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Roderick Watson

Scottish Poetry 1979-1980



Speaking is difficult and one tries
To be exact and yet not to
Exact the prime intention to death.
On the other hand the appearance of things
Must not be made to mean another
Thing. It is a kind of triumph
To see them and to put them down
As what they are.

("Approaches to How They Behave")

W.S. Graham's *Collected Poems, 1942-1977*¹ tell how he put the words down in six collections from 1942 to 1977 and how he has moved, not without difficulty indeed, closer to the appearance of things for "what they are." For many years his critical reputation rested on *The Nightfishing* (1955), but the appearance of *Malcolm Mooney's Land* in 1970 and then of *Implements in their Places* (1977) has allowed us to see the characteristic preoccupations of his work in a larger context. The present collection is made, we are told, from all the poems which the poet himself wishes to preserve. Graham has not lived in Scotland for a long time and yet, in the later books Scotland features quite often as he reassesses his youth and his debts to an upbringing in Greenock. It seems to me that

some of the best poems are written from this perspective, looking north from a cottage in Penzance, on the edge of things and (like his poetry) close to the sea.

The sea features in Graham's verses from the very start, particularly as a metaphor for the experience of the poet, venturing out into the nightfishing to see what he can catch, floating above all the figures from his past and dead or drowned fellow artists too:

I dive to knock on the rusted, tight
Haspt locker of David Jones.
Who looks out? A mixed company.
Kandinsky's luminous worms,
Shelley, Crane and Melville and all
The rest. Who knows? Maybe even Eliot.
(*"Implements in their Places"*)

Such fishing is a lonely task, but it is an isolation of the mind and not of place, as Graham recognises in wry lines addressed to a dead friend:

Speaking to you and not
Knowing if you are there
Is not too difficult.
My words are used to that.
(*"Dear Bryan Wynter"*)

Or consider Joachim Quantz's last words to his pupil Karl who has learned to match his master on the flute:

...What can I say more?
Do not be sentimental or in your Art.
I will miss you. Do not expect applause.
(*"Johann Joachim Quantz's Five Lessons"*)

Quantz knows the chill of creation in his "high cold room" as "Brueghel's winter / Locks the canal below" and he blows on his fingers to advise his pupil with a truly Scottish practicality--"Watch your fingers. Spring / Is apparent but it is still chillblain weather."

Such images from "the frozen tundra of the lexicon and the dictionary" occur often in the last two collections, where the unwritten white page can generate an almost arctic blast, as in the opening section of "Malcolm Mooney's Land":

From wherever it is I urge these words
 To find their subtle vents, the northern dazzle
 Of silence cranes to watch. Footprint on foot
 Print, word on word and each on a fool's errand.

Or the poet flies his message like a fragile kite that "bucks / And stalls then leaves the air / I thought I had made it for" ("Dear Who I Mean"); or he finds himself lodged in some ice crevasse—"would you ever want / To be down here on the freezing line / Reading the words that steam out / Against the ice? Anyhow draw / This folded message up between / The leaning prisms from me below" ("What Is the Language Using Us For?"). If these sound like poems about making poems (anathema to at least one critic I know of), then it must be recognised that much of W.S. Graham's very best work has been "about" the struggle with language and the essentially Beckettian recognition that words are trawled out of darkness as one goes along and yet can still, somehow, be made to make sense.

Graham's fascination with this process goes back to the syntactically dense and surreal "apocalyptic" poems of the forties. His first two collections, however, contain too many echoes from Thomas and Hopkins and from the alliterative compressions of Old English verse. The images are visionary and metaphysical, even sacramental, and yet they are strangely unresonant:

He who has been in exile
 By law of words left in a long field
 Ganged into stone and fierce foot still
 Against place and den of dug creatures,
 Who, hauled off love too into trial,
 Heard cry the voices waked blind
 As he lay white in a carriage of blood;
 ("By Law of Exile")

The lines are tremendously muscular but they lack force, for when the verse stops : the meaning stops and nothing lingers at all--except perhaps the reader's exasperation. It is a poetry that *seems* to want to celebrate the world, but it has no implications beyond the immediate dull thudding of its own words. Graham is much more successful when he comes to simpler and more direct statements in *The White Threshold* collection (1949). Here images of whiteness and light prefigure the "endless / Drifting hummock crests. / Words drifting on words. / The real unabstract snow" of "Malcolm Mooney's Land" but in this instance he equates them with the sea, with

the primal experience of childhood and with the white hair of old age:

Yes listen. It carries away
The second and the years
Till the heart's in a jacket of snow
And the head's in a helmet white
And the song sleeps to be wakened
By the morning ear bright.
Listen. Put on morning.
Waken into falling light.
("Listen. Put On Morning")

By 1955 and *The Nightfishing* the thirty-seven year old poet could produce beautifully cool lines ringing the changes on repeated words and phrases, still curiously abstract in places, but now completely convincing:

Now within the dead
Of night and the dead
Of my life I hear
My name called from far out.
I'm come to this place
(Come to this place)
Which I'll not pass
Though one shall pass
Wearing seemingly
This look I move as.
This staring second
Breaks my home away
Through always every
Night through every whisper
From the first that once
Named me to the bone.
("The Nightfishing")

Once again the task is to "name" things "to the bone," and autobiography, the sea, herring fishers and thoughts on creativity, identity and extinction all come together in the process. All things have become signs to be read--as they were in the earlier poems, only this time the message is clearer:

So this is the place. This
Is the place fastened still with movement,
Movement as calligraphic and formal as
A music burned on copper.

