

International Incidents

Randolph Healy, *Green 352: Selected Poems 1983-2000*. Salt, £8.95

Brian Henry, *American Incident*. Salt, £9.95

Randolph Healy and Brian Henry's new books advertise respectively their "surprising forms" and "polyphony", which is in keeping with their publisher Salt's commitment to the linguistically innovative, the post-modern and the experimental. These should be broad catholic categories but there are surprising overlaps in the two collections, and although Healy and Henry do testify to the press's variety and international range, the books also have national concerns that can only leave some of their readers guessing.

As the editor of the Wild Honey Press Randolph Healy publishes a wide range of mostly Irish and English experimental poets, but his own work belies the stereotyped coterie hermeticism of that scene. Perhaps because of his scientific background, many of the poems have a notable reasonableness, and their interest in equations and proofs is brought powerfully to bear on subject matter that resists logic. In "World War II", Healy's equation of the war's death toll with cost and weights and energy is reminiscent of Wordsworth's uncomprehending pacing around a child's grave in "The Thorn": "I've measured it from side to side:/ 'Tis three feet long, and two feet wide". For Healy,

Fifty five million people were killed
at a cost per corpse of over
a quarter of a million dollars,
a third their weight in gold.

Which took a total firepower of three megatons.
Which is the energy
of a seven minute hurricane
or of one hour of the world's tides.

This approach does not always work: the power of “Spirals Dance” is not in its interesting use of scientific terms (“The smallest change in Newton’s gravitational constant/ and stars could not form;/ and should the charge mass ratio of the electron/ or Planck’s constant waver neither atoms nor us”), or in its foregrounded subjectivity (“I think I prefer bottomless chaos” and “I suppose I saw each living thing” and “I used to think” and “I took it to mean”) but in its metaphors (“those/ who lost their footing in the storm/ that make trial pieces of us all”) and the stanzas where all three strands come together:

Am I here at all?
 At the garden exhibition,
 Dragons’ necks swooping and curving,
 Boas of white bells, crystalline repetition,
 Disappeared and were replaced
 By a landscape of little magnets
 Attracting, repelling,
 Lining up with the nearest field,
 Domains then collapsing under thermal assault,
 Summing over time to nothing.

In a similar fashion, the closing stanza combines Healy’s gifts, appropriating Yeats’s gyres and imagining Healy’s daughter at their apex, “standing between her shadow and her reflection./ Present”. The same mixture of idioms is found in the book’s most straightforward long poem “Arbor Vitæ”, which (like its accompanying footnote-essay) is always interesting, though its formal effects are unconvincing: a refrain consisting of anagrams of “chaos” and an acrostic of DNA deaden the interest of the poem’s narrative. This use of the acrostic is very different from the effect of the H-E-A-R that William Blake secretes in the third verse of “London”, but Healy’s poem is also driven by an outsider’s anger at a thoughtless, bureaucrat-run civil society.

The other long poems, “Flame” and “Daylight Saving Sex” and “scales”, run the logical languages (including a recipe for soufflé and a couple of games), snatches of autobiography and thoughtful ideas through the mill of collage and unusual lineation and punctuation, ending with the blacked-out blocks of the book’s closing page. The freshness of these poems, and indeed of the book, derives from the new subject matter and vocabularies

with which they engage and which they critique. Healy's attempt at generating forms for this matter is more effective in the long poems, although it is still the local detail that is most memorable: "February./ A pebble beach near a railway track./ Genevieve collects treasure in a straw hat". or "'It's ok. She's just stopped breathing.' Then in she kicked and we were off again".

This is not to slight the short poems: Healy convincingly mixes narratives and playful juxtapositions between spoken and learned idioms in "Storms", "Mutability Checkers", "FlipperSat News", "Processions", Breviary", and "Puppets", surely the first poem by an adult about Barney, the TV dinosaur. In too many of the other short poems, though, he lards the line with jargon and blocks off other tendencies that might work at least as well. Nationality brings out the worst in Healy: in "Anthem" and "(The) Republic of Ireland", he creates new forms for these determinedly one-dimensional poems which then require a note to explain exactly what that dimension is. Even then he does little with the form: his phonetic parody of the Irish national anthem ("Sheen a fin with with oil" for "'Sinne fianna fáil") is just that and nothing else, and his generation of twenty-two anagrams (though twenty-six might suit better) for "Republic of Ireland" scores too few hits like "her pallid beef in court" and "April could be finer". This leads to the formal correctness but innocuous or nonsensical ends in, for instance, "ice fire bother and pull" and "build her porcelain feet/ of tripled alien cherub". The collection's title, *Green 532*, suggests a more basic non-national kind of common identity—a note tells us it is the wavelength of light at which the human eye is most sensitive—and it is in its broad, fresh, curious approaches to the human that this collection most appeals.

