

The Ruins of Angel Republic

Andrew Zawacki. *By Reason of Breakings*. University of Georgia Press, \$15.95 (pbk)

Peter Carpenter, *The Black-Out Book*. Arc Publications, £4.95 (pbk)

A couple of years ago, in *Metre* 5, Andrew Zawacki wrote a review regretting the persistent confessional character of much British and Irish poetry. The complaint, unfortunately, is still relevant, and looks to remain so. In contrast, Zawacki's first collection is composed in a poised, impersonal (and American) idiom. The impersonality works well, even when it is a deliberate conceit: "Self-Portrait" for instance, eschews the first person singular in favour of the homophone "eye". This device associates the self firmly with the gaze, so that the final phrase of the poem strikes an obliterating, unbearable blow: "the eye is nothing it saw". The puns "idol" and "isinglass", which might otherwise seem excessive, gain purpose in this context: both confront an implied dichotomy between pure gaze and vile jelly; "isinglass" is particularly good in that it incorporates the poem's governing images of reflection and refraction. The poem explores our persistence in dualistic modes of thought, questioning their validity while recognising their power.

Zawacki rejects intrusive personality even in the dedications to his poems. These are relegated to the notes, where they sit with nice unease among laconic acknowledgements of references and sources. His sources are various, but perhaps less surprising or engaging than we might expect in a collection of such quality. Looking at the notes alone, the reader might wonder whether, in choosing which poems to annotate, Zawacki is not also offering a parodic reading list for the learned young poet (or critic): Job, Isaiah, Psalms (and a less expected, but welcome New Testament reference in "Ephahtha"); St Augustine, Meister Eckhart; Wallace

Stevens, Virginia Woolf, Fredric Jameson. James Wright is another more refreshing presence, in “Astrelegy”, though at some distance: Zawacki paraphrases one of Wright’s translations from Juan Ramón Jiménez’s *Diario de Poeta y Mar*. In the poems themselves, however, the references are appropriate and seriously handled, though never solemn: in “Agrapha” a verse of Isaiah “Don’t be afraid, I have called you by name, you are mine” is spoken by “bosses telling lies about factory byelaws”. “Autopsy”, a poem made of fragments from *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, shows a fine ear for the overlap of the critical register with the absurd: “the wrapper can be wrapped in its turn, as though the sun drew its radiance from the moon”, “not some mannerist parabola”.

That poem’s submerged play on concepts of modernism and post-modernism prompts a consideration of Zawacki’s own engagement with American modernism. A jacket puff from Susan Howe, and references in the poems to Wright and Robert Duncan, seem to place him in that stream of American poetry which in Douglass Messerli’s words is “concerned with... a complex of overlapping ideas about myth, politics, history, place and religion”. Place is important to Zawacki, especially liminal place. Many of the poems are set on harbours, or (like Wright’s) on riverbanks, or in parking lots, at boundaries where waste ground gives way to wilderness. Two poems, “Kinzua” and “Conewango”, describe specific places in north-western Pennsylvania. Zawacki’s note tells us the titles “are Seneca names”; he seems to relish in equal measure the appeal to an American past and the punning but quite apposite evocation of the Stoic philosopher. This attachment to place contributes to the American accent of *By Reason of Breakings*. Conversely, British and Irish poets, it seems, are interested in place in inverse proportion to their interest in modernism. Traditionalists and neo-modernists alike tend to express this axiom as if it were an immutable law. Zawacki does not recognise the phoney conflict between a developed sense of place and linguistic and formal innovation. Poets on this side of the Atlantic who are eager to halt British and Irish poetry’s drift into dismal, divisive provincialism might profitably adopt his attitude.

The pervasive elegiac tone of these poems similarly confounds neo-modernist and anti-modernist dogmas. The leftist tendency in post- or neo-modernism is suspicious of elegy’s consolatory

æsthetics, suspicious too, perhaps, of its overuse by a poetic establishment keen above all to touch, to move, its readers. Zawacki repeatedly acknowledges that the roots of elegy are in violence, in brutal erasure:

The weather bureau, he told me, has just announced calm on
the coastlines
under a constant assembly of clouds, and whether sirocco
evasions
have been handed down or sent up from the colonies,

they're certain to pass one another in transit, since tariffs are
higher
after the war, and people ignoring the news from that coun-
try have never
exercised themselves with death or prayer.

.....
It's years

he said, since the acrobats left and sundials relinquished
ownership of air
to a murder of crows, but the monument shading the court-
yard is there...

.....
Those who live here say little of being forgiven
While sculling the waves, but passing into where sirens don't
answer,
no longer remember which came before, the punishment or
the pain.

("Velocity among the Ruins of Angel Republic")

Crucially, though, he does not use his awareness of the violence and suffering that underpin the elegiac tone to enact a high-minded dismissal of elegy itself. Instead, he frankly acknowledges its æsthetic appeal: this collection is full of ruins, fragments, decomposition ("the untimely interred... exhumed"), "the torn thing tearing further" ("Slipknot 5"). Despite their strong American idiom, Zawacki's poems, his prose poems especially, are reminiscent of one of Baudelaire's prose poems, "Chacun sa chimère", in which the poet confronts a waste landscape peopled by figures who oscillate between the elusively symbolic and the stylised alle-

gorical. Zawacki's poetry operates in the tradition of the emblem book, and offers some of its peculiar pleasures.