Such a cool, articulated and cerebral voice is well suited to make music of abstract meditation--reminiscent of poems in a similar vein by Burns Singer. At the same time it is successful as a language for direct physical action: "The hard slow haul of a net white with herring / Meshed hard, I haul, using the boat's cross-heave / We've started, holding fast as we rock back, / Taking slack as we go to."

At last Graham has begun to solve the perennial problem of what "the difficult one" is saying, as he was to put it in the 1977 volume:

I think I am beginning to have nearly
 A way of writing down what it is I think
 You say. You enunciate very clearly
 Terrible words always just beyond me.
 ("A Note to the Difficult One")

It seems to me that in parts of *The Nightfishing* and in the subsequent two volumes Graham has achieved a very fine contemplative poetry like the love poem "Letter VI" or the elegy for the painter Peter Lanyon called "The Thermal Stair." The clarity and precision of verses like these can be traced back, I believe, to those pieces from the earlier collections which dealt directly with Graham's roots in Greenock, as if the autobiographical context had kept his syntax more open. Thus "The Children of Greenock" from the 1949 collection, as well as the "Three Letters" sequence (and "To My Brother" in particular) have key elements which will be re-lived in fine later poems such as "Greenock at Night I Find You"; "Loch Thom" and the beautiful and painfully open understatement of the lines to his dead father "To Alexander Graham":

Dad, what am I doing here?
 What is it I am doing now?
 Are you proud of me?
 Going away, I knew
 You wanted to tell me something.

You stopped and almost turned back
 To say something. My father,
 I try to be the best
 In you you give me always.

Lying asleep turning
 Round in the quay-lit dark
 It was my father standing
 As real as life. I smelt

The quay's tar and the ropes.
I think he wanted to speak.
But the dream had no sound.
I think I must have loved him.

These and other verses, not forgetting the sequence "To My Wife At Midnight" which closes the *Collected Poems*, have achieved a powerful biographical and elegaic presence to complement W.S. Graham's more cerebral sense of the difficulty and the delight of moving language into meaning. The two concerns were linked in "The Dark Dialogues" from 1970 in which the poet explores his own sense of who he is and what he owes to his parents:

A man's step on the stair
Climbing the pipeclayed flights
And then stop still
Under the stairhead gas
At the lonely tenement top.

These dead people and that distant place are only recoverable in the medium of words and the poet sees a terrible solipsism there: "This is no other place / Than where I am, between / This word and the next." And yet the familiar chill is tempered by the last lines and a timely recognition of the fact of love and of the physical reality of the Greenock shipyard skyline:

Maybe I should expect
To find myself only
Saying that again
Here now at the end.
Yet over the great
Gantries and cantilevers
Of love, a sky, real and
Particular is slowly
Startled into light.

Seven years later the same recognition has developed into the witty questions of "What is the Language Using Us For?" and Malcolm Mooney's ice crevasse has given way to a smirr of rain and the "beginning wind"--a more familiar and homely landscape:

What is the language using us for?
I don't know. Have the words ever
Made anything of you, near a kind

Of truth you thought you were? Me
Neither....

David Black's landscapes are haunted by shadowy archetypes and images of fertility, cruelty, sensual beauty and renewal. His new collection, *Gravitations*,² consists for the most part of two long narrative tales, "Urru and Uppu" and "The Hands of Felicity" (after Grimm), and a dramatic monologue called "Notes for Joachim" in which a Trappist monk jots down his memories, temptations and philosophical speculations for the benefit of his confessor--"to help us understand my impulse to heresy / and to sodomising the blond and lovely children / of some of our more solvent parishioners." The territory and the tone are characteristically dry and angular as the poet sets out to trace "whatever webs are weaving on the loom of the mind," in order to surprise the Devil "there! black-handed! applying his subtle pressures, / polluting the dyes, or biassing the shuttle." Black-handed, indeed, for it is the oblique strategies of Black's mind allied to his ironically pedantic diction which makes these odd and obsessive tales grip us from their very first syllabic lines:

When the narrative demon sits astride my
cerebrum and compels with yells and jeers these a-
ppetitive cattle along some grass-less track I
find no pleasure in feeling bit and spurs! No,
surely nothing rewards these vehement labours
unless out of the wreck of sweat and flowers, I
glimpse that body, the intangible and lovely
woman's body again for whom I wayfare.
And when that is the case indeed how could I
ask for more?--Yet without conviction, rather with
apprehension I don the demon's mask, I
whistle and shout to the dogs, I heave at the rein, I
wheel my horse.

