

COLD FRONT



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SIMON ARMITAGE AND GLYN MAXWELL, *Moon Country: Further Reports from Iceland*. Faber and Faber, £7.99

And new plants flower from that old potato.

—W. H. AUDEN, "LETTER TO LORD BYRON" (III)

The 1937 *Letters from Iceland* by Auden and MacNeice has become a canonical record of *entre deux guerres* Britain. A mixture of poetry, prose and anthologized commentary about Iceland, and signposted by Auden's precocious five-part "Letter to Lord Byron," the Faber volume was less an exploration of Iceland than an excuse to establish a literature and a European Britain of the 1930s. Calling Iceland the place where "Europe is absent," Auden wrote, "I am convinced that the cultural future of Iceland depends on the extent to which she can absorb the best of the European traditions, and make them her own." In retrospect we recognize the book as an arch-Modernist project by its preoccupation with "civilisation" and "culture," which MacNeice claimed were "limited by lack of wealth" on the island. It now seems patronizing in its banter and pompous in its self-conscious creation of a new generation. What saves it is the admission of eurocentrism that Auden offered Isherwood, after praising Iceland for its literary heritage and lack of hysterical nationalism:

But I had the feeling, also, that for myself it was already too late. We are all too deeply involved with Europe to be able, or even to wish to escape. Though I am sure you would enjoy a visit as much as I did, I think that, in the long run, the Scandinavian sanity would be too much for you, as it is for me. The truth is, we are both only really happy living among lunatics.

The travellers' position was undoubtedly determined by their circumstances, in which they were each "a sort of poor relation / To that debauched, eccentric generation / That grew up with their fathers at the War."

Almost sixty years later, in the summer of 1994, the BBC sent Simon Armitage and Glyn Maxwell back to Iceland for two weeks. *Moon Country: Further Reports from Iceland*, a variety of poems, prose narratives, photographs and dramas, features the unlikely English heroes playing a foppish, self-deprecating duo. Latter-day incarnations of Auden and MacNeice, who assumed the names Craven and Ryan in MacNeice's "Eclogue," Armitage and Maxwell traipse around the paradoxical "land of the midnight sun" as Mr Petersson and Mr Jamesson, who describe themselves as "largely agnostic and morally horizontal." Whatever Auden-defined "Universal-Complex sensibility" they lack is not an indication of their shortcomings; rather it denotes their desire to forego a serious socio-political critique of Britain and Iceland, in favor of an experience that might implicitly reveal both cultures. Because they emphasize the minutiae of travel and camaraderie, their reports are more fun than the *Letters*, though they often give way to flippancy and bathos. Maxwell writes that "nothing ever stops us," and we join the visitors in overlooking Icelandic history and mythology to tackle instead the local customs and geography. Their arrival is a mock-descent into the dark night of the soul:

The aircraft was heading continuously towards a hazy and uncertain brightness that seemed to hang in a semicircle over their destination.... They descended into black fog with thick rain shearing across the windows... and when the chief steward announced the temperature and weather conditions outside the cabin it occurred to Petersson that he was back in the Pennines.

This is from "St Bartholomew's Day," the first of a dozen dispatches Armitage writes as chronological scaffolding for the book. Each is whimsically named according to the *Perpetual Almanac of Saints and Folklore Diary*, we discover in "Kit Bag," a meticulous enumeration of Armitage's equipment. He allows the contents to speak for themselves, such as his "Gillette Cool Wave shaving gel with advanced lubricants for unsurpassed razor glide," and also buries his own "Book of matches" and the *Letters* in his cornucopia.

This sort of tongue-in-cheek enables us to indulge in the voyage, and the humor is infectious. They joke of "one another's being one another's / Literary Executors," only to throw "insults and stones at each other across the divide" at Thingvellir. Supposedly fishing on the *Gullborg*, Not Very Able Seaman Armitage emerges nauseated from his cabin, only to be cassette-recorded by barely more Able Seaman Jamesson, "whose insides are not only fomenting revolt, but have installed an interim government

and renamed the year *Zero*.” We learn that Maxwell is the great-great-grandson of James Maxwell, hero of William Billington’s 1883 poem “The Pilot Maxwell,” which makes Glyn not merely Jamesson but “Jamessonssonssonssonsson.” Later they suffer some well-meant ridicule at the hands of the locals, who call those who speak two languages “bilingual,” and those who speak one “English.” Petersson and Jamesson display virtuosity with their native tongue, though, during their joint performance, “and as was usual on such occasions the two men charged each other with the task of speaking an unrelated word or phrase at some point in the reading.” Petersson manages “textured vegetable protein” while introducing a poem about the Last Supper, but Jamesson wins by making “isosceles triangle” the concluding rhyme in a Petrarchan sonnet.

Maxwell contributes a jaunty, three-act “Icelandic entertainment” called “Harald and the Lonely Hearts,” starring heavy coffee-drinkers, drunkards, freeloaders, and a Troll with two dicks. After standing up Karina, the pseudo-poet loser Harald is finally reunited with her, in a series of escapades reminiscent of *Peer Gynt*. The play exemplifies the “slacker” posture that Maxwell and Armitage adopt, constantly hungover and “thinking of ways of getting out of everything,” as though this were not only the Iceland they’ve found but also the new England they represent: a pub-crawl culture of football, Trivial Pursuit and MTV. Dubbing themselves the “English Headphone People,” the duo plays Lou Reed’s “Perfect Day” on the same piano Auden and MacNeice sampled, and on which the Icelandic national anthem was composed. They prove in their interview with Vigdís Finnbogadóttir, President of Iceland, that they *can* be professional and informed ambassadors as well as Snowcat-riding “fools”: it’s just that they prefer the latter. Their Mercier-and-Camier antics demonstrate that they are several calculated steps removed from both their literary predecessors and their business-class fathers, from whom they have borrowed neckties which they help each other tie “like one man dressing himself in front of a mirror.”

Fredric Jameson (not to be confused with Jamesson) defines postmodernism as an attempt to conceive the present historically in an age that has forgotten history, and Armitage and Maxwell strike just the right amount of recollection amid amnesia. Auden’s name surfaces several times unobtrusively—and is once confused with Odin—but a search for his signature in the Magnússon Institute visitors’ book fails since the log goes back only to April 1994, as though to verify this account as genuinely post-Modernist. Another index of hyperreality is the poets’ tendency to define nature in terms of simulacra: ptarmigans are likened to tea-cosies, there is “a landscape that could have been the backdrop for an epic film,” and

Jamesson envisions steering an electronically-tagged whale with the computer equipment that is tracking it. The voyagers occasionally “stage” past events or record sounds for Radio 3, and the BBC is always lurking as Prime Mover and Big Brother. As Petersson summarizes the trip, “It felt real and symbolic at the same time.”

Coincidental with Armitage’s nostalgic narrative about writing and memory, the book sputters out of gas, as if mimicking the expeditioners’ fatigue. The nature of the volume’s eclectic construction also results in poetry which, *qua* poetry as we know it from these guys, is not always up to snuff. While Armitage’s interspersed lyrics beginning “From where we stand” and Maxwell’s “Breidavík Farm” are memorable, the prose poem sequence “The White Hart” is undercharged, and the few concrete poems are gimmicky. Nonetheless, the striking descriptions of geysers and lava pools, as well as the wit and irony with which the footstep-followers convey their adventure, make for jocose reading. In bringing Iceland to England, and vice versa, *Moon Country* may further its authors’ billing as the pleasantly slimmer-shouldered, *fin-de-siècle* heirs to the pair who took Europe there earlier in the century.