

Recurrence and Difference
Peter Maber

KEN EDWARDS, *No Public Language: Selected Poems 1975-1995* (Shearsman) £10.95
JURIS KRONBERGS, *Wolf One-Eye* (Arc) £9.99
JOHN BARNIE, *Sea Lilies: Selected Poems 1984-2003* (Seren) £9.99

‘No public language’ is indeed the fitting title for Ken Edwards’s poetry, with its endless ‘confusion of definition’, its competing idioms, its persistent refusal to join things together. Built into the verse is the belief that language is inevitably localised, prejudicial, limited - that it won’t share its meanings (as it often won’t here with the casual reader); and though this poetry may shun ‘beautiful things’ (‘Their Daily Island Life’) in favour of the ‘spilt bucket’ (‘Organically’), its prophesy of being ‘more fruitful than lyric production’ comes true. Whether we engage with its shifting terms, try to keep time to its cross-rhythms, or gaze in wonder at its aporia, Edwards’s poetry is constantly alive, responding triumphantly to every approach.

This valuable collection brings together most of the poetry that has shamefully been out of print, properly preserving the individual books in their entirety. It clearly illustrates the origins and development of Edwards’s innovative techniques of cutting and splicing, sampling and reconfiguring, from the haunting early imagistic minimalism of *Erik Satie loved children* (1975) to the ‘autobiographical’, many-moded *3,600 Weekends* (1993). The influences grow ever more peregrine as the volume progresses, *Glissando Curve* (c. 1995) adopting the Indian ghazal form for subjects as dark as capital punishment and the Balkans conflict.

He first finds his true force in *Drumming & Poems* (1982), when the dislocation techniques combine with dislocated subjects - the homeless, immigrants, the abandoned, dispossessed and lost. The specificity of event and real people only adds to the uncanniness; ‘Drumming (Slow Return)’ itself negotiates disturbing relations between a severed hand, broken speech patterns (‘It shock me and I decide/ not to buy it, them are/ more worthier over there’), and the cutting and awkward splicing of the speech that results in the reader’s own experience of deracination. Points of origin are endlessly elusive, opinions and observations lack any grounding; the only true certainties seem to be violent mobs and oppressive political forces, but there is the occasional possibility of a hidden inner stability:

When the whole wide world
Destabilises we share ‘the wine
Of what’s true in the glasses of what’s false’
(Or: what is / is clothed in what is not)

(‘Discursively’)

The grit of the street is etched into the lines:

this was the day
Whose burnt configurations delaminated
Joking lads who burst through a train
Monkeys so macho they don’t even close the doors
Behind them a civilisation wrecked itself
On an overdose of sugar

And a superfluity of media coverage.

(‘Cursively’)

The rapid shifts and ambiguous syntax hold an electric power, leading us in one direction only to throw us in another. There is an Eliotic ambivalence in Edwards’s vision of the city and its voices, that is both a scene of hopeless decay, and a regenerative landscape. The colloquialisms and clichés render language ‘metaphorical tat’ and he half yearns, like Eliot’s shoring up, ‘to knit fragments to make / coherence’; but in the chaos and fragmentation lie the muscle, the subversive bite, and indeed the music. Perhaps the abiding metaphor, in a poetry rich in metatextual commentary on his own poetics, is that of interference, sonic and social, now screeching, now serenading us through the books. If anyone is still in doubt as to whether British poetry can equal the powerful imagination of the great American contemporaries, they should read Edwards immediately. He has the rare gift of being able to change the way we perceive both everyday and global reality.

Wolf One-Eye, the first collection of Latvian poet Juris Kronbergs to be translated into English, would hold tremendous power if Ted Hughes had never written *Crow*. The reader in English will inevitably be reminded of Hughes in the creature persona and episodic structure, in the mixture of despair and black humour, the mythic dimensions, personifications of the universe, and especially in the rhetorical techniques, above all the rituals of anaphora, questions, and lists. Even the imagery of sight and darkness can be traced back to *Crow*; for Wolf’s one eye *Crow* has the recurring image of the ‘eye pupil’.