As an editor of *Verse*, Brian Henry must have a very definite idea of the kinds of new American writing which he does not wish to emulate, and there is a sense that *American Incident* is a willed reaction to the modes of much contemporary American lyric poetry. Its self-conscious subjectivity allows for some provocative essays on literature signalled by titles which include words like Naturalism and Realism and Lit. and Fashion, which are then grounded or, better, upstaged by Henry's fairly inventive use of obscenity (here are some of the fucks: "I'm fucking you while I'm fucking you", "The fucking public loves me. Fucking *loves*", "a go-fuck-yourself etiquette suddenly in vogue", "what a fuckknuckle", "singing for someone to fuck us", and "but maybe we were

just fucking”). The parodies advertised on the book-cover are another obvious example although I only recognised the Jorie Graham. Doubtless, there will be pleasures awaiting American readers in the other parodies.

Even from its title, readers can tell that *American Incident* is interested in redefining nation rather than Randolph Healy's post-colonial rejection of it. Like Healy in "World War II", Henry does subject national military action to scientific scrutiny: "Historical (Abstracts in) Couplets" begins "The emperor's twitch is misinterpreted/ As bellicose gesture" and ends with wittily casual, just-right rhymes: "How many people must one kill/ To go on the books as a famous general?// Ten million, maybe more./ Ten million three, ten million four". Henry also launches an attack on his country's current President in "Beating around the Bush", which formally chops up, repeats and ironises some of George W. Bush's remarks. However, as in the previous poem, he all too quickly identifies the culprit as someone else, and here the net effect is just as hollowly rhetorical as Bush's riding of the whirlwind: the idea that the poet is not so much satirising as reproving his subject about language is as reductive, cramped and one-dimensional as Healy's "Anthem".

American Incident's blurb sets too much store by its "political disquiet" and it is just as misleading about the book's formal achievement: it is "composed of a scattered novella, a performance text, lyric poems, anti-lyrics, verse essays, prose poems and their deformed counterparts, short fictions, hybrids, parodies, dramatic monologues, and works less amenable to classification": if this were a restaurant's bill of fare, it would not satisfy the most lenient trade description act. The purported novella is a scatter of fifty something short paragraphs. The differences between (and identities of some of) the other forms are hard to discover. Its desire to signal different kinds of mastery seems to reflect an embarrassment about poems. Henry evades the sort of lyric that is also absent from Healy's work, though his alternative process involves much more self-reflexivity than Healy's.

It's a chancy endeavour. The sense of ideas being thought out and considered and related to new ideas or sensibilities is present, but Henry's focus is too evidently on dispersal, as in the open-form poems structured around sonic echoes and aside-generating puns, such as "Adorno on the Gold Coast", "Pariah" and "Ode on the Road" which, typically, defeated this reader even as it gath-

ered a compelling momentum:

gibbous and porous, you're shorn
of meaning in this maelstrom, your hatbrim

an extension of your lawless libido, flung
&/or flaunted like an ex-slut's flunkie

: asphalt & angle will throttle this wreck
to pieces, foot fetishists will bow

to the belligerence of children
& bring what they've broken

to the heartland & their neighbors
who cringe together now

at the sight of such fevers

Of the long sequences, the "scattered novella" "Patricide in C Minor", is a sort of grimly introspective and impossible-to-follow *Bildungsroman* that charts its protagonists' inner life and sexual fantasies. The common effect of this "radical artifice" and of all the works of *American Incident* is to decentre the I. When Henry writes, "how else can we navigate ourselves, our selves' selves?" he catches the identity crises that supply him with his material and generate the poems' linguistic "polyphony". Even this quotation, of course, is couched in terms that undercut the contention. The sequence in which it appears, "Resistance", is part of what is variously called a sermon, a performance piece and a script. One of its companion script/sermon/performance pieces starts off by considering the destruction of museums by war and suggests that a work of art is more valuable than a child because, once lost, it is lost forever. In the same mode, in the title sequence, he writes, "If you feel you have no culture,/ say 'I have no culture' to everyone you meet.// This will generate conversation/ where the possibility did not exist before". The general effect of these propositions is inarguable.

That said, immediately after the title sequence there are poems and prose poems which do get over the fact of their own source even as they return to the same subject: "It's either snowing" concludes: "For a nude on a velvet couch I would pay a handsome

price// How often do I need to say *persona persona persona*?" This James Tate-like comedy, a highlight of the Forward-shortlisted *Astronaut*, is missing from much of this book, especially its opening hundred pages. The sugary suddenness of Henry's debut allowed its pining and opining talking heads to slip out of sight, and yet brought something new to the light-footed surrealism of Tate. What unites *American Incident* for the most part is not this quick, witty style but a preoccupation with interest in avoiding obvious statement or in stating the obvious and ironising it by juxtaposition. This book seems none too well-served by such self-limiting concerns.