

REFLECTION ON REFLECTIONS DILYS WOOD ON ANNE STEVENSON'S POETRY LECTURES



photo © Paul Stangroom



“Forgetting identity is clearly as important to Stevenson, as for some poets and critics is ‘finding identity’ – this is one of the thoughts in these lectures that stops us in our tracks, makes us think again.”

About Poems, **Anne Stevenson**, Newcastle / Bloodaxe (Poetry Lectures), 2017. £9.95
ISBN 978-1-7803734-5-4

About poems comprises the three Newcastle/Bloodaxe Poetry Lectures that **Anne Stevenson** delivered in 2016 and her Ledbury Poetry Festival talk on Sylvia Plath in 2013. Allowing for the fact that a lecture is a performance where confessional moments and vigorous blasts of praise and criticism are wholly appropriate, Stevenson has gifted us with her own creed of poetry and a raft of illuminating analyses of other poets' work, including Elizabeth Bishop, Robert Frost, Seamus Heaney, Frances Horowitz, Denise Levertov, Robert Lowell, Marianne Moore, Sylvia Plath, Peter Redgrove, Wallace Stevens, Richard Wilbur and W B Yeats.

Stevenson also puts together here a convincing and quite comprehensive (but not tedious) history of C20/C21 developments in anglophone poetry, spiced up by her own formidable ideas.

Stevenson's purpose is to define true poetry, its value for us, and how the health of the patient stands at present. In doing so, she makes some delightfully waspish attacks: on Black Mountain poetry and Charles Olson, as representing a sharp and fairly futile break with tradition; on the alliance between eager feminism and poetry, which I suspect she finds somewhat 'unholy'; and the current scene for which she reserves her most swingeing comments, 'friendly workshop poetry that enthusiasts, gifted and ungifted, are producing ... [about] almost anything... an intensely personal creative outlet for thousands ... [with] little connection with what used to be a rare, specialised art of language'.

Stevenson's lament about 'the sheer multiplicity of poets competing for publishers or prizes' which 'has necessarily lowered the oral and aural standards of art even as our celebrity-mad society hypes more and more individual names' strikes a chord, though many of us are in her line of fire, and may wonder about the word 'necessarily'? The great majority of workshop users are women, and the large number of us publishing poetry is clearly not seen as an unalloyed blessing by Stevenson, nor is 'confessional poetry' which, she notes, women poets have made their own from the 1960s.

Stevenson's attacks which include swipes at populism ('poetry has become much cruder and closer to prose... throw-away poetry... a post-modern appetite for sensational life-stories, eccentric language games and ... uninhibited self-expression') are all designed to help clarify what is worthwhile and to uphold poetry as a vital business. She is clear that survival depends on poets of genius but also suggests that a discerning readership attuned to poetic language is essential. A somewhat startling preference emerges from these lectures: Stevenson would ideally like more people to be reading and reciting poetry and far fewer to be writing it – in fact, very few!

In these lectures Stevenson often makes the point that she is not a reactionary, that changes in the poetry world of her youth were inevitable – desirable even in relation to the relative absence of women poets at that time and the hegemony of inward-looking academia. However, coy she is about elitism, she constantly makes an eloquent case for her own version of it.

Part of the enjoyment of this book is sensing the reversion to a hard line about poetry as ‘high art’ and wondering how far her fears for the future are justified. In questioning any aspect of her ‘line’ we face a formidable advocate – a poet and critic with a rare, distinguished, probing mind. Stevenson is also wonderfully placed in relation to her links with key US poets and with the British scene – together, some fifty years of involvement and practice. Up to a point, she offers her own education in poetry as an ideal start for a serious poet.

With regard to literature and especially poetry (learned by heart, recited, appreciated) Stevenson tells us that she was lucky in her family, her school and in her return to university study at Ann Arbor, Michigan, when at a key point (again single, with one child) she was induced to start writing herself. She was also put in touch with Elizabeth Bishop who became a shining example to her and – reading between the lines – this was in her view a more fortunate major influence than if she had simply been thrown into rivalry with Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath, her own near contemporaries.

