

the fact, and a novelist writing about gentlemen does not let us in on it, nor—even inadvertently—on his own private life, if he has any. The objection to Trollope is not to his trivial or pedestrian world but to its lack of intimacy, which in some readers can not unreasonably induce boredom.

During his army life Anthony Powell's narrator Nick Jenkins is, on one occasion, confronted by a general with a slim volume in his hand, asking what he thinks of Trollope. All the junior officer can find to say is: "Never found him easy to read, sir."

The general slowly repeats his words in accents of amazement and incomprehension, and then demands what the young whippersnapper reads

instead. After a pause of total blankness, "Well, there's Balzac, sir."

This provokes a further explosion. In fact the general is a man of deep humanity and penetrating observation, and one of the pleasures of the delightful scene is the gulf it reveals between the gentleman and—for want of a better word—the modernist. Flustered as he is, the narrator manages to get in one telling comment on Trollope, that "he does more thinking than feeling." On that note, and with recognition of the indubitable difference between Trollope and Balzac, the bounds of profitable discussion have been defined and must be abandoned.

Respectable Formalities

New Poetry—By JOHN MOLE

GIVEN ITS PUBLISHERS, who hail it on the cover as a brilliant new landmark, *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry*¹ must be considered as an event. Given the machinery of publishing, the commercial imperative and the demands of marketing, it must also be promoted as a *significant* event. In the publicity hand-out which accompanies my review copy, the word *major* is substituted for *brilliant*—"a major new landmark in anthologies of modern poetry."

So the pressure is on. Another anthology destined to be tossed to-and-fro between the cachet of its imprint, the claims of its editors, the society of its chosen few, and the talents of its individual poets—if the trees can be singled out from the wood. The more brilliant/major a publishing event, the more it merely serves the moment it seeks either to define or transcend. It is a collusion of innocent and knowing opportunism; a book with serious intentions which flies in, bags its place on the conveyor-belt of contemporary culture and hopes to make a bit of fuss at the customs while getting through.

In this particular case, it was a good idea to have a pair of editors, two heads being safer (if not more imaginative) than one, and more likely to vanish conveniently into the eventful mirror. The idiosyncratic, passionate partisan is always a risk. He is likely to turn up too early for the event, or behave inappropriately at it. With luck, he'll be an immediate success, but by and large perhaps it's better to

be careful. Certainly no single editor—least of all the already legendary Alvarez—could ever have written, "This is an anthology of what, over the last few years, a number of close observers have come to think of as the new British poetry." With what subtle modesty Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion smuggle through their unexceptional taste as party members of an élite committee of propagation. The whole tone of their introduction guarantees an authentic, insidiously safe anthology *à la mode*—a neat package of what can comfortably and comfortingly be felt to be important. It's not all that bad, but it *is* dispiritingly faceless—or rather, where a vivid face would have been welcome it wears the detached look of wisdom after the event. In places the modesty is tentative to the point of paralysis: ". . . it is now twenty years since the last serious anthology of British poetry was published . . . an unusually long gap, and to fill it with a representative anthology must in itself be some kind of service. We believe that we may be able to do rather more than that. . . ." *Some kind of, may be able to, rather more than. . .* Oh come on out and declare yourselves! (And, incidentally, what was so *unserious* about Edward Lucie-Smith's *British Poetry since 1945*, published by Penguin in 1970?) But maybe this is the limit of Morrison and Motion's capacity for declaration, once agreement has been reached. According to Morrison, quoted in the hand-out, things were not always so bland:

"Andrew Motion and I considered some fifty poets or so for inclusion but narrowed the choice to twenty: to do this we met, corresponded, exchanged phone calls, argued, compromised,

¹ *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry*. Edited by BLAKE MORRISON and ANDREW MOTION. Penguin, £1.95.

agreed, changed our minds again, and finally reached our decisions—remaining, as we began, good friends. There were differences but our tastes coincided to a remarkable degree.”

There is more vigour and sense of engagement in this short statement than in the whole of the judicious introduction (or rationale) as finally published. With the bald announcement “this anthology is intended to be didactic as well as representative” the editors come back from vacation. There is a shift from what seems to have been a home kitchen to an institutional dining hall, and the excitement of planning a menu and concocting a meal gives way to the respectable formalities of eating in college under the shadow of the high table “where tastes coincide to a remarkable degree.”