There are few defined beginnings
in the tissue of history...

("The Hands of Felicity")

To call the poems fairy tales, even Grimm ones, doesn't do them justice unless one invokes those other goblins, Kafka, Borges, Blake and Beckett, and even then, "much that is more precious / is forever destroyed by your minute in- / vasive precisions. And much, whatever care you / may bestow, is obscure beyond approaching." The danger with this voice, however, and its "blackish lucidity" is that its tone can become merely arch or elusive for its own sake, but for the most part

it avoids this pitfall and remains entertainingly *sui generis*. Consider the stiff-footed comedy of the syntax in "His mind errs to and fro as his great speed of walking / slowing moderates," or how the line-break is used in "no doubt the length of time that / blessings last is not susceptible to / mortal scrutiny." David Black is a master of these effects (remember "Delicacy was never enormously / My style" from *With Decorum?*), and he uses them to ensure the reader's constant interest. Yet the mythic patterns of the tales are larger and more disturbing, and more ambiguous, than a brief exposition could hope to indicate, just as Black disturbs us on a smaller scale with his psychological insights into the darker motivations behind these ostensibly "fairy tale" characters: "With what patience / the maimed wait for the active, and what power that / waiting generates!" Or again, he shakes us with moments of clumsy adolescent sensual transport that are enacted in the very structure of the lines:

Beyond low dunes the bay lapped at the shingle.
 In a mist of sensuality, on bicycles,
 we had pedalled, this girl and I, from a morgue of a
 suburb.

The single-mindedness of puberty
 required no further exploring of our relationship,
 and under a dull sky, giggling, ardent,
 awe-struck, we walked colliding among the scattered
 pine-trees, over the heather, until we came to
 this more concealing vegetation. True lust can
 be a sort of reverence. With what attention
 I undressed her childish woman's body. So gently

In these poems Black's gifts are those of the structural flow of the narrative voice itself--a considerable strength. He is a natural story teller whose poetry links the first-person psychology of Browning's dramatic monologues to something of the aureate and allegorical landscapes of Montgomerie's *Cherry and the Slae*--an odd and original contribution to the contemporary scene.

Donald Campbell's muse is more down to earth in witty poems like "Blether," "The Man in the Hous up the Stair" and in the sonnet "Aiberdeen," but the predominant impulse in his latest collection despite its title--*Blether*³--is romantic. Poems like "Thon Nicht" and "Minding" evoke a bitter-sweet nostalgia --"D'ye mind thon nicht? / Thon nicht langsyne / in the winter o our bairnheid?"--while "The Winds o January" and "In Frae the Cauld" counter the possibility of sentimentality with a reverse romanticism of their own:

confidence born of experience in a competent technique. Many different pieces in his *Collected Poems*⁴ testify to this ability, notably "Summer Daybreak, Innellen"; "Iona"; "Mozart's Salzburg"; "Callanish" and "Dans la Piscine," not to forget satirical forays like "School Prizegiving," "999" and "Programme Note," an absolutely hilarious attack on aleatoric music and avant-garde Mao-ism:

...Timpanists

advance to the rostrum, holding up their sticks
then, legs akimbo, facing the audience,
beat silence on capitalistic air.
Precisely at two hours fifty seconds,
they turn and strike the leader with their left sticks.
Immediately my music ceases, finished
until the next time it is re-created.

I consider applause artistocratic decadence...

The very early poems in this collection are less successful, but the remainder show a neo-classical ease, a settled capacity for phrase making that is entirely appropriate to "the careful words I meant to say." Verses like the excellent "Kelso Horse Show" suggest that Maurice Lindsay's primary talent is as a poet of social surfaces. Thus from the start he observed the world with a sharp-eyed interest in people and things, from "the jostling clatter of crowded shopping streets ...the boozy smell from lounging pubs that cheats / the penniless drunkard's thirst with its stale deceits," to "chattering women in tearooms, swaddled with furs, (who) pass knife-edged gossip like cakes" ("The Exiled Heart," 1946). Yet however well turned the lines might be, and I'm not sure about the personification of those "lounging" pubs, the result is not always imaginatively authentic. We know that postmen on bikes get hot, but somehow the actuality of the scene is diminished by the facility of lines like "the red-cheeked postman's out on his cycled rounds, / ferrying news of beyond through bordered flowers" ("Early Morning, Innellen"). The effect is pleasingly decorative, but although Lindsay is quite right to decry the thirst for novelty in contemporary poetry, I don't think that lines like these have allowed enough weight to Pound's advice to "make it new." The danger is that the world becomes stereotyped when cast in this urbane, Georgian mould, just as the farmer in "Epitaph for a Farmer" is humanly diminished when he is described as moving clumsily "like one of his own beasts...now and then bedding / some filly girl on the hayrick behind the shed." I wonder to myself--"filly

girl?" and "hayricks?"--in 1962? In another context Lindsay understands the process and notes that postcards sell well because they "claim to lay the constant on the table," whereas the real landscape is "an evasion of itself" ("A View of Loch Lomond"). This is well put and I'm not sure that his wit doesn't sometimes settle for the "constant," rather than tackle the more difficult "evasion," the very same "evasion" that exercised W.S. Graham in so many poems.

