

Has J. Jurms a Po?

Jamie McKendrick, *Ink Stone*. Faber & Faber, £8.99
 Douglas Oliver, *Arrondissements*. Salt Publishing, £10.95

"In China and Japan", the epigraph to Jamie McKendrick's latest collection tells us, "the use of bottled ink is frowned upon and generally considered to be a concession to barbarians...". The approved stationery is the treasured "ink stone", manufactured from an endangered species of slate (once found under rivers and now only in museums and private collections) called *tankai*. While there is no trace of any *tanka* in the forty-two poems that make up McKendrick's svelte new volume *Ink Stone*, most are nevertheless as rare and endangered a species as you're likely to find in contemporary British poetry—formally brilliant, unblushingly learned, emotionally engaged, while managing to steer clear of either empty pyrotechnics, tiresome pedagogy, or solipsistic over-seriousness. This is McKendrick's first collection of original poems since his move to Faber, the first since his (striking, even if—after three books—premature) *Selected*, and his first since *Marble Fly* scooped the Forward Prize for best collection and a flurry of critical acclaim in 1997. Such a formidable hat trick of first-sinces would test anyone's nerve, but McKendrick shows himself to be undaunted. *Ink Stone*, many-themed, intricately plotted, scaffolded by a dependable and adaptable formal technique, stands on its own as an unusually well-fortified, well-finished entity.

Suspicious of the written word, many poems take wing from the title to ponder the extravagant purports of penmanship. In "Ink Stain" (the closest we come to a title poem, and immediately the par rhyme suggests a disdainful concession to the barbarisms of liquid ink), the speaker laments a jacket ruined by an incontinent biro, resolving to wear the stain "like a badge/ of this scribbler's trade", and rounding off the stanza with its dark asso-

ciations: “—black ink, heart’s blood, mark of Cain”. The following stanza allays the foreboding of the first, supposing that brother Abel was a Neanderthal strategically expelled from the gene pool by Cain, “the one who went on to invent/ biros, and write the myths of primal guilt”. Now the ink stain justifies its existence in the eyes of the penman, its “guilt” blending with a deep humility as it betokens “the first blood of fratricide/ clotting the inkwell, crow quill, or hollow reed/ —sign of repentance, black bile, ox gall”. So the pen first writes, and then (in its symbolic blood-spill) rights, its timeless wrongs. The subtle punning in those echoing-out spondees is telling of McKendrick’s fondness for combining his scholarly gravity with dry humour on a level, lexical or rhetorical, that is inextricable from the words on the page; a level that, reading inside it, we cannot escape. McKendrick’s frequent use of double meaning draws attention to the scribbler’s problematic duty to mean what he writes despite the riddling multi-determinacy of his words, and it’s a trick that surfaces a number of times in this collection. A fine example lies in a translation of the Ulysses Canto of Dante’s *Inferno*, when Virgil, inadvertently comic, advises the poet against speaking Italian lest the Greek hero’s spirit find it “a shade repellent, if you’ll pardon the phrase”. Dante’s Canto XXVI is an apt conclusion to this collection, as it confirms what Dante learned (indirectly) from Ulysses, and McKendrick from Dante; that to mind one’s meaning and not play tricks with tongues must be the code of his “scribbler’s trade”.

The poet’s distrust of the pen and its potential for harm leads him if not to renunciation then at least to retreat. One dominant concern is with unsquinting, raw ocularity, whether in screening some pleasantly old-fashioned pictorial memory, or probing the body’s role in perception and the physicality of the eye. “Fish Eye” remembers a childhood fishing trip that ends in the unexpected trauma of a baited gurnard “banging about on the floor of the rowboat/ like a fist or a heart”.

We froze, and watched its will to live abate
 while a fog like a tide of opal stole
 over the oily surface of the eye
 extinguishing an eerie Borealis.
 Were the cells desiccating in the iris?
 Or divulging the inky depths to this new hemisphere
 of air too thin, too dry and bright to bear?