But what *proof* is in the eating? The poets are mostly under forty-five, with the exception of Anne Stevenson, Fleur Adcock, and Peter Scupham who was born in 1933 but did not publish his first book until 1972. And no one who appeared in Alvarez’s *The New Poetry*—however young he was at the time (e.g. John Fuller)—has been considered eligible for inclusion. Whereas, according to the editors, Alvarez “presented language as a mere instrument in a therapeutic transaction between writer and reader”, the twenty poets they have assembled (as against Alvarez’s slightly more generous twenty-eight) are set out to demonstrate a new relish for language. They are led by Seamus Heaney—“the most important new poet of the last fifteen years”—for whom language “embodies politics, history and locality, as well as having its own delectability.” Forces of disintegration, particularly the Irish Troubles, are seen as being approached obliquely, rather than through naked confrontation, in poems which have been made “to accommodate an uncommonly wide range of social responsiveness” through fictions, narratives, myth, emblematic landscapes, and analogues drawn from other troubled societies in which the artist finds himself an “inner *émigré*.” A sense of exile, where the poet—in Heaney’s words—sits “weighing and weighing/My responsible *tristia*”—predominates among several of the most serious and competent poets in the anthology, and (en masse) lies heavily despite the felicities of their surfaces. This is, perhaps, inevitable—although a poet such as James Simmons would have offered some variety without trivialising the theme—and the editors choose reliably from Heaney, Michael Longley, Derek Mahon and Tom Paulin, establishing in each case a strong, individual voice. Their selection from Paul Muldoon is distorted by their over-valuation of his clever extravaganza “Immram.”

TONY HARRISON AND DOUGLAS DUNN deserve their places—two poets whose uneasy relation-

ship both with their provincial, working-class upbringing and with “the cultural establishment” has been the source of much energetic and moving work. Harrison makes the stronger impact, while Dunn is given more space. Other good poets include James Fenton, Peter Scupham (made to look much more of a miniaturist than he is), Fleur Adcock and Anne Stevenson. These are various talents, presented even-handedly, and in most instances they endorse an apparent preference for intelligent, humane, well-crafted verse. There is nothing fugitive. Almost without exception they come from a well-established and narrow range of publishers who have nursed their reputations, but they do leave one wondering why the many excellent small presses must be seen as having contributed apparently so little of significance to “contemporary poetry.”

Which brings me to what disappoints and worries me most about the anthology. Praising Heaney in his recent notebook, *The Private Art*, Geoffrey Grigson wrote:

“Sometimes a single image out of a poem goes up into the dark and hangs there by itself, and says ‘Watch! Watch for more!’ and we know of a new poet. For me that was so with the last stanza in Seamus Heaney’s ‘Sunlight’

*And here is love
like a tinsmith’s scoop
sunk past its gleam
in the meal bin.*

‘Watch’ says the image, in its sudden possession of the dark, ‘Watch’, it says, ‘but you may be disappointed.’”

This is certainly a fine image, arising as it does out of a depth of feeling, an exact, sensuous register of personal emotion; but in so much contemporary verse, as approved by Morrison and Motion, there are just too many smart images going up in the dark and hanging there, rootless. Introducing the so-called “Martian school”, brilliantly beamed up by Craig Raine and Christopher Reid, the editors note that these writers share a delight in outrageous simile and like to “twist and mix” language—verbs suggestive of poker and cocktails respectively, and, in their innocence, witnessing to the superficiality which is rather anxiously denied in stressing that the Martians’ ingenuity does not prevent them from expressing emotion. But, yes, they do play a game for quick returns, and they are intoxicating, and their influence and reputation continue to grow. They have taken the element of visual epiphany which is a vivid strength in Heaney, isolated it, mixed in the cunning of the riddler, and made it a device—monotonous in its little frissons of amazing freshness. They, and to a less spectacular extent other more anecdotal poets in this anthology, will sacrifice far too much to a verbal coup. That they

should be given so much space in such a selective book is depressing. It's a selling short of the full resources of poetry, highlighting a fashion certainly, but giving far too much credence to a very partial story which should look infinitely more redundant in twenty years time than anything to be found in Alvarez. But, then, is that *should* mere wishful thinking? Maybe *The Penguin Book of Contemporary Poetry*, in its confident representation and didacticism, will contribute to an increasing detachment of the elements of poetry from poetry itself. I can only hope not.