By Reason of Breakings is extraordinary in its accomplishment, the more so for being a first collection, but I would offer one final reservation. Zawacki's poise can sometimes slip into over-poise, which is really, of course, a loss of poise. A number of poems in this volume are single rhetorical periods; where the substance of the poem is also a single, extended meditation this works magnificently, as in "Any Other Eviction, Than the Frequent", but elsewhere the effect can be of a voice in love with its own sinuous syntax:

What it meant when a wave broke in rings
or went about its business finding the end
we couldn't know: there were openings

in the wrinkled forecast of last years corduroy islands
and other arrivals and other half hours to visit:

("Parallax")

Unlike the better single-period poems, whose multiplicity of related clauses enriches the imagery, the hypotaxis here shades into a calculated, self-regarding, affectless parataxis. It's rather unfair, however, to carp about a collection of such consistently high quality, and of such high ambition. Zawacki seeks nothing less than a reconciliation of politicised form with an æsthetic which takes candid pleasure in those tones and voices which are most disturbing to that political sense of form.

With less success and less style, Peter Carpenter seems to be marking out a similar territory between neo-modernist linguistic innovation and a more traditionalist poetics of heredity and memory. *The Black-Out Book*, which takes its title from a wartime compendium of jokes and puzzles compiled "to provide the average family with sufficient amusement and entertainment for one hundred and one black-out nights", explores Carpenter's family history as well as a contemporary Britain of "Docklands and Spaghetti Junction" ("The Sun"), graffiti, and post-Thatcherite politics. There's also a series of poems on Northern Irish themes, culminating in "Cuttings", which deals with the Omagh bomb. This poem deserves commendation for not being embarrassing in its desire to respond to that enormity.

The press release which accompanies my review copy of *The Black-Out Book* quotes David Annand, with whom Carpenter collaborated on a millennium sculpture for the town of Maidstone, as saying he chose Carpenter's work for its "nice abstract quality—it was accessible, but not too accessible". This is an acute comment, though perhaps not the compliment Annand intended. *The Black-Out Book* displays the flaws of "accessible" poetry—a rather mundane understanding of identity and memory, a tendency to latch onto an interesting or arcane fact and proceed to over-explain it, an excess of unexciting language—without offering many of the rewards of "not too accessible" poetry.

This is a shame, because many of these poems seem to have been written from a great love of their subject. "Son" deals with a rather hoary theme: that of filling a dead or absent parent's role, that role being symbolised, in this case, by a big smelly crombie. It can't evoke for us what it clearly does for the poet-speaker, because the language fails from the start to engage us:

Fat trapped from Christmases
 deep in its tough system of greenish flecks—
 an age after the slush of sprouts and roast
 has been cleared away. And you're in there.

The symbol of Christmas dinner for family tension and cohesion is simply too hackneyed: the reader's mind wanders unproductively—did the speaker's father really cook or eat Christmas dinner in his overcoat? And why, if he hangs the garment in the kitchen, does only Yuletide grease get stuck in it? "Fix" is a more innovative attempt to pin down the memory of a father figure, precisely because it takes as its organising principle the fixing of a point on a navigational chart:

checklist: Mae West sub mariner's sweater
 silks harness

chart

pinned to table

(self as centre)

The reader is still left wishing, however, that Carpenter could have arranged his fragments of radio transmission, popular song,

childhood memory and RAF argot in a way that really emphasised their linguistic and social interest.

A more serious problem dogs Carpenter's explicitly political poems. This is "No Fit State":

We're going places. We've been told.
Numbed by the across and down?
Swap places with the next man.
Number his days. Button up.
We're going places. We've been told.
Families, individuals, that's all.

I cannot imagine that even Margaret Thatcher at her most deluded and nostalgic ever wants to hear again her remarks on the alleged non-existence of society. That they summed up for a generation of frustrated Labour voters the enervated social fabric of 1980s Britain is precisely the reason why they should not appear in a political poem: they are the death of intelligent comment.

The Black-Out Book does contain some successful poems. "Cuckoo" introduces a memorable character in the person of Nanna Cuckoo: "She was cold meat, mashed/ potatoes, huge scrapings of chair legs". "Chair legs" where we expect "marge" or "dripping" derails a poem that too easily could have turned into a catalogue of clichés. "Tag" does the job of public monument poetry effectively—I imagine it looks very well on Annand's giant steel double helix—though Carpenter's interest in graffiti has a touch of the fogeyish about it. "The Poetry of the Thirties" and "The Bloomsbury Front" evoke sharply their respective literary styles, the former better than the latter, which contains a "tantalus" that I can't help feeling belongs rather in Baker Street. Overall, however, this is not compelling poetry, which suggests that "accessibility", as the term is usually understood, is largely irrelevant. Language that excites the reader's interest is accessible, however much resistance it may offer to understanding; dull poetry is inaccessible poetry.