



A GIFTED MISFIT



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AMY CLAMPITT, *Collected Poems*, Faber and Faber, stg £14.99.

Unknown and unpublished, apart from occasional poems in magazines and, eventually, *The New Yorker*, Amy Clampitt first won critical acclaim at the age of 63 with her first collection *The Kingfisher*, published in 1983. In the final eleven years of her life, until her death in 1994, Clampitt produced a further four volumes, *What the Light was Like* (1985), *Archaic Figure* (1987), *Westward* (1990) and *A Silence Opens* (1994). These five volumes, gathered now in the *Collected Poems*, make public Clampitt's private years-long communion with literature, her "predecessors", family forebears and the natural world.

In a 1986 essay on Marianne Moore, Clampitt wrote: "absolute originality would amount to dying of one's own poison, and I for one am not in favour of that." She drew great comfort from the notion of shared experience, and in the opening essay of her prose collection *Predecessors, Et Cetera*, she wrote:

There is less originality than we think. There is also a vast amount of solitude. Writers need company. We all need it. It's not the command of knowledge that matters finally, but the company. It's the predecessors. As a writer, I don't know where I'd be without them.

The impression is that Clampitt's world was crowded with the ghosts and influences of her predecessors long before the public years arrived. She spoke often of Gerald Manley Hopkins whose work she saw as crucial to her own artistic development and who, together with Marianne Moore, influences her complex syntax and ornate stanzaic forms and her deep concern with morality. Delight in the sensuousness and transience of the natural world reflects a Keatsian preoccupation, with Keats's influence openly acknowledged in the sequence "Voyages: a Homage to John Keats". In one of these poems, "Margate", Keats's self-doubt about his work, his homesickness, his unease and his communion with predecessors are projections of Clampitt's own experience, his joy in the beauty of the wind whipping across a field of grain mirroring her similar joy remem-

bered from her childhood on the prairie in Iowa. And finally, amongst many others, is Emily Dickinson, always hovering in the background and a reminder of what Clampitt might have been had she not been recognised in her lifetime. In “Amherst”, a poem commemorating a visit to Dickinson’s grave Clampitt writes:

we’ve drunk champagne above her grave, declaimed
the lines of one who dares not live aloud.

—the inappropriateness of this act of drinking champagne in the presence of such poetic retirement expressing Clampitt’s own ambivalent attitude towards critical success.

The rush of words that came with her final poetic output reveals a writer struggling to articulate her sense of the world, the wonders of nature, the power of the past and the chaos of modern society. There is humour, irony, playfulness and huge energy and enthusiasm in the work which sometimes explodes unchecked to rip the bodice of poetry’s more demure costume, earning Clampitt some of her most vitriolic detractors as well as her most enduring admirers. When asked during a 1986 interview with *Oxford Poetry* if she had a particular poetic unit in mind, Clampitt explained:

It’s seldom that I have any notion in advance of what form anything is going to take. Sometimes a stanza form takes shape with the first few lines: that is, a matter of line length, number of lines, rhyme scheme if any. Sometimes I change my mind about the form midway. Sometimes a stanza form will be scrapped entirely, and I’ll start all over again, without necessarily starting a new poem.

Intermingled with poems devoted to the naming and describing of nature, are laments for the modern-day dispossessed, moving elegies for the poet’s parents and explorations of the lives and preoccupations of her predecessors, all elements combining in a reaching for understanding of the world she perceives.

Clampitt’s own sense of dispossession springs from her early childhood in New Providence, Iowa, where she lived on her grandparents’ farm until her parents moved three miles away to the desolate, windswept Pioneer Farm. Just ten years old, Clampitt’s sense of belonging was shattered by the move and her ability to put down firm roots all but destroyed. She wrote:

Depth isn't everything: the spruce
has no taproot, but to hold on
spreads its underpinnings thin—

a gathering in one continuous,
meshing intimacy, the interlace
of unrelated fibers
joining hands like last survivors
who, though not even neighbours

hitherto, know in their predicament
security at best is shallow. ("The Spruce has no Taproot")

Clampitt completed three novels during the 1950s but although they were never published, "luckily" she said herself, the urge of the storyteller never left her. She claimed that reading Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* destroyed any remaining novelistic aspirations because she felt she could never achieve the depth of knowledge of the modern world displayed in Pynchon's work. But ironically one of Clampitt's most impressive qualities in the poetry is her acute observation of urban life and her gift as a social commentator. "A Hedge of Rubbertrees" tells the story of the narrator's relationship with a West Village eccentric who lived "impervious to trends"—like Clampitt herself—and then was gone. Gone too is the conventional story's need for a satisfying conclusion:

Passing
I'd see her shades drawn, no light behind the rubber trees.
She wasn't out, she didn't own a TV. She was in there,
getting gently blotto. What came next, I wasn't brave
enough to want to know.

In a 1986 interview Clampitt declared:

Now that I've gotten to think of myself as a poet, I don't write prose any more, given the option, because the shape of a poem now seems to come more naturally—or maybe I should say it curbs my natural verbosity more effectively.

Curbs perhaps, but doesn't destroy. The storyteller triumphs in poems like "Highgate Cemetery" which relates details of the life and death of George Eliot (in ways like Clampitt herself in her refusal to be what Clampitt called in a 1993 interview with *Verse*, "co-opted" by society) or "Grasmere" inspired by a visit to Dove Cottage and describing the poet's appreciation

of Dorothy Wordsworth's lonely existence following her brother's marriage:

The upstairs bedroom where the roof leaked
and the chimney smoked, the cool buttery
where water runs, still voluble, under the flagstones;
the room she settled into after his marriage
to Mary Hutchinson, and shared with, as
the family grew, first one, then
two of the children, the newsprint
she papered it with for warmth (the circle
of domestic tranquillity cannot
guard her who sleeps single
from the Cumbrian cold) still legible:

Described in a recent review in *The Economist* as “something of an odd-ball” Clampitt was the first to admit this herself. Earlier in “A Hedge of Rubber trees” she observes:

unclassifiable cast-offs, misfits, marginal cases: when you're
one yourself, or close to it, there's
a reassurance in proving you haven't quite gone
under by taking up with somebody odder than you are.

Read this collection and its excellent introduction by Mary Jo Salter. Together they offer a tantalizing glimpse into the mind of a truly gifted misfit.