On the other hand there is little evasion (in the worst sense) about Lindsay's outspoken and civilised disgust for contemporary violence as expressed in honest and powerful poems like "Glasgow Nocturne," "Attending a Football Match," and "Glasgow Orange Walk." Nor does he succumb to the intellectual temptation to find a perverse glamour in bigotry and ugliness. In such poems it is his respect for the "constant" (in the best sense) that gives force to his outrage and pity; and yet, at the same time, it must be recognised that the force is also fuelled by a certain distaste for contemporary surfaces in general. Thus "How Do You Do?" and "Sightseeing in Philadelphia" seem rather unwilling to accept the supermarkets we all use, far less the populated city scene. Neither the poet's attitude nor the nature of supermarkets are finally illuminated and we are left instead with a bad taste in the mouth of the protagonist, a dusty flavour of fastidiousness about class and culture. I think of this effect as characteristically English--Philip Larkin often shares it, but Edwin Morgan's Glasgow poems never do, nor do American writers, as witness William Carlos Williams in the back lots of Paterson, or Allan Ginsberg in his poem "A Supermarket in California."

This comes down to something of a paradox: I think that Maurice Lindsay's confident civility is the source of his best work and yet sometimes it demonstrates a failing in his sensibility. Thus I prefer the poems where he seems less secure about himself and the world, as in "Accident Report" where other peoples' vulnerability becomes for a moment our own; or in the nakedness of "These Two Lovers"; or in "Seen Out," "Farm Widow" and "Summer Sales" which show an unforced compassion; or in "Picking Apples," a fine poem about a disconcerting moment:

the apples thud down; thud on the orchard grasses
in rounded, grave finality, each one after

the other dropping; the muffled sound of them dropping
like suddenly hearing the beats of one's own heart

falling away, as if shaken by some storm
as localised as this....

Such lines *do* reach that landscape which is "an evasion of itself," or as Lindsay puts it a few lines later: "the kind of touch and go / that poetry makes satisfaction of."

*A Day Between Weathers*⁵ by William J. Tait contains poems collected from a period of forty years writing and so it is not surprising that there should be several voices at work in the book. In early work from the "Rumours of Wars" section the sensibility is rather too "literary" as when self-consciousness and self-parody mingle in "Phoney-War Blues" and "Letter to AJLH." Even so, we are aware of a craftsmanlike writer who has learned from MacNeice and Auden, for Bill Tait shows metrical skill (see "Homecoming") and a good ear for rhyme and half rhyme. The danger of such facility, however, is that the accomplished smoothness of the iambic rhythms can deny expressive force to feeling. "In Memoriam W.S." (1941) is a fine elegy for a dead airman and a brief passage will serve to show Tait's strength and the moments at the very end, when the form begins to dictate too much:

If I should say I knew him well,
I should not know how much I lied;
How much that is essential still is held
In single sharp-edged image, and how much transferred
To slowly forming figure, veiled,
Inviolable, through lapse and fade.
I know at least a score of ways to tell
A tale coherent, self-consistent, and a fraud.
Yet he would rather have me fail
In art than honesty, than add
Another gilded airman to the tale
Of greater anonymity. He was no god,
Nor even Icarus. He fell
Ungracefully from out the hood
Of burnished copper to the desert grill.
Vest him with no lithe Spitfire...

The later English poems demonstrate greater variety, like "Maldon Road Blues" and "The Fault" which is reminiscent of Edwin Muir. Others are more humorous and often surprisingly elegant and witty in their outlook. I say "surprisingly" because many of the poems in the collection are in Shetlandic, as well as some in Scots, and it seems as if Tait has (at least) two very different poetic personae. The Shetland poems have a rugged directness as in "Hogmanay Sermon" or in

the long title piece, "A Day Atween Waddirs," where the poet evokes the shifting effects of sun and rain on the rocky coast and seems to be completely at home as he looks down on a communal landscape of ruined crofts and standing stones:

Bit here im I back da day, an, warm as I mind
 Da streen--0 a day atween waddirs wis dat,
 Toh da sun never shone, fur whatena sun needed we?--
 Da aald name chaps at my lug, da stane,
 Caad doon an cut dis hunder year an mair,
 I can still see standin ahint, if I turn-na my haid,
 An its shedow faas afore laek da shape o a tree.
 Ahint, toe, da roefliss hoose wi da raabit waa;
 An afore, whin da ee rins doon ta da aidge o da sea,
 Da hellakroess happit in green. [the buried dead]

The very resistance of the Shetland words carries an effective poetic force, all the more striking for the fact that the poet is speaking very plainly, laying out what he sees, as he sees it. Something of the same strength informs the poems in Scots too, many of which are translations from Villon. By comparison, the later poems in English make a much more sophisticated commentary on the poet's involvement with erotic experience and the whimsical features of the passing literary scene. "The Benefactor" and "La Belle Dame de la Disco" have a dandyish air to them, found again in the meticulous articulation of "25 B" and "To Jackie":

Your name, slim, epicene, belies you. Not
 But what you're slender. Legs like shafts that drive
 From heel to hip-bone, turned immaculately-
 Jointed, articulated, clean of line-
 Yet blur, confuse, delectably all but blend,
 Then change their mind, even more delectably.

