itself to "political" poetry as sloganeering activism. He questions Jahan Ramazani's formulation of American elegy as familial, instead presenting the elegy for the assassinated president as 'the complex connection between the observing lyric subject and the poet's public voice, through and with which he records with disturbing

accuracy the disintegrations and distortions of self and world that the occasion of Kennedy's death brought into sharp but disorientating and sometimes terrifying focus'. Berryman's description of the nation in 'Black foam [...] An invulnerable sleep' is read by Coleman as a deliberate muddying of the waters, a refusal to allow the plangencies of elegy to outbalance elegiac castigation, a sad and angry public mourning of something that exceeds the Camelot myth.

Two very different public poets are linked in the book by their influence on Berryman: his 'Majestic Shade', W.B. Yeats, and the Communist poet Bhain Campbell. Berryman's collaborations with the protest painter Ben Shahn and his translation of Paul Claudel's *Le chemin de la croix* for performance by the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra in April 1957 are examined as public interventions not previously considered in studies of his work. At the heart of this intellectually ambitious study, one that has much broader implications than a refocused Berryman, is an immortal question, which Coleman (paraphrasing Berryman on Coleridge) frames in this wise: '[...] what did Berryman believe his poetry could "do"?'.

One of the most satisfying aspects of Coleman's revisionary treatment of Berryman is to excavate the poet's merciless craft and belief in syntax, acknowledging – despite the noise the 'confessional poetry' label generated – the appreciation of 'stylistic and technical innovations his poetry represented to [his] contemporary readers'. Something that Berryman clearly thought poetry could "do" was to register, in a profound technical way, the shock of contemporary and historical matter at (as Coleman puts it) 'the very core of its most fundamental processes and procedures'. Among several gems mined from Berryman's unpublished material at the University of Minnesota is a note on a draft of a poem vowing to 'think harder in verse', a preference for denser syntax and an expression of belief that the difficulties of experience, including those where the personal confronts and interacts with the social and political, might be in some way soluble in poetry.

Nevertheless, we also read in the book that poetry is 'one of the most useful tools we have for understanding reality', which admits a greater gulf between poetic technique and the social and political world that is *out there*, and to which it is subordinate in terms of utility. This fault-line in the book – between poetry as formulating in the very minutiae of its formal elements a public vision, and poetry as a 'tool' in decoding public disorder which transcends its formal aesthetic – is scarcely to be attributed to Coleman; in fact, the quotation is Berryman's from the Alvarez interview. This dialectic is virtually a post-Romantic predicament, as intimated in later references in the book to Shelley's 'unacknowledged legislator', Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*, and Albert Gelpi's idea of the 'Neoromantic' poet, who 'believe[s], even in the face of the violence of contemporary history, that the word can effect personal and social change'. There seems to me an unresolved, perhaps unresolvable tension between 'think[ing] harder in verse' and 'one of the most useful tools'.

But this is already to admit the richness of the book in staking the terrain and provoking an essential conversation about the relationship of formal technique, the personal, and the public in Berryman's poetry, broadening out into the vexed Audenesque questions of poetry's "happenings". This comprehensively-researched, impassioned argument must be greeted with something like the enthusiastic recollection of Robert Lowell: 'and when a good critical essay came out, it had the excitement of a new imaginative work'.

Peter Riley Essentials

David Wheatley, Contemporary British Poetry (Readers' Guides to Essential Criticism, Palgrave MacMillan 2015. 212pp) Hardcover £55, paperback £18.99.

I know a British poet who, if I showed him this book (I shan't), would detest it. The reason for this would mainly be that he's a poet of an older generation led to believe for a long time that there was a singular (though varied) dynamic and adventurous route ahead for poetry which was achieved by an essentially small number of practitioners and their descendants, and nothing else mattered. This was the future, this was the hope, this was the offer of generosity to humanity. Then you find that in the accepted view there are hundreds of poets all considered equally valid, all taken seriously once they attain a certain "profile", and your hope for the future is a tiny and insignificant corner of this spread. The whole field is flattened. There is no prioritisation except that supplied by an unjust and derelict reward system.

