

## REVIEWS: Allnutt, Fainlight, Glück

*How the Bicycle Shone, New and Selected Poems*, Gillian Allnutt, Bloodaxe, 2007. £12  
ISBN 978-1-8522475-9-1;

*New and Collected Poems*, Ruth Fainlight, Bloodaxe, 2010. £20 ISBN 978-1-8522488-5-7;

*A Village Life*, Louise Glück, Carcanet, 2010. £9.95 ISBN 978-1-8477705-9-2

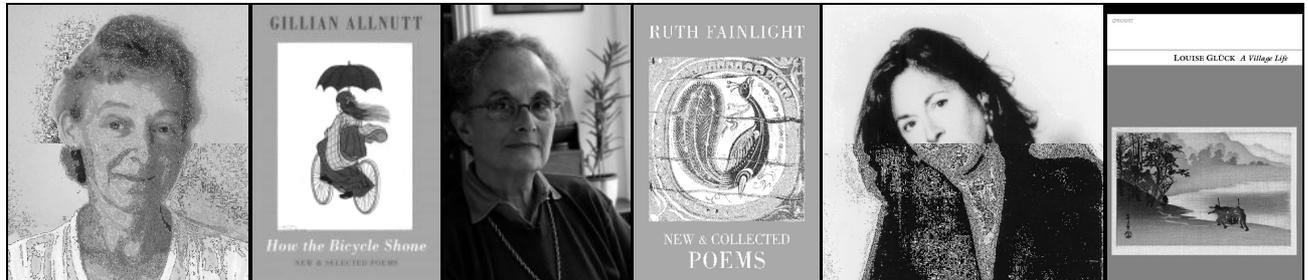


photo by  
Sarah Banks

A small preamble. Three important senior poets with very different ‘voices’ tell us something about poetry. It’s an art-form almost too close to us, relating to speech which is ‘natural’ and the hall-mark of humans. However, as each of these three poets builds towards a career-length achievement, we appreciate her unique ‘construct’, overcoming the resistance of form and language to her own needs and aims. These poets struggle, tread water, succeed and fail. But, even in a blind reading, we might recognise each mature voice here: its timbre; its own natural / unnatural, highly original expression.

Incidentally, the *apparatus* we get from publishers to understand poets could be improved. For the longer volumes at least, I wanted more biographical material; perhaps a meditation by the poet herself on what she’s tried to achieve; perhaps a critical essay, like for example the *Afterword* Mimi Khalvati wrote for Mary MacRae’s *Inside the Brightness of Red*. The Allnutt volume has short, helpful notes on each constituent collection. The Fainlight volume has no notes. The general reader, who probably doesn’t read academic criticism and now rarely finds reviews of poetry in ‘serious’ newspapers, has to search for her own clues.

In **Gillian Allnutt’s** *Selected* there are 200 pages of poems, published over thirty-two years, drawing on seven collections, the last three given in full. Allnutt is a highly recognisable poet because of her ‘spare’ writing, her spiritual interest (joined – which is rarer – with an abiding interest in faith, religious forms, and the bible) and her link with County Durham (brought up partly in Newcastle, working many years in London, then becoming the responsive in-comer again).

Short, plain, pithy poems in which each line and often each word ‘counts’, are Allnutt’s hall-mark, especially in recent collections. We could miss how scholarly, intellectually bright, technically skilled she is, because it’s not part of her self-presentation to let these things show. For example, *Attenuation*, a poem in her series *In Memoriam Kit Allnutt, 1924 – 2004* (*Wolflight*, 2007) is a *sestina*, that rare, difficult and, here, skilfully exploited form. The temptation is to keep the *sestina* content simple, but the ideas in this poem are complex and tricky. The poem is perhaps about ‘holding back’, simplifying desire – a key interest of Allnutt’s – and the short staccato lines fit the theme, “Let it wait. / Let the sky, inattentive, turquoise, / Stall. Let her, alone at the piano, / Fail, like a heart ...”

