

Re: Reading

Peter Reading, *Collected Poems, 3: Poems 1997-2003*. Bloodaxe, £9.95 (pbk), £20 (hbk)

The publication of the third volume of Peter Reading's *Collected Poems* is a cause for celebration. We can now read all of Reading (so far), and experience it in audio-visual format on 22 DVDs produced by the Lannan Foundation. The audio files are also available at www.lannan.org. The Lannan project is entitled *The Life Works of Peter Reading*, a grandiosity which only a poet whose work is as littered with bogus suicide notes and obituaries as Reading's could get away with. The last poem in this collection is his most laconic *obiit*, yet: "I" struck through in red ink, accompanied by the proof-reader's mark for "delete".

Reading's reputation as the scabrous, rebarbative poet of (post-)Thatcherite grot has been challenged over the last few years, most comprehensively by Isabel Martin in her excellent guide *Reading Peter Reading* (2000). This most recent volume allows us finally to lay to rest that misleading characterisation, though we should be careful not to replace it with another, that of Reading's universalism, humanity and compassion. Reading is often nihilistic, crude and pedantic. His complex arrangement of variously ironised personæ doesn't let him off the hook here, nor is his misanthropy always frustrated love for fallible *H. sap.* Sometimes it is just misanthropy. Sentimental ascription of humane motives to Reading puts him in good company—Swift, most obviously—but does him no favours. Righteous indignation is usually accompanied by self-righteousness, and Reading displays both.

Not only has recent criticism been more forgiving, but Reading's satirical targets have gradually become more palatable to a leftish, socially liberal audience. The ambiguous concurrence of *Going On* (1985) in tabloid bigotry:

Muse! Sing the Rasta. who stabbed out a
baby's eye with a Biro
thereby persuading its mum
that she should give him her purse

has been replaced by renewed excoriation of corporatism in *Shitheads* (1989) and of redneck Texans in *Marfan* (2000). To say that these are easy targets is to miss the point. They are apolitical targets, the targets of someone with virtually no interest in seeking specifically political explanations of human behaviour. *Perduta Gente* (1989) might constitute something of an exception, with its reproduction of official found material about "civil defence" in the event of a nuclear incident. Reading claims this material is genuine, "illegally photocopied". Normal service has been resumed in the latest collections, Reading placing his narratives in contexts of original sin and human despair at intractable human nature. Reading's apolitics or unpolitics set him apart from both neo-modernist poetics and its preoccupation with deconstructing the political implications of language use, and the poetics of (for want of a better term) the mainstream, which aestheticise political commitment. Reading's poems typically stop at the point where a genuinely political response might start. "Neighbourhood Watch", after a thoroughly enjoyable jeer at the Blair government's attempts to combat "anti-social behaviour", concludes that the yobs really are the barbarians at the gate:

they represent the end of us;
the hallions are hammering at the door;
the neighbourhood is going to the dogs.
[But more than electoral bluster is required
to arrest the momentum of this gathering maelstrom.]

More subtly, a poem such as "Anthropological" (like "Neighbourhood Watch", from the collection *Faunal* [2002]) entertains but ultimately dismisses the notion of a language that embodies a political stance. The poem's ironies pivot around the speaker's inability to realise that, in deprecating the culture of primitive islanders, he is describing humankind itself: "Their base condition/ is no wise bettered by experience./ They are at once vile and intractable". "Vile and intractable" neatly describes the speaker's own rhetoric. Its vileness is plain, but its intractability is

evident not only in its blockheaded racism, but in its refusal to be co-opted to a political meaning. This lofty voice might be a direct cause of the ecological spoliation described elsewhere in *Faunal*, or it might not. It is close to the Darwinian voice of “Journal”, which also has its moments of racialised disgust, which in turn is not so distant from the sympathetic voice of the poet-ornithologist who describes the “secular *epiphania*” of viewing rare species. The insufferable superiority of “Anthropological” is a *tone*, rather like Reading’s “translationese”, which is always, and deliberately, just stopping short of being a *discourse*. Reading’s poetry purposefully reveals the utter impotence of irony as a politically oppositional mode. Wholly subjective, it is useless against brute force, or against wilful imperception of its antiphrasis. As Paul de Man puts it, irony is “fully de-mystified when within the realm of its language but totally vulnerable to renewed blindness once it leaves for the empirical world”.

Having the *Collected* Reading at our disposal means that we can see, for the first time with relative ease, the extent of what Martin calls his “fastidious intratextuality”. Not just the images which recur with such passion that they quickly become part of the reader’s own mental apparatus, but the obsessive repetition of his own and others’ lines. This intratextuality is intertextuality as well, in that many of the most striking repetitions are borrowings from other texts: the image of Odysseus sheltering under “olive and oleaster grafted flush”, a haunting quotation from Propertius: “Sunt aliquid manes letum non omnia finit” which Reading translates as “Ghosts *do* live/ Death doesn’t end all”. First used in a very early poem, “New Year Letter”, it is repeated compulsively throughout *Work in Regress* (1997) and shows up again in *Faunal*. “New Year Letter” (a surprisingly tolerable example of a ghastly genre) was addressed to Reading’s friend Michael Donahue, who had used the Propertian tag in a poem of his own. Donahue died in 1985 in a car accident. Reading’s many elegies usually feature the poet reprimanding himself for speaking to the dead:

[Therapy, whining, anxious to demonstrate
how the nice bard is awfully sad about
having his old pal flenched by car—
others’ bereavements don’t marvel readers]

The reproof also functions as literary criticism, rejecting a dismal-

ly familiar kind of poetry which is little more than advertisement for the sensitivities of its “nice bard” author. Even in the midst of guilty anger and self-reproach, Reading finds space for a sneer, reminding us of the poet’s own definition of his work as “the slick prestidigital art of Not Caring/Hopelessly Caring”. The “Not Caring”—not just the “detachment” of his personæ, which has been overemphasized by critics, but their savage energy and lofty moralizing—is as important as the “Hopelessly Caring”, and reading through three volumes of Reading, it becomes increasingly difficult to tell which is which. In “*I.M. G. MacB.*”, collected in *Work in Regress*, the poet recalls a conversation with George MacBeth, “twenty-six years ago”:

I said I thought it absurd to talk to the
dead in a poem—
death, ipso facto precludes
cosy perusal of verse.