All that Stevenson has to say about Bishop’s poems here is fascinating and aims to define a balance between meaningful involvement and artistic ‘distance’ – an ideal which Stevenson contrasts with those Plath poems that seem locked into a narrow personal myth.

To put it very crudely – and you must read the book to understand her complex and somewhat fluid approach – for Stevenson, realised poetry is much more a sophisticated artefact than an emotional release, while, paradoxically, helping define true feeling and, indeed, truth. Worthwhile poems emerge, not from a prior choice of ‘meaningful’ subject matter, but as a flow of sound initially, then enriched by the reaching-out, the ambiguity, and, ultimately, the truth in language itself.

My own recent re-reading of Keats’ letters suggests to me that Stevenson underplays the choice of subject matter as a serious, indeed often critical, concern for poets. But we know what Stevenson is getting at when she speaks of Yeats, ‘again we see that the dimensions, oral and rhythmic, of a poet’s voice taking precedence of his ideas.’ She is pointing up the difference between the open engagement when a poet creates and that when, at the other pole, young John or Jane sits down to write the set prose essay ‘My Holiday’. A true poet is an adventurous maker, Stevenson suggests, half unconsciously in pursuit of the unknown. Such a one would be limited by a pre-determined direction – this is one reason why for her some feminist and political poems come under suspicion.

Ulterior motives, which are bad for poetry in Stevenson’s view, include using writing as therapy. She refers to work by Sylvia Plath which ‘continually balances on the thin line between art and psychotherapy’ and quotes Ted Hughes’ view that ‘It’s a dangerous society that drives you to think that your originality is the only meaningful possession possible.’

Quite often Stevenson’s comments on individual poems are more illuminating of her general ideas than her more abstract attempts at the definition of the different orders of language. Of poems by Bishop, she says, ‘the underlying impulse was personal ... And yet ... the observer’s eye informed the poet’s ear. She saw ... she watched. And so by being momentarily drawn as into the visible world, she forgot herself – or to use a more up-to-date term, forgot her identity.’ Forgetting identity is clearly as important to Stevenson, as for some poets and critics is ‘finding identity’ – this is one of the thoughts in these lectures that stops us in our tracks, makes us think again.

Stevenson’s fascinating talk on Sylvia Plath, which she describes as a revision of some of the points made in her Plath biography, *Bitter Fame* (Viking Penguin, 1989), profiles a supremely talented, ground-breaking poet though of a quite different type, she suggests, from Elizabeth Bishop. Plath is a poet who Stevenson believes became locked, unwillingly, in her ‘ineradicable interior drama’.

In Stevenson's revised evaluation of Plath, she suggests that the poet's road to suicide was mainly determined by grossly misguided mental health treatments, and that expression through personal poetry was a possible counterpoise, though ultimately self-defeating. There is high praise for Plath's artistry – 'In Lady Lazarus, each bladed stanza has been honed and perfected... Nothing like it ... had ever been written by a woman – or a man – before. ... Its plot is Gothic, melodramatic, a woman's revenge story, but the rhythm that ties the lines together, with its almost jokey rhymes, is joyous; the poem is obviously enjoying its own performance, rushing along like a train on a track.'

This warm approach to 'personal poetry' by Plath may seem a modification of Stevenson's strictures elsewhere, and, indeed, in many respects, these lectures are humbly explorative rather than didactic. This goes also for the somewhat provocative elitism that is indubitably present here.

Stevenson is aware that she will be saddled with this modern anathema, linked with her revulsion from mass poetry activity and also her loyalty (which I suspect never wavers) to 'poetry of the voice and ear, fundamental to the art since the Elizabethans and before. The same iambic line, the musical cadence, the memorable alliteration and assonance ... refreshed but not greatly altered in the poetry of Yeats, Auden, Wallace Stevens and Robert Frost.' She aims to discuss the trends that run counter to her ideal as fully and fairly as she can. One aspect of this counterpoint is that she adds to her in depth discussion of 'great poets' the analysis of two relatively unknown published poets, William Martin and G F Dutton. One of the points made about both is that they are *not* products of today's hype-machine, but practice forms of pure poetry not fitting familiar templates.