In other poems she rhymes subtly or uses devices like repetition. *The Garden in Esh Winning* (*Nantucket and the Angel*, 1997), a very moving, personal poem which first enthused me about Allnutt’s work, has rhyming couplets throughout. Other aspects that might be missed are her strong lyric gift (but not easily, if one lights on one of her truly soaring poems like *On the Dark Side of the Moon*, in *Nantucket and the Angel*, 1997), her interest in narrative, her humour and irony.

She has several longish narrative poems and sequences here, including the imaginary journal of Elizabeth Siddall, the strange and deep eponymous *Nantucket and the Angel* and the equally challenging eponymous *Lintel*. Many of Allnutt's pared-down poems, which might at first seem 'imagist' and include strong images, are miniaturised narratives of a whole life / way of life. A good example is the series *A Shepherd's Life* written to compliment Victoria Crowe's paintings of Jenny Armstrong (*Sojourner*, 2004). Here seven short poems, none more than seven lines, offer the nugget of a life, both doings and emotions.

Allnutt's humour takes the form of rather sophisticated 'sly digs' at forms of pretentiousness. Though formal worship seems to play a part in her life, we feel her on her guard in church and with clerics. There is broad comedy in the portrait of the angel who "rips a page from the nearest hymnal", though "He knows not to smoke in church" (*Nantucket and the Angel*). There is a 'sprightliness' about even her most solemn writing which comes out in the frequent play on words and lightning shifts in reasoning. A form of wit – rueful, directed against herself – is ever-present, reflecting her puzzled cogitation about life, love, virtue; how little we know, her tone implies...

When thinking about a writer's wit, or 'inwit', the question surfaces, 'What's at the heart of her work?' There is the occasional sharp reference to social injustice ("And kids like saplings planted by the council", *About Benwell*, in *Blackthorn*, 1994). There are telling words about the destruction of the environment: "The coral reefs are derelict cathedrals" (*Camaria*, in *Blackthorn*). But Allnutt's main concern appears to be with timeless ethical issues and we can't appreciate her achievement unless we understand her problems. She wants, I think, to pose serious questions while avoiding the didactic and prescriptive.

Some references to landscape (especially remote and 'bare' landscapes) make me ask how far Allnutt is a poet of 'place' and 'contemplation'. But there is really little evidence of the pantheist in her approach. Despite her responsiveness, 'nature poet' would have been far too easy an option for her? Allnutt is less interested in 'nature', I suspect, than in the human instinct to seek solitude and enlightenment. The less showy virtues – abstinence, forbearance, acceptance, endurance, a spirit of independence – are probed with all the subtlety of her mind. This may account for the many poems that are portraits, often of women, often of those living mysterious or lonely lives.

Apart from such portrayals, it may have been quite taxing to find material which will 'carry' her interest in values. Her output does not seem huge. She is pushed hard to find the right context: sometimes the re-telling of a biblical story; sometimes an elaborately contextualised encounter between invented persons. In so many poems she comes back to the bedrock: in her own words, "To what end were all these things given?" (*The English Widow* in *Lintel*).

There are so many scattered references here to the bare, the butt end of things. But she is no cheerless ascetic. Her work, even in its pared-downness, is often warm and committed. Among the 'simplicities' which draw her is the bedrock of family affection, especially the grandmother / grand-daughter relationship and what seem variants of this (between Tabitha and *Lintel*?). In such poems, flooded with warmth and a good deal of humour, do we detect that, for Allnutt, love – freely given, forbearing, unselfconscious – is the ultimate desired simplification?

**Ruth Fainlight's** *Collected* consists of 500 pages of poems, written over fifty years, drawing on over a dozen books. There are both persistent themes and a journey of development. The ratio of exceptional, more ambitious poems, in a wider variety of forms increases as she passes mid-career. A sea-change is established with *Sugar-Paper Blue* (1997), though there are many fine poems written earlier.

Reading so large a body of work, you have impressions and make odd connections. I momentarily linked Fainlight with the Brontë sisters. This related to the balance in Fainlight's work between calm analysis, down-to-earth interest in fine detail and a potent interest in the extremes of passion.

