

B R I E F L Y N O T E D

Michael Hartnett's achievement is demonstrated anew in *A Book of Strays* (Gallery, €10). These are his "songs for his people", and allowing for some unevenness due to the inclusion of a few early, more serious poems, it is a hilarious collection whose mainstays are curses, jokes, squibs, ballads and vengeful occasional rhymes: one remembers a critic, "Do you recall the book of verse/ he wrote all by himself?/ You can't recall the title?/ Neither can anyone else".

Aquarius 25/26 (£6 to Flat 4, Room B, 116 Sutherland Avenue, London W9 2QP) offers memoirs and reconsiderations of George Barker and W.S. Graham: both poets were alcoholics and their limitless rudeness and bad behaviour are the source of any number of anecdotes: Ronnie Duncan's incredible account of taking (and paying for) Graham and Nessie Dunmuir on a holiday to Crete begins with this understatement, "The dream holiday, however, together with my naïve expectations, was to suffer a shock". Graham, whose new *Collected Poems* will be published by Faber next year, is well-served by the critical essays here, which emphasise the poems' existentialism and weirdly effective impersonality.

The fiasco of Robert Lowell's *Collected Poems* continues. Farrar, Straus and Giroux announced its imminent publication yet again—this time for Autumn 2002 (with Faber & Faber following after in Spring 2003), but this has been pushed back once more to "March or April 2003", as FSG's publicity office precisely put it in an email to us, with English publication presumably to follow sometime after. A few years ago the American critic James Longenbach wrote that "today, Lowell more often appears as a minor, catalyzing figure in critical narratives about Bishop's career, much as Bishop once appeared as a footnote to Lowell's formal breakthrough". Longenbach continued by commenting that Lowell's achievement was more substantial than such a view allowed. Given Lowell's endless revision of his poems, no-one will gainsay the difficulty of editing such a volume, but it's worth remembering that he died over twenty-five years ago. With each subsequent delay Frank Bidart, the chief editor and Lowell's

friend, and FSG do Lowell's reputation damage. No important poet of the twentieth century has been so badly served.

Richard Murphy's memoir *The Kick* was published last year (Granta, £20). It is an enthralling and entertaining book, chock-full of anecdotes about such various personages as Theodore Roethke, Ted Hughes, Sylvia Plath and Conor Cruise O'Brien. Its primary importance however is for the light it sheds on his small oeuvre: if the *Collected Poems* seemed to some people disjointed in their concerns and settings, it is now clear that autobiography brings them together. The currents and contradictions of Murphy's life—religion, family, sexual orientation—are illustrative of the wider changes that Ireland has gone through over the half century. And the rich, dense pleasures it lavishes on the reader ensure a crucial and permanent place in Irish poetry.

Kit Fryatt talks about some rivers in review of Alice Oswald in this number. Readers might like to note that *Rivers*, a collection of poems by Peter Porter, Sean O'Brien and John Kinsella, is now available from Fremantle Arts Centre Press (priced AU\$21.95). O'Brien's selection includes the poems recently published in *Metre II*.

Norton are continuing in their policy of re-releasing collections by A.R. Ammons that have gone out of print. This autumn it is *A Coast of Trees* (originally published in 1981) and *Sumerian Vistas* (originally published in 1987). Indeed it's hard to imagine the book-binder who could accommodate all of Ammons in one volume. Or, as Helen Vendler put it, "never has there been a poet so sublimely above the possible appetite of its potential readers". That there is too much of the work seems inarguable. And yet one feels that without such fecund sprawl we would have been denied the splendours of *Sphere: The Form of a Motion* (1974), one of the great long poems of the last century, or late lyrics such as "Fascicle" or "Sparklings".

On 27 November 2002, Susan Howe read to a well-disposed audience at University College Dublin. The reading was in two parts, beginning with Howe's performance of the smartly angered poem from *Singularities* (1990), "Thorow", a text that demands a reading with an energy capable of matching the intrepidity of its writing. This can be a problem for Howe, as the impact of her work is more seen than heard. Nevertheless, "Thorow" worked wonderfully in performance, but principally because the sound of the poem evoked a vibrant page-setting that

the listener had already seen. And this is Howe's real task as a reader: to connect you to a poem that you have seen before. The second half of the reading featured Howe's new book *Kidnapped*, a beautiful edition from the Coracle Press that looked chillingly expensive, and it suffered by comparison to "Thorow". *Kidnapped* focuses on ideas of textual ownership, and in it Howe celebrates the materiality of books through a Benjaminian nostalgia for the vestigial libraries of her deceased Irish relatives. But the more Howe tried to communicate the importance of the tactility of a book in the reading, the more you felt the absence of anything to look at. Howe is a great plastic poet, but her words die on the air.