Nothing could be further from that day "atween waddirs"; and in the last analysis, the difference is not a matter of developing style or old poems and new poems. It stems instead from those untraceable links that bind together how we feel (and even what it is *possible* for us to experience), with how we speak, or how we "hear" the words in our heads.

The challenge to find an appropriate poetic "voice," this time in a genuinely everyday Scots diction, is raised again in Duncan Glen's *Realities Poems*.⁶ This book is a substantial collection of sequences, most of which have appeared before in separate smaller publications from Akros. Glen's concern is to work out his "realities," namely what he knows, trusts in

or believes as an individual, as opposed to the hectic or alienating faces of the modern world. Thus "The Inextinguishable" sets a romantic vision of light, landscape and spiritual aspiration against intimations of human regimentation, racism and bigotry. These dualities are each given their own syntax and the poem is built up from the repetition of key phrases, sound effects and "concrete" lexical patterns which interpenetrate and struggle for mastery before "the inextinguishable" finally wins through. It is an effective "experimental" piece, willing to take risks, well suited to reading aloud and essentially dramatic in conception. If some of the other sequences are less successful, it may be because they are less creatively dramatic. "Follow! Follow! Follow!" makes heavy weather out of juxtaposing football and philosophical speculations about religion, "Ane to Anither" explores the mysteries of love, identity and language; and "This Perfect Beauty Seen" cogitates on Plotinus and "the nature of the One." I don't think that the problem of writing extended poetic discourse has been solved in these sequences--or, at least not consistently solved. Too many of the lines seem to be rhythmically or imaginatively diffuse, with a tendency to explain rather than to demonstrate or re-create.

The Ane aye there
 ayont aa that is in Being or Form
 continuously pourin out Life and Creativity. Frae it
 the Being of Supreme Intellect
 you tell us Plotinus
 and the licht of luve
 as bricht as ony side of intellect
 abune the lower forms of Being
 and yet the Ane uncheynged
 gien out abundance without end
 and without necessity or need. The Ane...
 ("This Perfect Beauty Seen")

This lasts for several pages and although Glen seems to have deliberately chosen to keep it abstract (the capitalised nouns become intrusive after a while) one cannot help missing the racy stresses and the dynamic images which MacDiarmid would have given to a similarly metaphysical flight. By the same token, compared to MacDiarmid's voraciously synthesising ego, the persona of "Ane to Anither," for example, sounds rather thin and defensive, insistent rather than inspired. A defensive note of a different sort is struck by the protagonist's "voice" in "Naitur Lover" and by the pub pundits in "Of Philosophers and Tinks." This time, however, the speaker is

coarser and more aggressive, the characteristic tone of Scottish insecurity: "You think you can laugh frae your PhD heichts...But I hae read philosophers tae." The genre is familiar and not unwelcome, but the lines lack the confidence of MacDiarmid and, perhaps, more tellingly, the expansive generosity of Sydney Goodsir Smith.

I believe that the strength of this collection lies in the less ambitiously eclectic poems and in particular in those drawn from domestic experience and the places and place-names which Glen finds so evocative. Thus "A Stert and an End" plays ten variations on a mundane back garden setting, until the man digging, his wife, the cat, the wind and "the leaves birlin heich to the sky," form a succession of ordinary patterns that come to seem less and less ordinary. In this poem Glen never strives for more than a cool, prosaic, descriptive statement and his unadorned Scots diction is best suited to this tone. The same sober openness can be found in "Houses" and "Open Lands" from the more autobiographical "Days and Places" group, reminiscent of fine earlier poems like "My Faither." The "Traivellin Man" and "Scotland's Hert" sequences take a droll look at the public face of the country and the culture to which Duncan Glen has given so much of his time and energy as editor and publisher, and the title poem of the latter is straight-facedly hilarious:

I would screive o Scotland
And mak a unity o it

but
ken nae word o Gaelic
though I've had three fortnichts in the hielants
and went on a boat to Lochboisdale
wi hauf an 'our ashore. In Inverness I was that lanely
I went to bed early. In Fort William it rained

Glen adopts the persona of an art gallery attendant for "In Place of Wark"--and his gentle comments on modern art and the contemporary public are in the fine satirical tradition of Garioch's Edinburgh sonnets. The reader is convinced of the actuality of what the poet observes in these thirty short pieces:

I sit in my moulded black chair
near to Matisse's 'Draped Nude' (1936).