DEREK MAHON'S NEW COLLECTION² contains several poems good enough to place alongside his "A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford", a justly celebrated piece, and one of the best in the Penguin Book. It is not only in his confident use of the familiar stanza form that Mahon can be seen as the Marvell amongst his contemporaries and compatriots. He is a truly witty writer, and his recent work reminds me of T. S. Eliot's observation that all too often one is confronted by "serious poets who seem afraid of acquiring wit lest they lose intensity." That this is a genuine risk is illustrated by numerous, honourable present-day poets, but in Mahon's case what Eliot calls "wit's internal equilibrium" is immediately evident. Whereas there has always been a tough reasonableness behind his sometimes very slight lyric grace, there are all the signs that the lyric grace in itself is becoming tougher:

*I lived there as a boy and know the coal
Glittering in its shed, late-afternoon
Lambency informing the deal table,
The ceiling cradled in a radiant spoon.*

That *informing*, in the third line, is characteristic of Mahon's imagination and skill; it's a modest word but brilliantly exact, a perfect functional pairing with the more obviously "poetic" *lambency*. In a poem which, like so many in the book, holds darkness and light in an intense equilibrium, it presents light as a virtue, as an element of the imagination possessing the material world and shaping it from within. Mahon's poems are full of radiant objects which shine all the brighter for their setting in a dark, chilly universe of exile and unrest, and a hard, crystalline energy informs the measured verse.

Mahon can, at times, appear a solemnly playful, self-aware doomsday dandy, and in "Another Sunday Morning" he simultaneously assumes and is amused by the stance. The echoes of Robert Lowell are unmistakable and, given the title, clearly deliberate, but the sardonic viewpoint is more reminis-

² *The Hunt by Night*. By DEREK MAHON. Oxford University Press, £4.00.

THE FOUNDATIONS OF CONSERVATIVE THOUGHT: An Anglo-American Tradition in Perspective

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cent of Louis MacNeice in Regents Park than Lowell in Central. Mahon's temperament sets a limit to his sense of public responsibility:

*A chiliastic prig, I prowl
Among the dog-lovers and growl;
Among the kite-fliers and fly
The private kite of poetry—*

There are echoes of Dark Tower Yeats, too, particularly in the fifth stanza of "To the Unborn", and assuming the persona of Knut Hamsun in Old Age, Mahon confronts one of Yeats's most celebrated lines:

*One fortunate in both would have us choose
"Perfection of the life or of the work."
Nonsense, you work best on a full stomach
As everybody over thirty knows—
For who, unbreakfasted, will love the lark?
Prepare your protein-fed epiphanies,
Your heavenly mansions blazing in the dark.*

This is well-put and crucial, but Mahon's own epiphanies are protein-fed and he knows, with an exquisite guilt, that he's well-breakfasted. He's not going to deny his gift for the sake of an obligatory solemnity. The dark remains a *backdrop* to offset the vivid inventions of his verse, and when in the volume's title poem he posits for a moment that Uccello's marvellous rampant pageantry "were not the great/Adventure we suppose but some elaborate/Spectacle put on for fun/And not for food" he catches exactly the tension set up throughout his work. His own hunt by night has a private beast in view—the anxious source of his vivid and generous imagination.

IN SOME WAYS similar to Derek Mahon's, though lacking his kind of formal elegance—and, I suspect, mistrusting it—Anne Stevenson's recent poems are at the same time anxious and generous, brittle yet open to a wide range of experience which sometimes overwhelms them. *Minute by Glass Minute*³ is puritan and celebrant, and the glass that Anne Stevenson keeps looking through (the title of this new book is reminiscent of the earlier *Travelling Behind Glass*) both separates her from the world and irradiates it. "When we belong to the world/we become what we are", she asserts at the end of "Poem to my Daughter", but she knows that consciousness, the self-awareness of her art, is a holding back:

*Another day in March. Late
rawness and wetness. I hear my mind say,
if only I could paint essences*

³ *Minute by Glass Minute*. By ANNE STEVENSON. Oxford University Press, £4.50.