Carcane has handily reprinted Robert Graves and Laura Ridings' *A Survey of Modern Poetry* and *A Pamphlet Against Anthologies* (£14.95). Of the two the first is much more the period piece, at least for anyone not in need of a twenty-five page tutorial on why E. E. Cummings' couldn't bring himself to use the caps key on his typewriter. A line of Tennyson's quoted in the *Survey*, "More ordure never will renew our midden's pure manure", might have come in handy in the *Pamphlet's* onslaught on the anthology industry, but the unforgettable account of "Mr Dribble's 'Hundred Best Telephone Numbers'" ("all that an anthology should be... comprehensive and free from prejudice... if I were condemned to life in prison or on a desert island, and were allowed to take six numbers with me, I should find them all in this anthology") more than compensates. The reader ends up almost grateful, in fact, for the Edwardian Mr Nixons of this world, if only for the opportunity they afforded Graves and Riding to ridicule them so uproariously. Cultivators of that lovable small furry animal, the anthology poem, don't escape their notice either. Here they are on Edna St Vincent Millay's "Sonnet XXXIII" as a genre piece in the vein of "The Lake Isle of Innisfree": "It is really extraordinary how many poets, when feeling thoroughly low-spirited, revert to childhood and think of going out into the wilder parts of the world and building a tiny tiny house JUST TO SHOW HOW I HATE YOU ALL". That's telling 'em.

"Mr Pound's Hell [...] is a Hell for the other people, the people we read about in the newspapers, not for oneself and one's friends." Les Murray would go a long way to avoid comparisons with Ezra Pound, but T. S. Eliot's judgement on the Hell *Cantos* could just as easily be a description of Murray's theology, the latest instalment of which can be found in *Poems the Size of Photographs*

(Carcenet, £6.95). Murray's dislikes, like Mr Cooper's acathisia in *Murphy*, are deep-seated and of long standing, taking in liberals, feminists, Marxists, academics and sex-Nazis. As ever, his hammer of the Lord smites in gnomonic telegraphese: in his eccentric hieroglyphics "figures// led by strings to their genitals mean fashion"; "Marxists will resurge by squaring sex with equality" according to a newborn Dr Strangelove; and "The Poisons of Right and Left" are condensed into a touching little homily:

You are what you have got
and: to love, you have to hate.
Two ideas that killed and maimed
holocausts and myriads.

Murray's decline into self-congratulating mannerism has been apparent since at least *Subhuman Redneck Poems* and shows no sign of abating here. This is a pity, since inside this slim enough volume is a slimmer but much more attractive volume trying to get out. But perhaps these poems aren't by him at all but some other writer of the same name: their author is described as having been born in 1932, which by our reckoning makes him a good six years older than the Murray we know and love.

Still on the subject of theology, in his *On Belief* Slavoj Žižek distinguishes between authentic and inauthentic fundamentalists. Inauthentic fundamentalists spend their time taking their bad faith out on other people who fail to come up to their standards (see above). Authentic fundamentalists like the Amish, meanwhile, just get on with it. If twentieth-century British poetry has an authentic fundamentalist patron saint it is David Jones, whose *Wedding Poems* have been edited for Enitharmon by Thomas Dilworth in a lavish and beautifully produced edition (£12).

A story about David Jones turns up in *Basil Bunting on Poetry* (ed. Peter Makin, Johns Hopkins University Press). Jones was a dedicated typographer whose work can still be seen on the cover lettering of *Agenda*, and as Bunting reports: "He maintains the whole quality of a civilisation, or a culture, can be shown in a very short inscription, or derived even from a single letter." The two men were having tea at the time and describing Jones' design of a title page for his 1969 book, *The Tribune's Visitation*. Jones had only managed to produce the first "T", but suddenly rose and "slowly, slowly, very carefully, drew in the letter H. Then he sat down again; with a sigh, he said, 'I'll have the E by Friday!'"

Breaking the Skin: Twenty-First Century Irish Writing (eds Nigel McLoughlin, Matthew Fluharty and Frank Sewell, £7.50/€12.50) is published by Black Mountain Press, but devotees of Charles Olson will be disappointed to find nary a mention of Projective verse within its covers. *Breaking the Skin* is an anthology of Irish poets yet to publish more than a single collection, of whom Gary Allen, James McCabe, Aidan Rooney-Céspedes, Tom French, Kevin Higgins and Michael S. Begnal are all well-known to *Metre*. Rosita Boland, John Redmond and John McAuliffe are notable absentees, while Frankie Sewell puts together an Irish-language section—rud a chuireann i gcuimhne dúinn gur mian linn ábhar i nGaeilge a fhoilsiú ó am go chéile nó aistriúcháin ón teanga sin. Ná bíodh aiféaltas oraibh: bígí ag scríobh chughainn gan mhoill!

Another absentee from *Breaking the Skin*, and a contributor to this issue, is Sam Gardiner, whose excellent *Protestant Windows* unfortunately passed us by when it came out from Lagan in 2000. Gardiner was born in 1936. Could his absence be in any way connected to the “glass floor” described in Iggy McGovern’s poem “On Being Excluded from a ‘New Poets’ Anthology on the Grounds of Age”: “So, off with you, please leave the floor/ Don’t make a fuss, don’t slam the door [...] / But let us do you one good turn/ And send your poem to Age Concern”? We ought to be told. Iggy McGovern is fifty-five. His poem can be found in the latest issue of *The Stinging Fly* (PO Box 6016, Dublin 8, €15/£12 for three issues).