Sometimes someane touches a canvas
and I staun up, which is usually enough.
I'm no a man o unnecessary words.

Sometimes I adjust the thermostat.

Nor does the effective plainness of this aspect of Glen's work depend on irony, although there are many ironical moments in the art gallery. Thus, in "A Sort of Renewal," the poet lists twenty-three memory snapshots from his childhood, youth and maturity--"spots of time" recollected for their own sake and delivered in the present tense. The trivial and the important share equal weight, each associated with a specific hour on the clock and quite free from metaphor or affective colouring:

It's five o'clock and Sunday.
A winter's day and wet wi sleet.
It's time for tea at grandma's house
which is Aunt Jean's and Uncle Willie's tae.
It's time for scrambled egg wi cheese
when we visit ilka Sunday.

("Five P.M.")

Such stripped, "artless" statement is more sophisticated than it looks and, as with "A Stert and an End" and some other poems in this mode, it operates very successfully without the need for authorial explanation or metaphysical expansion by way of references to Wittgenstein, MacDiarmid, Wordsworth or Plotinus.

Walter Perrie's *By Moon and Sun*⁷ plunges us back into a complex of allusions and other people's systems, for it is a long and elevatedly philosophical love poem addressed to Jonathan, the Biblical comrade and lover of David, who is celebrated as both bed mate and muse. Yet it loses both concentration and impact by adopting its tone of extended rhapsody and if Jonathan is a real person at all, then we learn very little about him. Instead, Perrie makes him something of a demiurge so that he can carry what seems to be the poet's primary interest in symbolic, literary allusion and the controlling metaphor of alchemical refinement, regeneration and the marriage of opposites. Indeed, the means seem to have taken over the end in this poem, for the text is heavily supplied with alchemical woodcuts, and references and footnotes to everything from Baudelaire to the Bible to Ben Dorain. The end result is that the poem fails to convey a coherent imaginative imperative and one is left to suspect that it operates instead under a kind of modernist camouflage. It cannot help

single voice whose cool and understated tones have pursued his developing theme with an admirable, not to say sometimes daunting, consistency. The poet's "circular journeys" begin with *Instances* in 1967 with a wry observation of the world sometimes reminiscent of Norman MacCaig, as in "Virtuoso," addressed to a water spider: "Water is sticky. I know that from books, / you know it when you break the skin and drown." Two years later, *Inventories* is exploring the bleak landscape that Fulton has come to make his own--a Scotland of open moors and northern light where the eye is caught between the sheerness of height and space and the small details of sticks, roots and stones:

It's not difficult to stay, passive
to the heathery wind and summer rain, curious
about the age of wiry bits of trees
preserved in peat-banks the water is hollowing out.

Leaving such a place behind you
is another matter.

("Remote")

This is a mental perspective too, and in such chilly spaces the poet is seen as a person who makes lists--inventories--just as he does in his city flat at home ("Loch Araich-Lin"; "Cleaning Up"; "Attic Finds"). But always there is an echo of unease and an odd detachment, as if experiences and memories were things to be found and handled, or numbered or discarded.

His memories were the most difficult to remove.
He plucked out armfuls of undergrowth,
surprised at the toughness of old stems
and the brightness of secret flowers,
he couldn't understand how
they could be so tangled and still live.

("Cleaning Up")

A similarly clear-headed sense of alienation appears in "Describing a City" and "A Cleared Land" from *The Spaces Between the Stones* (1971), and in other pieces where Fulton restricts his focus even more, to produce poems from numbered sequences of short, gnomic utterances ("Variations on a Pine-Tree" and "The Spaces Between the Stones"). Some reviewers criticised such work for being too clinical, and certainly between these "stones" the "words have no shadows." It was the poet's intention, I think, to move closer to something like the "narrowing intensity" described by MacDiarmid in "On

a Raised Beach," nevertheless, the danger and the paradox is that such extreme terseness can become almost melodramatic, or turn into a set of angst-ridden epigrams. When it works, however, this detached intellectual style can still stir our imaginations, if only to freeze them again a moment later:

The new spaces are not between the stones,
The new spaces are inside the stones.

Columbus sails on nothing, a multi-million-
to-one chance of striking a particle.

The edge of the world is now wherever you choose
to fall off, the edge is everywhere.

