

Special Reserve

Gillian Allnutt, *Sojourner*. Bloodaxe, £7.95 (pbk)

Gillian Allnutt's sixth collection inverts T.S. Eliot's observation that words "reach/ Into the silence". Rather than eloquently inscribing a struggle with language, making words strain to their utmost limit, Allnutt's poems emerge from the silence and maintain traces of it in their shape and utterance. These are ascetic poems which resist the easy and potentially comfortable option of eloquence. Their language exists on just this side of silence; they are poems which never settle easily into statement, poems which are simultaneously achieved and relentlessly restless, this searching edginess signalled by their unobtrusive rhymes, their half-rhymes, their hesitant rhythms and their search for poetic resource. They make particular demands on the reader, because they have made particular demands on the poet. They resist abstraction, which can threaten to become another form of obfuscation; Allnutt prefers clarity and transparency—the clear-glass window of Alnmouth's Franciscan friary rather than baroque stained glass—but she also knows that aspiration can intensify dissatisfaction with who and what we are.

Sojourner ranges widely in time and place, reflecting on lives threatened by war and its consequences, by social, political and personal dislocation yet managing to find forms of coherence, and considering the terms of legacy from the past, a legacy that is here metonymical rather than metaphorical. The legacy itself, what has survived, may be puzzling and may not provide full reassurance of a coherent life, but it has to suffice, for now. One of those metonymic legacies is a harmonium, "hauled from Merthyr Tydfil, to be hid", to be located elsewhere. Wrenched from context, it is in danger of becoming merely a cipher, its significance misread or occluded. Such a legacy could never turn into Wallace Stevens's harmonium, because Allnutt sees no possibility for her-

self in so magisterial, Coleridgean, a synthesis. Her harmonium can only remain what it is, its meaning and potentiality perhaps unavailable to the next generation, but for now remains meaningful to its owners, “full of hope and humdrum under the lid”.

At some points in *Sojourner*, the exploration of legacy shades over into a restless examination of “hoard”, one of the book’s most resonant words. It suggests the Anglo-Saxon word-hoard, important in several ways to Allnutt. Living in the North East of England she considers the relative closeness of that Anglo-Saxon past, materially there in various ruins and priories in Northumberland and particularly in St Cuthbert’s legacy, experienced on the part-time island of Lindisfarne. Part of her poetic resource is Anglo-Saxon, evident in several poems, including that just-quoted last line from “The Harmonium”, though she uses many other resources too, including Robert Burns, here recalled as the lowland poet whose words remain appropriate for a modern border shepherd. But Allnutt sees that we too are hoard: “part of the hoard of what happened”, affected by wars and by events that may be geographically and temporally remote, but still able to affect and potentially shape our lives. What we carry from the past is also hoard, something kept back by us, not exactly treasure, perhaps, but something we need to remind us of who we are. The hoard may be what has inadvertently survived; a little cello, a cobbler’s last, an old shoulder-bag. That harmonium hauled from Merthyr Tydfil will have “to be hid” not just because to hoard it is to protect it, but because it is to preserve us, protect though not ensure some necessary sense of our self. A legacy is always dual in nature, pointing back into the past but also salvaging something from it, and hoard, with its connotations of miserliness, raises exactly that duality of possession; do we possess a hoard or does it possess us? In “Hester” Allnutt describes a woman holding herself together, “like laughter,/ hoarded”. In “Bette” a mother hoards the “wild, too well remembered words” of her lost son. Allnutt sees the duality of legacy, but at times she can, with the starkest of language, summon up the sense of a future. Thus a group of poems that invoke growing up with the legacy of war ends with “The Fifties”:

There were windows the war had left alone.
Imagine.
A world that would open.

Such a moment of potential vision is essential to Allnutt, as is her invocation of visual art, something of a characteristic of her work. In *Sojourner* there are two groups of poems focussed on paintings. One is devoted to works by the German Expressionist, Paula Modersohn-Becker, and the other to an exhibition of paintings by Victoria Crowe of her shepherd neighbour in the Scottish borders. It is as if Allnutt recognises that the intense interiority of her poetry requires an alternative vision in order to expand and to claim a form of objectivity. It may be that ekphrasis can only work for her if it initiates a correspondence with her own interiority, but these poems are also important gestures to the reader, in asserting a common ground between poet and reader that exists beyond the poem itself.

Descriptions of Allnutt can make her seem a portentous poet. Yet one of her most striking qualities is her reticence, allied to a tendency to understatement. This reticence has increased with each book of poetry and forms the clearest line of development in her work. It here results in a particular kind of silence, where her experiences have been interrogated so intensely that they are now to be conveyed through sparse image. In "Exile, Newcastle, 1962", *Sojourner's* penultimate poem, she goes over by now familiar territory; her adolescent sense of displacement in Newcastle, having been born in London:

My mother, thwarted.

A Grand Man by Catherine Cookson.

Gran getting old in London,
the lino in holes—

"You'll catch your heel!"

The Flight of the Heron by D. K. Broster (a woman).

My first period.

A 14 year-old tries to make her diffused world cohere, simultaneously finding guidance in reading, remembering a grandmother's admonition, and, in retrospect, realising the impossibility of separating personal development from the multiplicity of factors that shape an identity (hence the pun on "period"). But to point out these features violates how the poem actually functions, because it grows out of the earlier poems which have also insistently focussed on the inseparability of personal experiences and historical "period". Not that this inseparability results in easy coherence

or a fusion of competing identities; it just means inseparability. Allnutt explores how self-acceptance, while never easily available or a matter for complacency, can only be achieved by a recognition and acceptance of variousness—and it too exists just this side of silence.