Many of Fainlight's earlier poems are cool, concerned with abstractions, and written in debating mode. Perhaps the first passage which gripped me was in *The Betrothal* (*The Region's Violence*, 1973): "Even the earth is more caressing than he. / Crumbling it blots her cool from his sweat, / Its dryness soothes

the chafe of their grinding. / And the rosebay-silk, whiteness unfurling / From split pods, confirms that love is precious.” This was a marker for other references to the effects of passion. The word ‘drench’ is used more than once and other violent physical reactions caused by strong feeling: “Let’s not mention love. It’s like a glowing / stove to someone covered with burns already” (*Passion in Fifteen to Infinity*, 1983); “her whole body goes icy-hot, imagining / that caress. Under sleeves and stockings, / at the back of the neck, the soft hairs lift” (from *Their Words*, part 1 of *Sheba and Solomon*, in *Burning Wire*, 2002).

In Fainlight’s poems passion, whether sexual or not, is mainly approached from a woman’s standpoint. Fainlight points up both the emotional and intellectual strengths of women. *The Lace-wing*, a fine poem from *Another Full Moon* (1976), offers a kind of *credo* in relation to the sensibility and honed intelligence a creative artist brings to her work. The poet stares at the insect’s “pin-point ruby eyes”: “the intensity of our mutual / Examination exhausted me ... Our pupils throbbed with the same shared / Awe, acknowledgement and curiosity.”

Fainlight is not primarily a feminist poet, a ‘confessional’ poet, a love poet, an explorer of family conflict, or (while I’m listing what she’s not) a political poet, a poet concerned mainly with the environment, or in any way a trendy, streetwise writer. The closest she comes to being a feisty, amusing ‘sister’ is in her many poems about the woman’s lot and about aging; and these poems have more realistic pathos than ribaldry. Apart from the streetwise mode, she has work in all the veins listed above. But perhaps the key to her strength lies in a range of experiences on the cusp between the sensual and the spiritual. She writes, often with stunning discrimination and accuracy, about what she sees, incorporating what she feels and thinks while looking.

Certain visual experiences are studied with an obsession equivalent to Cezanne’s with his mountain. There are a substantial number of references in these poems to changes in the quality of light (often seen through a window). There are at least fifty metaphors – some sustained – for the visual appearance of moon, ranging from “a thin-worn disc of beaten, tawny / metal foil or crumpled papery fallen / eucalyptus leaf” (*The New Tree*, in *Sibyls and Others*, 1980) to “... [the moon] turns its high, hard, wide, bald / brow towards the dark.” (*Apogee* from *Moon Wheels*, 2006).

These examples bring me to linguistic inventiveness and sensual richness. The same contrast applies as in her general approach. Lucidity and calm are key characteristics of her style, except that there are potent clusters of vivid sensual images. One example from *Pomegranate (Sugar-Paper Blue)*, 1997: “The seeds inside are chunks of ruby crystal / that grit between my teeth like broken glass / and melt like lumps of sweetened ice / the mesh of pith that holds them, jeweller’s chamois ...” Also, read *Morpho (Sugar-Paper Blue)* for a remarkable poem of sustained close observation and descriptive power.

Fainlight’s work has developed freedom. In many early poems there is a certain ‘thinness’, perhaps a deliberate invocation of cool intelligence, absence of feminine ‘fuss’ and self-dramatisation. Poems are often pithy arguments with little ornament. We can compare this style with a recent poem *Facts About Ants* (in the *New Poems* section here). This is marvellously free-wheeling, changing focus several times without losing the thread.

In mid-career Fainlight added to her repertoire a wide variety of longer narrative poems and sequences. The basis may be a journal of aspects of her experience (the eponymous poem *Sugar-Paper Blue*), fantasy (encounters with Sibyls) or a dramatic narrative (*A Village Story*) which impresses as a thumb-nail Greek tragedy. Ideas and ethical dilemmas are studied through narrative.