With this influence hardly in question it is perhaps not surprising that Jaan Kaplinski’s preface has to work hard to situate the volume within a Baltic tradition. The charge that ‘rhythm and respect for poetic inventiveness, inspiration has survived better in the marginal territories of Europe’ grates a little in the light of this derivation, and especially juxtaposed with the musical variety and constant inventiveness of Edwards. But nonetheless *Wolf One-Eye* does have an imagination of its own. Knowledge of the origins of Kronbergs’s mythic creature in the poet’s exile, growing up as a refugee in Sweden, and more immediately in the experience of a detached retina, is remarkably helpful, making the already emotionally engaging journey all the more moving. As a cycle of exile, fragmentation, the search for identity and recovery, it is perfectly balanced. It’s a tale of extremes, of everything and nothing, microcosm and macrocosm. Kronbergs develops the seeds of postmodernism in *Crow* through Wolf’s exile from his mythological world of rivers and forests into a contemporary nightmare of endless variability, ‘a meta-thinking tangle, a blast of mtv-flashes’.

The professed aim of Arc’s ‘Visible Poets’ series, that translated poetry should self-consciously read like a translation in order to emphasise ‘the strange, the unusual, the new, the foreign’, is baffling. Like all good translators Mara Rozitis reveals the original but not in transliteration, sensitively negotiating both sides of the equation. She manages to preserve the concision of the synthetic Latvian (included in parallel) despite the very different demands of analytical English, and perhaps her greatest touches come from her marvellous ear for punning on colloquialisms and stock phrases, as when we hear that Wolf’s field of vision ‘covered more/ than met the eye’.

Sea Lilies, John Barnie’s selected poems, is dedicated to revealing his ‘breadth of form and depth of thought’: but for much of the volume Barnie seems to be finding his feet, in more ways than one, since his journey to find a comfortable form takes time, encompassing some

stilted blank verse along the way. *Clay* (1989) marks the beginnings of a distinct style in its sensitively mediated voices of the Romantic poets. The exuberance of these poems and the comparative emptiness of many of the nature poem suggests that Bernie works best when he has tangible human subjects. Regarding his alleged major concern, he can hardly be said to ‘tackle the increasingly destructive impact of humans on [the natural] world’ on the basis of a few environmentally-friendly surface subjects, occasional transferred epithets, and the odd questioning of what constitutes ‘nature’. Barehanded, he too often does not have the technical virtuosity to sustain purely descriptive poems.

The subsequent selections are uneven, but not without gems. *The Confirmation* (1992) suddenly springs into life in its last grouping: here the much longer lines have a dramatic liberating effect, allowing the poet to range back over childhood memories, and seeming to free up his diction too. One particularly powerful nexus of poems, that transcends the individual collections, relates to parents and old age, beginning with the unnamed ‘mountain climber’ in ‘A Flight of Stairs’ from *Lightning Country* (1987), encompassing several ‘Mother’ poems, and culminating in the perfectly judged reticence of ‘My Father’s Hands’ from *Heroes* (1996). The nature poems are most successful not when human destructiveness is at issue, but when the natural world casts delicate, allegorical reflections upon the human: as in ‘A Shoal of Fish’ where ‘To die/ is to be alone’, and in the exquisite poignancy of ‘Flowers’:

Keep on,
they say from their wounds,
how can you turn back,
we press you to the edge
with softness
that embodies no more than our lives
leaning into the future.

The lines are so delicately open and closed: birthday flowers or flowers on a grave, ‘our’ and ‘your’ ambiguously commingling, ‘no more than’ seeming to limit the allegory whilst opening up the uncertainty of the future.

The final selections, from *At the Salt Hotel* (2003), are most remarkable for a new style that involves awkward splitting of words across lines and the reduction of punctuation to little more than the slash, used to indicate a breath or a shift in thought. Beneath this eccentric façade lie uninspired observations – a rather ordinary satire on a car showroom, inconsequential insect and bird vignettes – and these are often prefaced with the phrasing of platitudes: ‘Look at...’, ‘I’m thinking of...’, ‘Let’s praise...’. Perhaps this contrast is the point: after all, that nature is literal and humans ‘invented second sight’ (‘Above the Usk’) is Bernie’s take on ecopoetics. In ‘A Citrus Grove’, for the first time there is a sense of the message being embedded in the fabric of the poem, where the thoughts on art and nature are wittily echoed and counterbalanced by the imagery; but often the flatness after all the effort is disappointing, and there is a danger that the lack of insight reduces Bernie’s ‘ecological scepticism’ to the grumblings of a countryside snob: ramblers are myopic, ‘forgetting the detail’ (but detail in these poems is often at the expense of depth). The points of focus resolutely refuse to leap into allegory, and are denied the distance of irony; just towards the close the voice begins to compensate in the beginnings of a stream-of-consciousness style. The volume as a whole suggests that it is not yet the proper time for Bernie’s *Selected Poems*, but that we can hope for stirring developments in the future.