She keeps hearing what her mind says, and she answers back with litanies of the actual. Several poems in the book weave their way philosophically in and out of exact, sensuous transcriptions such as:

*Beechhole, cheekbone of the interior,
Sugaring maple, tap of sour soil,
Woody sweetness, wine of the honeybark,
Mountain trickle, bitter to the tongue.*

but there is a strenuous, mannered air about the way Anne Stevenson registers her doubts and tentative certainties. "Burnished" is an interesting poem in this respect. It begins:

*Walking out of Hay in the rain, imagining
Blake
imagining the real world into existence,
I suddenly turned on him and said with
energy—
How dare you inflict imagination on us!
What halo does the world deserve? And he—
Let worlds die burnished, as along this bank.*

"What halo does the world deserve?" The question is rhetorical and has a double edge; it is recriminating and, at the same time, hesitantly affirmative. At its centre is the quarrel out of which Anne Stevenson makes an authentic, if somewhat befuddled poetry. The tug between what, in the long poem "Green Mountain, Black Mountain", she defines as "ghost-pull" and "animal pull" leaves rather too much unresolved although it's fascinating as oblique autobiography and as an exploration of the contrasts between her New England upbringing and her more recent experience.

An incidental strength in Anne Stevenson's work is her acute feeling for moments of pain in human relationships—there's a world of horror and compassion in the portrait of her dying mother ("she was dying at us")—but in the same poem she can be mockingly whimsical in her excessive use of simile. Stanzas 11-13 of section five of "Green Mountain, Black Mountain" announce the Martian invasion of Vermont.

FOR DR ANIMUS, in Anne Stevenson's "Small Philosophical Poem", "the world is the pleasure of thought." It's a pleasure intensified by the "small glass of doubt" which his wife Anima pours him. Alistair Elliot is a poet who belongs in such stringently meditative company where thoughts, as he says, are often "like shop-windows standing between/us and our ease" but keep on coming and are shaped with relish into poems. In fact the poems themselves become a kind of ease, in that Elliot is an immensely *urbane* poet who has given back strength to that somewhat bland term. His work is full of scholarship, wit and observation, and it's appropriate that one of the poems should take as its epigraph Dr Johnson's comment "He that travels in

the Highlands may easily saturate his soul with intelligence, if he will acquiesce in the first account." Elliot's poems are certainly saturated with intelligence, but never enclosed. They are open to everyday experience, and some of the most moving of them in *Talking Back*⁴ result from a learned acquiescence to the commonplace. For example, the "kitchen full of folk" to which he delivers a message in "Ingredients of a Sleepless Night in Wales" is illuminated by the passing reference to *Piers Plowman*, fitted quite naturally into a conversational idiom. There's nothing precious about this—Elliot's poetic personality is far too gregarious ever to lay itself open to the charge of rarified erudition—but the approach it demonstrates is what makes poems which, on the surface, are about ancestors, families, travel and passing events, work effectively at a far deeper level.

Alistair Elliot's skill is equally evident in his dexterous, juicy versions of Verlaine's *Femmes/Hombres*.⁵ When asked what brush he painted his women with, Renoir is said to have replied "*avec mon chibre*." In this collaboration *chibre* has spoken to *chibre* across the years, and is obviously the only tool fit for the job:

*You are not the most fond of love
Of women who have tried me on;
You are not the most spicy of
My women of the year just gone.*

*But I adore you anyway!
Besides, your sweet, mild body in
Its final calm knows how to say
All that is fatly feminine*

Fatly feminine and rampantly male, *Femmes/Hombres* is a catalogue of mutual delights without what Burns (and Elliot) calls the "consequential sorrows."