Even the wording is wide-eyed (all those gaping vowel sounds), and the extravagance of the poet's watery off-rhymes ("oily surface", "Borealis", "in the iris", etc.) more than pays off, introducing a mysterious beauty to the sense of open-mouthed awe.

At the heart of this collection there is a tension between a childlike atmosphere of perpetual wonder, and a jaded, desperate disinterestedness. "I'm up in my watchtower, keeping watch over/ the beasts of the field", yawns the poet in an ostensibly rhymeless sonnet entitled "For Now", before bounding down-stairs to answer the door to two women:

Who smile at me and ask me what I think
of the Bible's predictions for the future?

Myself, I think it's safer to predict the past
and start to intone: *Sufficient unto the day*
are the evils thereof.

The smugness, the droll Epimethean ennui, is an assumed posture, however; the poem that follows bows under the weight of the speaker's pessimistic predictions for the future when, on a vacation in which "nothing was what you'd call wrong", he remains glumly aware that "there was still time for us to miss the boat". The poet's spurious apathy masks a salient concern for the future and a spellbound avowal of life's fragility. This might explain why the collection's overture, "Apotheosis", narrates with comic-strip brutality the self-defenestration of a pedantic bore holding forth on how to hold a bee; a clipped visual gag that makes for instant reader-gratification but flows deliberately against the tide of every subsequent poem on death (presented as a scattered series of profound, deliciously muted meditations).

It is easy to admire McKendrick's poetry and difficult to fault it. Its intricate formal structures and elastic rhyming patterns fit glove-like over both the comic and the somberly introspective strands of the poet's personality. Distinguishing his sham nonchalance from the genuine downright boredom we read in many of the poems is easy too; my one reservation being that perhaps we read of boredom and listlessness in too many of the poems: the moping can feel oppressive. Spontaneity and imagination keep *Ink Stone* from suffering much from this; it only takes the surprise swoop of a smooth-talking vampire or a scaly basilisk to

enliven the sense of mythic power behind this poetry; a pair of trespassing toads in “eco-warrior fatigues” to awaken the humour; or a haiku like the slickly evasive “Yuan Mei’s Advice to his Pupils” to remind us of the graft and patience essential to the poet’s delicate, impossible-to-perfect craft: “Brave water in spate/ for a pure, blue slate ink stone/ (though you’ll search in vain)”. McKendrick’s sensitive search, though, is an end and reward in itself.

Arrondissements is an impressive assortment of poetic sequences seeking to capture the noise and poise, the kinetic edginess and the clamorous self-confidence of contemporary Paris. Published posthumously by Oliver’s wife Alice Notley, the book is characterised by both the strident avant-gardist energies and the conscientious po-ethics of its author. In the preface, Douglas Oliver is quick to communicate the drive behind what was to be his final project: “A poet of modern Paris”, he announces, “has to write about more than the river mists fogging the Pont Mirabeau while Apollinaire’s river flows beneath”. Spurred then by a desire to remap the post-Romantic psycho-geography of his adopted city, Douglas Oliver presents us with a Paris which, while still dreamily narcotic for the poet, remains aggressively down-to-earth, its energetic multiculturalism reflected in the multistylism of the poetry itself.

The book is divided into three sequences: “The Shattered Crystal”, a personal excavation of the literary subconscious of Oliver’s own district, Faubourg Poissonnière-Montorgueil, home to the memory of Paul Celan and Heinrich Heine; “China Blue”, a brief survey of some Asian diaspora of the thirteenth and nineteenth arrondissements; and the one-hundred page “Video House of Fame”, a post-modern flight of fancy and eclectically thrilling, nightmarish tour of virtual reality.