The narrative achievements add to her other strengths: the dazzling descriptive passages; her exploration in short lyrics and the longer poems of both passionate emotions and the intimate life of mind and spirit.

**Louise Glück**, has eleven collections published and has won, it seems, all the major US poetry prizes. Glück must have taken to heart Jaques’ famous speech in *As You Like It* (“At first the infant, / Mewling

and puking, in the nurse's arms..."). She has one collection entitled *The Seven Ages* and in this one, *A Village Life*, 'life' rather than 'village' is the key focus: adolescence, the early years of marriage, middle age and old age are the subject of her characteristically probing, cumulative analyses.

There is something quite neo-classical about Glück's choice of eternal themes, just as there's something very contemporary about the low-key, rather prosy expression, which has its own subtle rhythms and pointedness. Glück is a delicately persistent writer but, paradoxically, she ambushes us with ruthless honesty, especially about the decay of youth and passion. Of young people she says, "They have this thing everyone wants and they *don't* want –" (*Noon*). An aging person walking a dog tries not to think of death, "I keep in my mind images from each walk ... // so for a while it seems possible / not to think of the hold of the body weakening, the ratio / of the body to the void shifting, // and the prayers becoming prayers for the dead" (*A Village Life*).

We can be forgiven for missing in Glück both economical intensity of language and rich ornament but a study of her work shows that the elaborate construction of a whole collection *as one unit*, and often as an extended metaphor, involves complexity in spades. Glück wrote a whole collection, *The Wild Iris*, in the voices of flowers (in *A Village Life*, too, we have the voices of earthworm and bat).

This time, she takes an imaginary community of a Mediterranean type and focusses on different individuals and groups, almost as if she is making the film of the village, panning from faces to landscape. This is artificial. She shows no real empathy but gives us a 'stylised' Southern Europe in a perfunctory way ("Around the fountain there are clusters of metal tables"). She is, in fact, mainly writing about a social and emotional locale as all-American as Tom Sawyer. The most convincing poems here are about an obviously US based experience of puberty, early sexual experience, a parent's attempts at sex-education (*At the River*, the most amusing poem here), early questioning of authority, disillusion within marriage (including the brilliantly edgy *Figs*) and other types of disillusion and fear ("What have you done to your body, her silence says. / We gave it to you and look what you did to it", *A Slip of Paper*).

Why therefore the elaborate device – I almost said 'hoax' – of invoking the imaginary 'village' and, incidentally, an imaginary industrial town to which some of the villagers have migrated? *As You Like It* might again give us a clue.

Glück is erudite and interested in ancient poetic forms in a way quite typical of some US poets. In framing this collection, she seems to have reflected on the body of work, mainly ancient but also re-explored in the Renaissance, which is called 'pastoral'. The second poem in the book is entitled *Pastoral* – a deliberate pointer – and it seems clear that Glück aims, not precisely for the study of humble shepherds, but for the kind of 'play' and tensions Shakespeare explores in the forest of Arden. She scrutinises fundamental emotions by taking them out of their ordinary setting; and frees herself to make lyrics (there are about a dozen here) about the phases of human life.

Using the pastoral mode, Glück seizes different opportunities. In several poems here she reflects on the experience of leaving the 'village'. For 'village' read 'life'. Glück has found an oblique approach to the issue of aging and the passage of time (prominent in this collection). We can't miss the import of a passage from the poem *Pastoral*: "When you got tired of walking / you lay down in the grass. When you got up again, you could see for a moment where you had been, / the grass was slick there, flattened out / into the shape of a body. When you looked back later, it was as though you'd never been there at all." Flesh is grass?

Do we feel the machinery of Glück's elaborate 'construct' creak a little? Yes, but there is also something intriguing and admirable about her sustained effort to approach old themes in a new way. Her search for new angles is inexhaustible and I suspect that, by not approaching, for example, her own adolescence through simple direct recall she 'sees fresh' and digs deeper.

**Dilys Wood**