Not that there is no conflict – there is massive conflict, but it is internecine. No one (or no authority) steps outside the crowd or questions the map. From the point of view of my (semi-fictional) poet this means that a large amount of inferior and defeatist poetry is taken seriously as part of the history, including sheer jokers, by which is not meant readable and genuinely funny poetry, which is not a problem, but purveyors of facile Augustan pastiche, prosaic pointless anecdote and other forms of failed entertainment -- poetry which is content to rest on a view of the human world as quaint. It is as if at the time of Wordsworth and Coleridge, Samuel Rogers was held to be equally important on principle (possibly a "democratic" principle), so that the whole thrust forward of new poetry at that time gets diluted, as if to say in a footnote: "There was also a small group of innovative poets who spent a lot of time in The Lake District".

It is in principle the critics rather than the poets who are surveyed in this overview, and (still from the position of my increasingly fictional poet) there too the field is flattened. For of course critics vary in perceptiveness and integrity just as much as poets do, but the need to represent contrary views means that the intelligence or good taste of the critic is less important than the setting up of discussion points, so that

whenever possible statements of advocacy and relevance are counter-balanced by denial and accusations of incorrectness. So not only do advocates have to be found for the worst jokers but praise of many of the best poets has to be challenged. Is it not inevitable then that judgement is cast back onto the reader within set boundaries without any real help provided, and are we not therefore bound to get some very stupid statements highlighted in blocks of sans-serif bold as points of controversy? And in a category where critics are in short supply, such as the "experimental", we have to rely for guidance on what (to a grumpy poet) sounds like crackpot ravings.

The final blow to my embittered poet would be that although he is a senior poet with an international reputation he is not mentioned in the book, as indeed many such are not, although this is the most comprehensive overview I have ever seen. So we leave him sitting there fuming like a dedicated atonalist contemplating the popular and academic success of Philip Glass and the revival of Eric Coates...

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The answers to these accusations are of course simple. David Wheatley had a specific purpose which he has performed with professional efficiency: to provide an overview of the current poetry situation as understood at large and especially in education. In fact this is not merely a serious and sophisticated account, it is also the most generous I have seen, with notice taken of many poets who would normally be ignored in such books, which are notoriously conventionalist. It would have been absurd to represent what has happened in fifty years of British poetry by some twenty poets (though such things have been done), and even if you don't believe in overviews (I don't very much) and think half of the poets discussed have serious shortcomings, the need to represent all major factions is obvious. The poets are in the books; they are in the curricula; they have been promoted and rewarded and appointed to prestigious positions, and, given the overwhelming preference for novice poets within the industry recently, it is surprising that any serious history can be constructed at all. There are always grumpy and isolationist poets around; Pound rejected almost all English literature as not worth looking at, but the only history to be made of that is the history of Pound. Wheatley has done his homework, striven to be fair, and the factual errors which always abound in such books have been reduced to a minimum.

Poets are put into the currently promoted poetry boxes labelled political, eco-, gender, class, experimental, postcolonial etc., in which their worth is defined by essentially extra-poetical qualities or implications, as is the demand these days. The boxes are more thematic than descriptive. The "post-colonial" box contains Caribbean and Asian poets as might be expected, as well as Irish, Scottish and Welsh but also, refined into a linguistic concept, involves Philip Larkin and Geoffrey Hill. In fact it begins to look difficult not to be

post-colonial for almost anyone, and the abhorred centre from which everyone flees is clearly where no one lives, as Wheatley aptly puts it. Rather than a place it is a concept such as "Oxbridge hegemony" and if there is anybody in it they won't answer the door. Asian, African and Caribbean poets, wherever they live, do not actually get much attention in the whole book, being squeezed out mainly by the Northern Irish, and the performative forms associated with them are little mentioned.