“The Shattered Crystal” is a sparkling, sprawling amalgam of intense philosophical meditations and frenetic street gospels. Phonetic wordplay reverberates throughout his fluid *vers libre* as the poet scrutinizes the “gutter pools thatched/ by garbage” and the “precincts/ shambolic with market stalls” amid the cacophonous “sundry arab gutturals... Jewish whispers... tourist twangs” of the stifling cityscape. The rigorous musicality in many of the poems is meaningful because streetwise, a direct and hectic translation of every assault on the ear; hence a “road resurfacing machine” quite guiltlessly “troubles my verse rhythms”, the way a

ringing telephone might find itself leaking into a John Ashbery poem. The sounds of the street though, however intoxicating, are always only background music to Oliver's lavishly painted visual effects, when "singing quietens in the sharp science/ of the eyes".

The poet's descriptive method could be defined as sumptuously inexactitude, a technique which, when successful, is luxuriantly Fauvist and exotic, but which can make the reader feel like the point-blank target of a paintball splatter-gun, when for example:

...ultramarine
mud gets swabbed with cobalt in a wink.
Paradise erupts there in yellow anemones
under the bungling Prussian blue foliage,
the watery silhouette of a crimson forest
make the horizon tattered, blood washed down
the easel-slope.

Unsurprisingly, visual art is a constant reference point for the "colourous chords" to which the poet sets his words. Celan's painter wife, Gisèle Celan-Lestrange, is as dominant a presence as her husband in this sequence.

Throughout this and the middle section of *Arrondissements*, Oliver attempts to clarify his aesthetic goals, struggling to reconcile his attraction to the "Celianian gloom" and concision of experimental verse with his obvious fondness for Romantic excess. In a poem entitled "Walnut and Lily", the poet finds himself uncomfortably at odds with his revered predecessor, the "celestial" Celan. Taking an epigram from Heine (Heine and Celan apparently antidotes to each other), the poem opens with a smirk:

White undervest nestling on black trousers
creeping round the bookcase in dawn light
seen before getting up to make coffee,
sad water-lily under a love-pained moon.

This, we are informed, is "a Heine piece of beautiful shit" said "while tucking in a shirt"; though taking it instead for a sardonically bloated imagism scribbled down in a station of the metro, say, is an easy mistake to make. There is a contradiction in Oliver's aesthetic that is hard to negotiate our way around. Like Pound, he

despairs of looseness, of “words flying off to nothing”, yet he invests in his strongly favoured æsthetic stringencies in only a small clutch of poems, affording the rest a volubly free and rambling rein. In “Walnut and Lily”, the ambivalence is reduced to a choice between two jackets: either “the old romantic tweed” or “middle-age black/ and Celanian gloom”. The cynical eye cast over Heine challenges Celan as coldly, as that poet’s laconic “space inside the word” (“walnut” sans kernel) is also deemed “a crock, this time, of shit”; though the speaker automatically, penitentially, reaches for the black jacket.

Oliver frequently finds himself abashed at his own loquacity. In “Money in Sunshine”, Oliver salutes Prynne and his “marvellously tight word orders”, while comparing his own verse to an oversize apartment block, “money destroying/ the limits of syllables because it won’t stop/ talking until all the profit is squeezed out”. While in a delicately precise homage to Celan, he lauds the “savage light” of “Todesfuge”, before concluding on behalf of his contemporaries:

And we, we’d emulate this,
letting our lyrics croak
the throat
into broken music
as if mere self-unease
were our righteousness
smashing the lyric vessel
in darkness
so to be as smart as he was
oh to be as smart as he was
our words nowhere near bursting
with such a lesser weight of light,
as we flip through
the fragments
of our cheque book stubs.