“Just a convention, of course,
just a convention”, you said.

Despite the speaker’s earlier dismissal of “therapy”, it seems that the repetitions of “*Sunt aliquid manes*” which close “Three” have effected some kind of healing, a soothing. Reading’s insistence on including with sentimental or grandiloquent material the means for its own deflation goes beyond a desire to have it both ways, though this is how the poet himself often explains it, noting that his use of a Victorian amateur classicist persona means “it’s possible to say things in a way which would otherwise be regarded as stilted or even unintentionally humorous, so it’s a kind of double-bluff in that way”. But Reading’s deflationary tactics also mean that several personæ, sometimes “selves” separated in time, as in “*I.M. G. MacB.*”, can inhabit the same poem. Ghosts *do* live, in the form of palimpsest and auto-quotation, (and in these collections we have poems made up entirely of recycled material) within a poetics which is becoming ever more laconic, more preoccupied by erasure and blank space. The unremarkable sentiment expressed in the quotation from Propertius becomes the organizing principle of a temporising rhetoric. This volume seems to display a move from a novelistic poetry of character, plot and architectonic structure towards a sequential poetry, which makes a theme of its own temporality.

This change in narrative emphasis is matched by formal change. Reading no longer seems so preoccupied with metrical experiment. He remains one of the most metrically interesting poets around, but extended passages of hexameter or semi-classical elegiacs are now matched by stretches of blank verse or syllabics. These familiar forms retain trace elements of rarer and more intricate patterns: Reading's blank verse is not the somnolent default setting into which almost all of his contemporaries occasionally slide, but a deliberate vehicle for anger, comedy and pathos. There is this wonderful judgment on the "Sealed Knot" Civil War hobbyists, for example, "(And furthermore, they think it's all O.K./ they think it's all O.K., they think that shit)", or, from "Repetitious", Telemachus engineering the execution of the disobedient women of his father's household:

The nimble-witted and resourceful lad
 rigged up a hawser from some dark-prowed barque
 across the courtyard at about six feet

and there he dangled them on nooses

When Reading reads this, he uses the lack of stress on "some" to pause before he slings out the Homeric tag, almost as a metrical unit in itself. The effect is sinister and comic, reminding us of the oral and mnemonic function of such "repetitious" phrases. The internal rhymes—"from" and "some" rhyme in Reading's north-western accent—point up the metrical joke.

One metrical innovation in this collection are the "*Coplas a Pie Quebrado*", an adaptation of a Spanish form which Reading mostly uses to balance grandiloquence and degradation, the broken final line acting as a kind of insurance against over-indulgence in sonorous melancholia:

the tricks, strength and agility,
 physical prowess and power
 of youth soon die

when all turn to the dreariness
 of Senility's grim suburb
 and zeal expires.

Or in another version, which offers the added benefit of showing us, with a descent into near-nonsense, how the metre works:

pictograph/petroglyph; runic
utterance sandblasted wordless;
sacrosanct hieroglyph rubric
faded to meaningless slur

.....
[Scholars unearthing the City
dug up the Dairy Queen milk bar
chanced upon numerous treasured
archæological finds:]

Blueberry Caramel Fudgies,
Raspberry Snottyo Cookies,
Nuttyplop Whip Butterwhangers
Bumpy Bananadip Sundaes.

It is probably not possible to imagine the ruin of our civilization (if that is the right word for a culture that includes Nuttyplop Whip Butterwhangers) without hubris and nostalgia: a look at the kind of budgets filmmakers expend on disaster blockbusters suggests the level of conceit involved. But if the impulse to represent a despoiled future is irresistible, then there are few better ways to deflate implicit self-importance than these skittering dactyls and bathetic spondees.

Also included here is one use of the pie quebrado form which doesn't work wholly to diminish the speaker. The persona in this poem is a member of a death squad operating in Central and South America, a cousin of the "Counter-Anti-Guerilla" in *Going On*: "Don't forget: the right to own is/ high priority; the right to/ live is *nada*". Clearly, the metrical truncation stands for the arbitrary ending of life and the stunted moral capacity of the speaker, but the device is no less effective for being obvious.

Reading through the *Collected Poems* it becomes apparent that much of the value and interest in Reading's poetry resides in its metrical variety and precision. He is not precisely an original poet, in that a lot of his material is "found" or quoted, and for all the sociological interest of his work, the impulse to deflate and jeer precludes sustained political comment. None of this matters. It's still possible to glut yourself on his poems—to read the 300

pages of this third volume in a single sitting, end up thinking in hexameters. But when Reading's metres slacken, so does the reader's interest. "Alert!", his translation of Vahé Oshagan's Armenian poem contains the ingredients of a successful Reading poem: a solitary paranoiac persona, invective and translationese, but it never coheres. The realization that what keeps us reading Reading is essentially rhythm would not be the surprise it is were not any but the simplest measures unusual in modern English verse. Reading might well be the most metrically adept and inventive poet since Swinburne (whom he admires and imitates), and for that reason alone he is a rare bird, to be cherished. This volume completes (so far) a dauntingly assured and technically intricate body of work. Its cover is also the best yet of Peter Edwards' scowling portraits of the poet: "too good", as Reading has it, "makes me look like shit".