Wheatley's job is basically to shepherd all the poets into these various pens with the help of the barking critics, and to do this without showing grace or favour. He does this dutifully, but is, thankfully, not in fact as neutral as the job demands. He is not afraid to point out that a populist poet given to attacking other poets as "academic" happens to be a university professor. He maintains the mask of impartiality, but I think he is happy to betray his own convictions through faint ironies and the balance of representation. Certain popular poets just don't get the space you'd expect and some of the most successful jokers are simply absent. Bullying critics who undertake to re-write the poem are handled with traces of disdain, as are the majority of anthologists. The importance of the creative writing industry is not stressed, and neither is the proliferation of poetry prizes. It is good to see him giving generous space and praise to poets such as Denise Riley, Douglas Oliver and R.F.Langley, albeit awkwardly boxed. The real out-and-out avant-garde (which those poets are not) is unrepresented apart from two pioneers, Cobbing and Finlay, but that is increasingly a world of its own. Among critics Wheatley clearly sees through the wielders of the political thumbscrew as well as the purveyors of "tradition" and "community", and he recognises that "post-modern" is an unworkable category. These departures are a welcome change from the standardising mode which is normal for poetical overviews, and a certain pleasure can be taken in detecting authorial stressing in what is outwardly an account of disagreeing critics.

But one thing Wheatley makes no secret of is his favouring of Northern Ireland. Seamus Heaney begins and ends the book and is repeatedly deferred to as poet and critic in all departments (though some opposition to him is admitted), with Sean O'Brien (who is not Irish) running a close second. Belfast and Hull are the two meeting poles of the map. The Belfast poets, of the 1960s "Group" and younger, crop up again and again. Wheatley is not hidden behind critics here, but is, for instance openly scathing of Iain Sinclair's dismissal of most Irish poetry as a tourist product aimed at England. This merges with a stress on politics which runs through the whole book. If you are a contemporary Irish poet (Northern or Republic but especially Northern) the pressure upon you from critics, which I think Wheatley endorses, is basically that you have one subject and only one open to you, which is the "troubles". Whatever you write, discussion on you is liable to turn in that direction.

This pressure from critics to be political in one

way or another, and the insistence that you *are* political whether you know it nor not, is the most striking impression of the current poetry scene that the reader is left with in the end. All the various controversies seem to boil down to this. In Wheatley's hands the political spreads into the territorial, to the extent that sometimes where the poem was written seems to have become more important than what it says. I feel these pressures to be integral to the conversion of poets into teaching and discussion possibilities in the college curricula. There is an impersonality in this sorting and highlighting for educational purpose, though it is also aimed at the novice reader unable, as they more and more are, to read poetry as anything but a quirky way of talking about something else and above all something conceptually familiar. Wheatley agrees to this but at the same time resists the reduction, and when he allows himself the space to expand on a particular poet can give a thoughtful and enlightening account beyond the categories.

The only other thing I feel compelled to say is that this overview, like all other overviews, omits almost everybody, as it was bound to. The survey format has always been a narrowing of the field and so have all the anthologies, the best of which make no claim to representation beyond a specific gathering. In 1989 a book appeared called *The Hidden Musicians: music making in an English town* by the anthropologist Ruth Finnegan. It was an overview of all musical activity in Milton Keynes: brass bands, teenage rock groups, amateur orchestras and choirs, ukulele bands – anybody who was making a sound recognisable as "music" was admitted. And it was done in defiance of the critical idea that only endorsed forms of music making (classical, professional etc.) are worth studying. It might be interesting to take a small town somewhere in the British Isles and study all the poetry being produced there without exception. It could bring forth surprises, though I can't see it happening. In the local poetry readings I go to in the provincial area I live in, it is sometimes the "open mike" session at the end which produces the best poems, and they will never, short of a miracle, be included in anybody's overview.

Andrew Latimer Fashionable Nonsense

Paul Peppis, Sciences of Modernism: Ethnography, Sexology, and Psychology (Cambridge University Press), £60

The 1996 'Science Wars' edition of the postmodern cultural studies magazine *Social Text* carried an article by the physicist Alan Sokal satirically entitled, 'Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity'. The article was a kind of cultural hoax at the expense of the left-wing humanistic institutions. Sokal had 'liberally salted' the article with nonsense in an attempt to see whether the editors would publish it just because '(a) it sounded good and (b) flattered the editors' ideological