All political careers end in failure, Enoch Powell said. A quick comparison with literary careers and that “end” looks almost quaint. *The Burning Bush* is a lot younger than Iggy McGovern, but is still feeling the pinch: “*The Burning Bush* has been a failure. Having set out to promote ‘underground’ literature and ‘experimentalism’ [...] it soon became apparent that the Revolution of the Word was not suddenly going to materialize in Ireland.” The feeling must be catching, as the opening poem in the current issue, by bona fide experimenter Maurice Scully, bears the bad news that “Maurice Scully is dead.” Suffice to say that he appears to have recovered by the end. (*The Burning Bush*, 3 Newcastle Road, Galway, Ireland, €8 for two issues in Ireland and the UK, otherwise €15, cheques payable to Michael Begnal).

Another bona fide experimenter is Randolph Healy, the appearance of whose *Green 532: Selected Poems 1983-2000* (Salt Publishing, £8.95; see www.saltpublishing.com) is an important

event. Healy is affable, humorous, poignant, quodlibetical, erudite: the real thing all right. Here is the end of the lovely “Vision”, a poem about the birth of a daughter:

There she sat in Louise’s arms
irises glittering
like the sea alight with the early morning sky
and like both of these containing no pigment
the colour due to scattering
spectral blue
the blue of pure hydrogen’s flame
living cobalt
the blue light streaming
from her eyes into mine.

We hope to return to *Green 532* in our next issue. As we may do to recent arrivals David Constantine’s *Something for the Ghosts* (Bloodaxe, £7.95), Andrew McNeillie’s second collection (already!) *Now, Then* (Carcanet, £8.95), Jamie McKendrick’s *Ink Stone* (Faber, £8.99) and Anne Stevenson’s *A Report from the Border*, subtitled *New & Rescued Poems* (Bloodaxe, £7.95). One genre usually guaranteed to produce more goo than a trip to the sweetshop is the Festschrift, but *The Way You Say the World: A Celebration for Anne Stevenson* (Shoestring Press, £7.95, see www.shoestringpress.co.uk) won’t rot anyone’s teeth, and is an important pendant to the new collection.

Metre was delighted to receive a copy of Stephen Burt’s *Randall Jarrell and His Age* (Columbia University Press, \$29.50, £20.50) just as we went to press, one of the reasons being how infrequently we receive American books. Any American publishers reading, please take note and take pity. We’ll be returning to *Randall Jarrell and His Age* at a later date, along with another provocative new critical book, Peter McDonald’s *Serious Poetry* (Clarendon Press, £40).

American Poetry Review, which describes itself as “the world’s premiere poetry magazine”, recently held an on-line auction to raise funds. Near the end of the auction, a complete set of the magazine—with an “estimated value” of \$3,500—had received no bids. A mixed lot of signed first editions from Gerald Stern had received no bids and neither had a similar lot from Marvin Bell. As the final hammer approached, it looked like a large number of

poets—many of whom came directly from the *APR* stable—might be forced to shell out their own hard-earned shekels to save face. But it wasn't all bad news. A broadside by American poet laureate Billy Collins, estimated at \$100, had reached \$200. "Gen-X" poet Joe Wenderoth was bringing them in: the minimum first bid of \$75 was made for his proofs and manuscripts, although the "estimated value" was a princely \$250. And a cast-autographed copy of a book about *The West Wing* television series had approached \$175. As the magazine points out, *APR* has published nine Nobel Prize laureates and thirty-three Pulitzer Prize winners. They also published the works of Araki Yasusada, the "avant-garde Japanese poet" supposedly discovered by the magazine, later revealed to be an elaborate hoax on the editors. No word on the "estimated value" of his manuscripts.

Metre wrote to D.J. Enright recently inquiring if he would be interested in contributing to a Movement retrospective feature. He replied by return to say how unwell he was, but that as light relief from his chemotherapy he was working on another commonplace book, to be called *Injury Time*. Humanest and most humanist of poets and critics, he died at the end of 2002. A commemorative notice will appear with our Movement feature in issue 14.

We also note with sadness the passing of William Cookson, founder and chief editor of the outstanding and long-running English poetry magazine, *Agenda*. Staunchest of Ezra Pound's defenders, Cookson was also the author to the invaluable vademecum, *A Guide to the Cantos of Ezra Pound* (1985).

Corrections corner: in the biographical note for Zbyněk Hejda in *Metre* 12 we said that he had lived in France. This is incorrect. While his wife is French, he has spent his life in what is now the Czech Republic. Our apologies to Mr Hejda for this.

(Mention here does not preclude a longer notice in a later issue.)