The Man with the Surbahar (1971) marks a welcome return to a more human world although its use of many numbered sequences is a little testing for the reader, with more than a flavour of "frail mathematics" (indeed, the sequences are pruned in this selection). "The Cold Musician" and "The Voice of the Surbahar" add Fulton's passion for music to his poetic vocabulary and yet even Vivaldi and raga are subsumed to the controlling imagery of hard light and northern frost. The city dweller's domestic scene is hauntingly evoked in "Hung Red" and "Interiors Without Walls," a world of windows, flickering TV screens, neighbour's parties, atrocities on the news, quarrels and conversations, all overheard or over-seen by the passive observing poet. Fulton's stance is at times almost oppressively introspective, and yet the denser texture of these poems produces powerful effects, for we recognise and respond to more of the practical world in them. Consider, for example, the implications behind these lines on a pottery ornament, always remembering that the owl is a symbol of wisdom:

On the mantelpiece there's an earthenware owl
with two black empty holes for eyes.
He's been staring through me now for years.
He stares through my friends. Sometimes we stare back.
Through love and music that he can't see, he lasts.
("The Voice of the Surbahar")

Fulton's refined exploration of the existential tundra which he discovered in a world of middle class interiors is continued in the poems from *Tree Lines* (1974), as when the poet struggles with an intolerable sense of pressure while music and conversation surround him ("Underwater") or when "Septem-

ber the First" catches him in a characteristic stance:

I stand at the window. Green sprigs clutter the street,
rain flashes, furious and horizontal in the sunlight
that whitens and hurts like a prolonged magnesium flare.
It shines through me, I am a transparent ghost,
an ice skeleton with an unwanted view of the pure
stark horizon...

The spirit of these lines is in clear accord with Robin Fulton's long standing affinity with Swedish writers for he has done at least six volumes of translations from Swedish poets. This interest and his admiration for Ingmar Bergman reach their finest expression in a complete sequence dedicated to the hero of *The Seventh Seal*, the knight who plays chess with death. "In Memoriam Antonius Block" is a very fine poem and it stands as the climax of the *Selected Poems* and something of a summation of all Fulton's earlier themes and images. He makes evocative use of birch forests, city streets and the rooms we call home, all bathed in that even northern light and murmuring with many voices, including echoes from the opening lines of the *Inferno*--"*Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita...*"

"Once, in a glade, I saw a dead leaning birch
reflected in a pool so still the reflection
was in clearer focus than the tree itself. My mind's
eye
is too sharp for comfort as I stumble beneath the trees.

Once, in a glade, I cut my name on bark and added
I am in the middle of life. Now years on
no longer able to add, I cut again
I am in the middle of life still beneath the trees."

He is walking alone across a white plain...

This is the perfect expression of Fulton's sense of the almost filmic distance between himself and a world where the spaces between the stones have expanded to fill the landscape, and the poet's eye has become all ice--Bergman's camera, indeed:

Ultimate adaptation: to be transparent,
to stand against the wall and be one with the wall,
an eye without substance yet seeing everything.

It is not an adaptation that many of us would care to make.

The later poems, from 1973 to 1978 are less intensely inverted, they show a lighter touch and a further advance into the world of people and places ("A Fifteenth Century Triptych"; "Turning Forty"; "Undated Photograph"). It is significant that the closing lines of "Music and Flight" use the same images which concluded "In Memoriam Antonius Block" with a vision of closed doors and "a white treeless landscape"; but this time the translucent chill has lifted and at last there is scope for humour and for cautious optimism, too:

Between flights I haunt forests and cities,
 packed places full of rooms and clearings.
 The great secret doors that open quietly
 and close behind us once or twice in a life,
 we learn to live with, they take their time.
 The older I grow the more space I find
 behind the small doors I touch by chance,
 they always open, nature contradicted:

the world becoming denser as it expands.

It's a pleasure to welcome Alastair Mackie's *Back-Green Odyssey and Other Poems*⁹ as the best new poetry in Scots to have appeared for at least the last two years. All credit, too, to Rainbow Books of Aberdeen for a neat production with illustrations by the poet's daughter, the only pity being that poetry books are so badly displayed and distributed in Scottish bookshops. Mackie's verses have a steady, even pace to them that has become his true voice--a Scots which acknowledges a debt to MacDiarmid and more especially to Goodsir Smith without needing to imitate them. The poet shows an unforced and easy familiarity with Pushkin and Homer, Boris Karloff and Laurel and Hardy, too, who are all welcomed and valued for what they are, just as he values washhouses and back greens and Saturday morning cinema in the thirties for themselves, without a hint of name-dropping or romantic symbol-making or class conscious point-scoring. The sense of humane balance and the plain meditative dignity of these poems is impressive, a dignity derived perhaps from the poet's recollections of his youth in Aberdeen ("In the Thirties"), or, more poignantly, from the book's dedication--"to my deid"--and from hence the very fine closing sequence on the death of his father. These verses are plain speaking and un-sentimental, yet not afraid of feeling:

Against that masterpiece, Dad,
 Whit was your life? You werena Priam

or Hector or Ulysses but a blocker,
squarin aff granite fae a quarry hole.

Bleed is clartier than art.
I canna greet for the Trojan deid,
for the weemin waitin for the lang-boats,
the touzled thraws on a fremmit cooch.

Nor did I greet for you. Only, your hirstlin
oot your life in a ward bed
hung ower me like a spaedom
ye wid in time mak true.