An uneasy correlation of monetary and poetic economies begins to emerge here, as if prodigal prosinness amounts to squandered capital. Indeed, the main trajectory of Oliver’s work, as evinced in *Penniless Politics* and *A Salvo for Africa* (originally included in the *Arrondissements* project), has been to speak for the pow-

erless unspoken for, the result being a poetry ambivalent towards its safely avant-garde margins and continually searching for routes out of the valley of its own saying. It is perhaps a little disappointing then that in his depictions of feverish lice-pickers and homeless men named Jo-Jo, Oliver holds his subjects' integrity as stage props lightly in the balance, forever guiltily wondering whether they'd do better out of the penniless poetics of a sharper, more Celanian lens. The ending of "Walnut and Lily" is a resignation, however; frustrated with "smashing the lyric vessel" noiselessly "in darkness", he acknowledges his words to be "a flood of lyric feeling", and the "frayed tweed" ultimately has its day.

"The Video House of Fame" is a showdown of breath-taking originality and humour. Punctuated by corny American cuss-words and linguistically gory fight scenes, as well as oriental wisdom poems from an oddly well-versed computer-game console, the narrative relates one man's mission to rescue an arbitrary president's daughter from an evil and equally arbitrary warlord, terrorising an empire in the process at the command of the omniscient and unbeatable computer game, Regender. It is, however, a testosterone-fuelled shoot-'em-up with a twist: chock-full of ontological uncertainty, void cryptography and Baudrillardian scaremongering, this is pure, joyous travesty of "what the nerds call postmodernism", to quote the hero's invaluable Video Cheats Bible. Blasting his way through the labyrinthine levels of the game, the speaker must battle his metaphysical demons, including his own split identity (in the form of depersonalised and duplicate automata confronting themselves in mirrors) and a big-breasted Japanese "bimbo" on the threadbare nets of his own desires (here his fearsome portmanteau of armaments includes a cybermace, psychoprod, persuadertron, and (wait for it) poison gas—no respecter of "Geneva conventions" in "Desireland"—while elsewhere his ammo is truly apocalyptic as he launches "infinite lock-ons/ infinite screamers/ infinite No Mercy" at one miserable opponent). Alongside these there are the harrowingly realistic adolescent terrorists "trained on sim", aiming in their planes for "government arcades in the sky", introducing a gravity to the (pre-9/11) charade that Oliver's promiscuous high-brow name-dropping fails to emulate (the names Kierkegaard, Buber, Schrödinger, Heidegger and the like are thrown like grenades, sounding before long like yet another list of fantasy ammunition).

Mostly though, it is the illusion of gravity that engenders Regender: any existential angst on the part of the speaker is demoted to a delightfully Chaucerian onto-scatology, with one of Oliver's many game-selves accusing him of talking "non-relativistic/ shit from/ out your ... non-existent anus". Similarly, there were theological interrogations present in "The Shattered Crystal" which reappear now in the form of absurd and mocking anagrammatic puzzles. One stage of the game is entitled JAH-WEH level, which Oliver in his quest for meaning proceeds to dissect:

HEAVE JH WELL (heave God into well—the well of infinite wisdom?)
WE'LL HAVE HJ E (then we'll have hegemony?)
HE'LL JAW EVEH (God never stops talking?)
LAVE WHEEL, JH (please wash the chariot wheels, God)

And so on; reminding this reviewer not a little of one memorable scene in Beckett's *Watt* in which Mr Spiro's Catholic magazine *Crux* offers a reward to the brother or sister in Christ who can devise the most satisfying anagram of Jesus, Mary and Joseph (winner: *Has J. Jurms a po? Yes*).

Inevitably and infuriatingly, the game cannot end. The speaker's ontological status degenerates into "Absent Narcissus Mode" ("where am—?" he is left to ask) as the game subsumes itself, plays itself out and ends "silently within itself"—from which we are meant to infer that Oliver hasn't lost, he has simply failed to win. The same cannot be said of Oliver's poetry, however; while his self-reflexive aestheticising betrays a certain technical self-consciousness, his insecurities are over-modest rather than justified. Oliver's voice is (or sadly but more accurately was) uniquely inventive and intelligent, and *Arrondissements* is a collection of enormous energy, beauty, humour, and worth.

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 *obit.* 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: