

In his later years, Salvador Dalí used to sign blank canvasses and sell them to lesser souls who would fill in the rest. Reading C.K. Williams's latest collection, *Repair* (Bloodaxe, £7.95stg), which has won the Pulitzer Prize, one is tempted to think that something similar is afoot. Certainly it would be sad to find that it is Williams himself writing these pale imitations of a collection like *Tar* (1983). If it's the man himself then he joins the disreputable pantheon of poets like Adrienne Rich, Charles Simic and John Ashbery who have zapped on the cruise control years ago. Happy driving!

Following Tim Kendall's *Paul Muldoon* (1996), there is a second book-length study of the poet. Clair Wills's *Reading Paul Muldoon* (Bloodaxe) although published in 1998 covers his work right up to *Hay*; and whereas her previous book, *Improprieties: Politics and Sexuality in Northern Irish Poetry*, was informed by critical theory, here she has written a book that is for the general reader. It is an intelligent and perceptive assessment of the work, exemplary above all for the nuanced way she discusses the poetry in relation to Muldoon's life. It would perhaps have been fitting to have given more acknowledgement to Kendall's study, some of whose central observations are very close to Wills's (especially regarding mixture of naïve and cynical perspectives in the poetry), but in general *Reading Paul Muldoon* has much to recommend it as a complement to Kendall.

Not to everyone's taste will be the abrasiveness of Peter Reading's *Ob.* (Bloodaxe), which includes a haiku entitled "Mnemonic": "Whenever I whiff / *Pont l'Evêque* I recollect / your cunt, Carolyn". The dinner-party consensus, the protocols of mixed-company conversation, all condemn this type of thing, especially the use of the word "cunt", as simply bad taste. But to balk at this would be to deprive oneself of many of the pleasures to be found in *Ob.*, for instance, the brief sharp pathos of the title poem, or some of the languid excellencies in "Chinoiserie". Reading calls to mind John Wilmot, and not only because of the scatology, but because of the elegiac tone, as debauchery and the pleasures of the flesh are relegated to memory. It by no means a perfect book—there are a good few poems of exceptional banality—but it has that most rare of things, the live current of an individual imagination going through it. And now on top of *Ob.* comes *Marfan* (Bloodaxe), a postcard home from a Lannan-sponsored stint in West Texas. And on top of that Isabel Martin's exhaustive study *Reading Peter Reading* (Bloodaxe).

Tony Harrison's *Laureate's Block* (Penguin) requires little comment. Harrison's work has always depended on the tension between its display of presumed high cultural form and proletarian content. In this volume's title poem, unwisely helped into print by *The Guardian*, the once accomplished author of *V* displays the collapse of his formal powers in tin-eared, flat-footed verse. Its political strutting is little better. How bad does a poem have to be ("A Celebratory Ode on the Abdication of King Charles III"?) to make you side with prize twit Prince Charles against its author? Yes, that bad.

A first collection by a far from inexperienced author (we gather he has played tennis for Ireland, among other things), Alan Haughton's *Variations of Ambush* is a gathering of work "written over the last sixty or so years". No acknowledgements are given, but *Metre* would have been happy to publish lyrics as finely weighted and considered as these. Many have a ceremonial quality ("The Mother", "A Grave", "Lethe"), while an interest in music is only the sign of Basil Bunting's influence (no bad thing). *Variations of Ambush* is available from Bracken Press, Carrigrohane, Cork (no price given).

Although a journal of contemporary poetry, *Metre* is not averse to recommending new editions of non-contemporary poets when they are as distinguished as Irish Academic Press's *The Collected Works of James Clarence Mangan*. The publication of *Poems 1848-1912* (Mangan's posthumous publishing history accounting for the peculiar dating) and Jacques Chuto's masterly *James Clarence Mangan: A Bibliography* almost completes this marvellous achievement. The one remaining volume is Mangan's prose: it remains to be seen whether the sensational completion of the *Autobiography* to be published in the next *Metre* will be judged eligible...

Two recent introductions to young American poets, the species that is at once most elusive and ubiquitous (they're all middle-aged before their first book comes out, but the universities produce thousands of them annually): Kevin Prufer's *The New Young American Poets: An Anthology* (Southern Illinois UP), and a special issue on the subject in *Verse*. The Prufer book is of little interest as it merely reproduces the stylistic and thematic divisions in American poetry of the last three decades and gives no idea of what the new ones will be. The *Verse* issue is altogether more intriguing. Most of the young poets gathered here are eclectic and inclusive in their tastes (it's no longer Bernstein *or* Wright, but Bernstein *and* Wright) and radical in their results. Brian Henry and Andrew Zawacki have them reviewing each other and their seniors, and there are a few good interviews. The editors tell us that an anthology based on the issue will be out soon, but this issue is also recommended—an invaluable vademecum for what's ahead in the U.S.

A few years back Carcanet published the collected poems of Robert Pinsky, but don't have plans to publish his latest collection, *Jersey Rain* (FSG). Which is a shame, as the book contains some of the American laureate's (now in his third consecutive term) finest work not least the title poem, which ends like this:

The Jersey rain, my rain, soaks all as one:  
It smites Metuchen, Rahway, Saddle River,  
Fair Haven, Newark, Little Silver, Bayonne.  
I feel it churning even in fair weather

To craze distinction, dry the same as wet.  
In ripples of heat the August drought still feeds  
Vapors in the sky that swell to drench my state—  
The Jersey rain, my rain, in streams and beads

Of indissoluble grudge and aspiration:  
Original milk, replenisher of grief,  
Descending destroyer, arrowed source of passion,  
Silver and black, executioner, source of life.

Early in his career, Pinsky was associated with Stanford University and particularly Yvor Winters, as was the British poet-critic Donald Davie, who died in 1995. After Carcanet's reprinting of *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry* (1972) in *With the Grain* edited by Clive Wilmer, comes *Two Ways Out of Whitman*, edited by Davie's wife Doreen. Anyone looking for a map of twentieth-century poetry on both sides of the Atlantic could do a lot worse than buy these two volumes. Occasionally abrupt and dismissive of what he perceived to be rubbish, Davie was nevertheless one of the outstanding critics of poetry the last century, along with such figures as Helen Vendler and Edna Longley. It's a pity then that he has been lumbered with such a cantankerous image—the reality was very different—critical generosity and startling insight abound in these pages.

And in very brief: Joanne Limburg's *Femenismo* (Bloodaxe) looks of more than routine interest for a first collection... As the Oxford dust continues to settle, Faber have shrewdly made sure Keith Douglas landed in their in-tray: *The Complete Poems* is Desmond Graham's edition, with Ted Hughes's 1987 introduction... Christopher Pilling shows some exquisite brush-strokes in *In the Pink*, a series of responses to Matisse... Sorley MacLean, Iain Crichton Smith, Norman MacCaig: Scottish poetry has suffered some terrible losses recently. Carcanet publish *A Country for Old Men and My Canadian Uncle*, Smith's two-in-one last book. They also publish MacGill-Eain/MacLean's *O Choille gu Bearradh/From Wood to Ridge*, to be reviewed

in these pages by Patrick Crotty. And still from Carcanet, a senior Scot who happily continues to thrive: Edwin Morgan's *New Selected Poems*, a lively Scots *Phaedra*, and *A.D.*, a trilogy of plays about the life of Christ.