I think highly of the elegaic strength and the human dignity of these poems from "The Day-Book o a Death" sequence. There's an equally meditative pace to the "Back Green Odyssey" poems, twenty-one sonnets in a lighter vein with the poet as Ulysses sunbathing on the grass with his pipe and "the claes-line pegged wi washin. They could be / sails. (Let them)." Mackie never descends to crude irony, nor does he force the metaphor into mockery of himself, the heroic age or the present. He gives, instead, to all things their due:

I smell--the deck whaur the last flooers bleeze,
the blue reek o September's stibble burn,
Month o the pyres! and the ess o the deid
mells wi the hell o tubers and tap-reets.

Inevitably, perhaps, the classical references are reminiscent of the work of Sydney Goodsir Smith, but Mackie's voice is his own as he gives a dominie's nod to the immortals without seeking Smith's more rumbustious Olympian persona. Yet perhaps his "Orpheus" sequence on Smith's death does try to match the Orpheus elegy in *Under the Eildon Tree*, and it seems to me to be the only failure in Mackie's collection. Even so, the book marks a new level of technical accomplishment for Mackie, seen again in "This is my Season," an Autumnal sequence addressed to Pushkin. Consider, for instance, the onomatopoeia of the Scots in poem 14: "In your back-end poems I hear your horses' hooves, / their glentin mells dingin on the iron fields. / The dreich steppes creik wi skreichin gless" and "The birk logs whirr and spit; / whiles a bricht puffin-low, nou a slow smoochter, / and the chaumer mirkens." Impressive, too, is the unforced realism of the opening lines of number 5 without a trace of modish environmental outrage or sub-Romantic disgust with the modern world:

At nicht aneth the couter o the Ploo
 I tak a dander by the Billowness
 and hear the sea, yon cosmic washer-wife
 scourin the sma stanes and the plastic trok;

These lines characterise the skill and the emotional balance of the whole collection. I could quote more.

*The Equal Skies*¹⁰ must be Norman MacCaig's twelfth book from Chatto and Windus/Hogarth, not counting two selections, and as always, the standard is high. His delight in the world has not wavered nor his ability to play truth games with its inhabitants and with himself too, in his familiarly cool and exact utterance. But this particular collection is notable for its recurrently elegaic moods and it contains some of MacCaig's best poetry for years. The book begins with a set of reflections on the death of his close friend A.K. MacLeod and these "Poems for Angus" are full of sad knowledge and terse acceptance:

I know I had my death in me
 from the moment I yelled upside-down
 in the world.

Now I have another death in me: yours.
 Each is the image of the other.

To carry two deaths
 is a burden for any man:
 ("Triple Burden")

Echoes of these and other ends appear throughout the collection, for there are memories of Hugh MacDiarmid in "Two friends," of a drowned fisherman in "Sea change," of another friend in "Tighnult" and of "Old Sarah" and her life after her husband died—"She drew / her black memories around her, / her life savings. And fed the hens. / And smoothed the blankets / in the huge dark space of the box bed." In this fashion *The Equal Skies* transforms "grief's ugliness," but not without a sharper sense of personal mortality as with "Intruder in a set scene," or the opening lines of "Fisher-man":

Look at my hands--
 pickled like vegetables. Look at the secret crystals
 in my knee joints and shoulders. My eyelids' rims
 are drawn in blood, I stare at horizons
 through eyes bleached with salt other than theirs.

MacCaig's humane equilibrium remains, but the understatement of some of these poems speaks volumes for the aching effort involved as the poet--the "Equilibrist" indeed--switches the radio from "tortures in foreign prisons / to a sonata of Schubert (that foreigner)" and comments: "Noticing you can do nothing about. / It's the balancing that shakes my mind." The implications of that insight continue to shake us all whenever we look up from the poetry pages.

And looking up from these pages now, we must somehow accept that Robert Garioch died in the Spring of 1981.

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NOTES

¹W.S. Graham, *Collected Poems 1942-1977* (London: Faber and Faber, 1979).

²David Black, *Gravitations* (Edinburgh: M. Macdonald, 1979).

³Donald Campbell, *Blether: A Collection of Poems* (Nottingham: Akros Publications, 1979).

⁴Maurice Lindsay, *Collected Poems* (Edinburgh: Paul Harris Publishing, 1979).

⁵William J. Tait, *A Day Between Weathers: Collected Poems 1938-1978* (Edinburgh: Paul Harris Publishing, 1980).

⁶Duncan Glen, *Realities: Poems* (Nottingham: Akros Publications, 1980).

⁷Walter Perrie, *By Moon and Sun* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1980).

⁸Robin Fulton, *Selected Poems 1963-1978* (Edinburgh: M. MacDonald, 1980).

⁹Alastair Mackie, *Back-Green Odyssey and Other Poems* (Aberdeen: Rainbow Books, 1980).

¹⁰Norman MacCaig, *The Equal Skies* (London: Chatto and Windus with the Hogarth Press, 1980).