On the whole Stevenson's grapple with her own firm tastes is admirable. But she goes too far in drawing a sharp line between the 'professional' and 'amateur'; and also in finding mass involvement/workshop culture so purely invidious. The 'mass' so condemned are in fact mainly women. The entry of so many women into creative fields across the arts seems to have mainly negative significance for Stevenson. To me, this movement seems like a second suffrage, and I wonder why she, admitting the fact of this democratic expansion, shows no thrill, no confidence? For many women – we should remember – involvement with poetry has meant undertaking a serious self-education. And some poetry courses, offered by the best practitioners, are sophisticated, challenging skill factories. This is how the baton is passed and how it was always passed.

When Stevenson focusses on the professionalism of say Bishop, Heaney, Stevens and, indeed Plath, whose craft she recognises, she makes excellent sense, but the general distinction falls on stony ground for me. There is surely no reason why a fine poet should not be nurtured by today's workshop / prize-awarding machine just as poets have coped in the dubious environments of royal courts, the theatre, academia, or, like the English Romantics, were eventually floated to fame by the rise of magazine and printed book readership eager for improving literature.

Was Gerard Manley Hopkins, one of Stevenson's influential predecessors and favourites, a 'professional poet' to his contemporaries? He was immensely skilful and specialised but utterly excluded. Nor is the best kind of apprenticeship and influences (such as Stevenson herself experienced) a *sine qua non* for poets. Some great writers have had to cope with no role models writing in their native language – not students, then, but pure pioneers. 'Professional' can only be a short-term label – a spur to poets themselves, perhaps – until time hopefully sorts out the best.

Stevenson laments the break with traditional metrical poetry in the mid C20 and seems to find no serious compensation in the stimulus that might be seen to derive from new factors such as the wide availability of world poetry in translation and, amongst writers in English, the advent of poets of varied ethnicity (some refugees), also 'working-class' poets. She points out how few women were in the pantheon when she began writing, but she tends to associate women with a democratisation which, when linked with special pleading, she infers has adversely affected standards.

Standards are always being undermined of course. In the literature of any age, trash flourishes, not sensibly evaluated at the time. The tags on poems that happen to be mere propaganda, including

'Feminist', flash by as this stuff goes down the chute. Yet the emancipation of women into the arts has surely produced some fine writers, otherwise blushing unseen. And the door is now wide open.

Some excellent woman poets were active in the UK before the stimulus of numbers and new successes had its effect. I'm thinking of, for example, Elizabeth Jennings, Frances Horowitz, Gillian Clarke, Anne Cluysenaar, Penelope Shuttle. But these are matched by significant women writers who were empowered by a sudden wholly new atmosphere and opportunities.

Many women in the new wave did not become feminist writers and some have exploring the metrical and formal poetry which Stevenson intimates has gone for ever. Women, such as Gillian Allnutt, Mimi Khalvati, Pauline Stainer, Kathleen Jamie, Lynne Wycherley, Elizabeth Burns, Alice Oswald, Deryn Rees-Jones, Esther Morgan, Angela Leighton, Katherine Gallagher, Alison Brackenbury, Myra Schneider, and Stevenson herself pursue the numinous in poetry. These poets' skill, metrical experiments, choice of focus all suggest that their concept of poetry is of 'high art'.

The subtitle of *About Poems* is 'and how poems are not about'. Mainly through perceptive textual criticism, Stevenson makes her point that the finest poems are frequently not 'about' their ostensible subject, even when they have one. Another interesting point that Stevenson brings out – and it certainly needs more stress in relation to all the arts – is that *tradition* can be enormously if subtly important to a serious artist. In entering the music of language (*qua* Stevenson, the first act in writing a poem) the poet often follows a grove that has already been cut by his poetry predecessors. This conception of poetry as shared special language clearly provides Stevenson with a reason for hating what seems a break in a continuous line. Perhaps her worries can be assuaged. Many in workshops and otherwise are reading avidly – most of the writers she mentions, her own work, too.