AND THIS SEEMS a suitable point of intermission at which to mention Gavin Ewart's entertaining new collection of short poems, *More Little Ones*.⁶ There are limericks, clerihews, haiku, one-liners, all competing for the prize for the most memorable brevity. Some of the best are not that far distant from Verlaine ("Pantoum: Worship", for example) while others, such as the couplet on Seamus Heaney—"He's very popular among his mates./ I think I'm Auden. He thinks he's Yeats"—are perhaps too complex in their multiple

⁴ *Talking Back*. By ALISTAIR ELLIOT. Secker & Warburg, £4.95.

⁵ *Femmes/Hombres*. By PAUL VERLAINE. Translated by ALISTAIR ELLIOT. Anvil Press, £3.95.

⁶ *More Little Ones*. By GAVIN EWART. Anvil Press, £3.50.

⁷ *A Rift in Time*. By PATRIC DICKINSON. Chatto & Windus, £3.95.

ironies to appeal widely outside the literary metropolis.

In a poetic climate which favours irony and cunning, and in which *content* is often the merely necessary means towards the desired end of stylistic novelty, Patric Dickinson's candid lyricism is as refreshing as it is rare. The poems in *A Rift in Time*⁷ are, to take Hardy's definition of poetry, "emotion put into measure", and their authenticity transcends fashion. The language is unspectacular, the verse forms traditional, but they serve the purpose of a poet whose depth of feeling is best conveyed by the simplest means. I find Dickinson's work often very moving indeed; it is immediate, and subtle in its modesty—though the *personality* is too awkward, even irascible in its loves and hates, ever to be described as self-effacing. Dickinson's kind of straightforwardness is a balance of the commonplace and the idiosyncratic. Here is the second of two poems entitled "Seathwaite Falls":

*Walking up the tortuous path
Up through the rocks and bracken
Towards the falls,
I felt so heavenly shed
Of being, yet nothing gone,
An angel's nakedness,
I stopped and you climbed nearer.
I was so little dead*

JAMES BALDWIN

JIMMY'S BLUES

Selected Poems

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Sometimes quiet and reflective, sometimes violent and bitter, this first selection of James Baldwin's poetry reflects many of the themes of his best known novels.

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MICHAEL JOSEPH

*So not alone with love,
You had to be silent there
By the never-silent waters
And nothing heard, if spoken.*

*—Your kind of coming back
Our ever-flowing on.*

This strikes me as an exemplary lyric. I have read it aloud several times, appreciating its pauses, repetitions and emphases—the discreet impetus of that second “up” at the beginning of the second line, the exact placing of “heavenly” which anticipates “an angel’s nakedness” but might at first be mistaken for mere effusion, the “nothing heard” in verse three which echoes and complements the “nothing gone” in verse two, and the absolute clarity with which a complex perception is expressed in the last two lines. By no means all of *A Rift in Time* is as impressive as this, but even a handful of poems of such quality makes it a book for which to be grateful.

I ADMIRED Gillian Clarke’s previous collection, *The Sundial*, but found rather too many of her vivid, sensuous nature poems marred by neat, moralistic codas. *Letter from a Far Country*⁸ trusts more in the power of metaphor to teach through revelation, and is a various, impressive book. The title poem, written for radio, explores the role of the home-centred wife and mother “who ought to be/up to her wrists in marriage” in the context of place and history, those “dead grandmothers” who

*... haul at the taut silk cords;
set us fetching eggs, feeding hens,
mixing rage with the family bread,
lock us to the elbows in soap suds.
Their sculleries and kitchens fill
with steam, sweetness, goosefeathers.*

From wrists to elbows, as the sense of history and restless disquiet intensifies throughout a poem which is—paradoxically—also a celebration. Gillian Clarke is best, though, as in her earlier work, at making her reader aware of what she calls “the otherness of pain.” That is the farthest country of all. It crowds her poems with intimations, and she looks resolutely in its direction.

⁸ *Letter from a Far Country*. By GILLIAN CLARKE. Carcanet, £3.25.

⁹ *Reading Geographies*. By MICHAEL CULLUP. Carcanet, £3.25.

¹⁰ *The Agricultural Engineer*. By JOHN LOVEDAY. Priapus Press (37 Lombardy Drive, Berkhamsted, Herts.), 50p.

¹¹ *Day Book*. By JOHN COTTON. Priapus Press, £2.00.

¹² *Being Glass*. By EMMA ROSE. Priapus Press, 50p.

MICHAEL CULLUP, whose first book *Reading Geographies*⁹ brings together the work of sixteen years, is another poet who doesn’t scorn subject matter and is attentive to the particular moment. He is quoted by his publisher as believing “. . . as Edward Thomas put it when writing of Robert Frost, in words being *bound together and made elements of beauty by a calm eagerness of emotion*.” Unfortunately, although the poems are well-crafted, there is a tendency for the calm to become blandness, and Cullup takes rather too many short cuts in his attempts to establish mood:

*There are leaves in my mind, dying leaves.
It must be autumn, judging by the weather.
Something is smouldering somewhere.
The boughs creak.*

There’s a kind of precision about this, but it begins to seem like the after-effects of feeling—too measured a transcription—rather than a re-creation. “Something is smouldering somewhere” may be genuinely perceptive but it is also curiously null. The best poems in *Reading Geographies* are about people, and the best of all is “The Ailing Gentlewoman”, in which a clever use of banal parentheses catches the mood of twilight gentility:

*The world too being delicate as the snow was,
So that the nature of one’s disorder
Fell so much without complaint to the
ground
One felt healed, in a manner of speaking,
The ground being covered by snow
As it were by a mantle, over all,
So that one looked from one’s world out on
to it
Lying there,
With a sense of rightness at its being so
Just as it was, fallen,
One was grateful, in a way, for its being like
that:
Without hurt, white, and quite silent.*

JOHN COTTON’S ADMIRABLE Priapus Press has just celebrated its twentieth year in backroom business, and I’d urge anyone who feels that volumes like *The Penguin Book of Contemporary Poetry* are less than sufficient to send for its complete list. To do so at once, in fact, since today’s decision so often becomes tomorrow’s good intention. Among the press’s recent publications three particularly successful items stand out: John Loveday’s vivid rural vignettes from the 1930s and ’40s, *The Agricultural Engineer*,¹⁰ John Cotton’s own *Day Book*,¹¹ which is a series of thirty-two “fragments” moving adroitly in and around themes of personal and social concern, and Emma Rose’s *Being Glass*.¹² Emma Rose is a young poet of real promise. Although her imagery is often too tightly packed,

and her intensity self-enclosed and brittle—"Always inside I am looking out"—she has an excellent ear and a gift for touching in the minutest detail. Her imagination leans towards the surreal, and she needs to beware of whimsy, but her sense of a poem's necessary shape restrains her from excess. More of her work can be found in *Flags for the Occasion*,¹³ a beautifully produced pamphlet from the Dodman Press which also publishes the excellent poetry magazine *Grand Piano*, and this is a

characteristic example: "Ceremonial":

*Glass and dust make a fine cutting edge,
but glass for all its brilliance is not
what they have come for, nor for dust,
although
they hope to gain something from this.*

*The candle and the solemn dog.
A ring is poised between her thumb and
finger,
around it promises and rituals
whose light strikes glass in patterns of frail
gold.*

¹³ *Flags for the Occasion*. By EMMA ROSE. The Dodman Press (24 West Hill, Hitchin, Herts.), £1.25.

Sinners

There is a kind of mumbling song
Concentrated, taken up.
I stare at the bandaged heads that turn
To the wayside gathering. Are they
Thinking of the spectacle they make?

Under the hurt brows
The eyes live.
I see my image in their lakes
Calming waves, the sun behind me.
The young man who was dead
Sits up. Silence,
Then a kind of rumbling sound
And heads turn up as though
To hear a voice.
On the poor hillside
The houses sit
Ready for earthquake. The young man
stands.

The storm is gesturing far off
And shouting. Its anger travels in.
I move to the group unwrapping my
Deformity, sensing their greed
For wholesomeness, the frantic praying.

I look at the tired man
Curing and raising.
In his black eyes new images:
The garments and hats of Pharisees
Talking together,
Stepping distastefully this way
Past the poor houses and cripples.
They come to spurn
Our hopes with the No of orthodoxy.
They find devils and magic
At this harmless wayside,
And say our sickness makes us sinners.

Patrick Hare