

E A Markham, who has died suddenly in March 2008 in Paris, was a formidable poet, fiction writer, editor and teacher. He had been a contributor of poetry to *Stand* since the early 1980s, but most recently, in Vol. 7 no 3 (2007), he gave us nine stories *Short Shorts/anti-Parables*. He was born in Montserrat in 1939 and came to England in 1956. He had enormous energy and had a charismatic presence. In 2002 *Stand* organised a reading to celebrate the magazine's 50th birthday. There were readers who had been associated with the magazine since its early days and others who showed directions that might be tempting for the future. Archie arrived late, strode into the theatre through the audience from the back, threw his bag onto the stage and, at least for a few minutes, took over the show. We hoped from then on that he would be one of the writers who would form a bridge between *Stand* in its heydays as edited by Jon Silkin and *Stand* in the new millennium. In many ways he formed such a bridge. He had known Jon Silkin for many years and had invited him to read at Sheffield Hallam University shortly before he died. Recordings and verbal accounts of that reading suggest that it was something special. Archie had been one of the leaders in promoting the study of Creative Writing at MA level and in the Department of which he became Professor and Course Leader he built up a powerful group of writers and their students. They made an intelligent and responsive audience. I knew him as a fellow course leader of an MA in

Creative Writing and he was an intelligent, imaginative if sometimes unpredictable External Examiner. What was perhaps most valuable in his numerous gifts to students and tutors of Writing was to help them to learn to have faith in genuinely original, risk-taking and demanding work. For someone so concerned with living it is interesting that he wrote many poems *in memoriam*. Often, they live out a dialogue with a supposed listener, alive or dead (or largely imagined); and most of his poems have a certain dramatic quality – a reader will need to fill out the stage in which such words are wanted and enacted. The concluding lines of 'On the Death of George Macbeth' are worth recalling now:

This is no public letter, no large statement

to rival epitaphs of the great dead – Auden
on Yeats; Wallcott on Auden. But real enough to hold
at bay coarser thoughts – that with one name cancelled
we of the stranded army shuffle sideways, close up

towards the front of the Anthology which you might
have edited. Your voice was familiar-strange
and good to hear. Your poems took risks like
all your costumes. You might have performed a little longer,
man.

This Ghoulish-Afterlife

I mean it goes on, and its funny, ghoulish afterlife is in the form of tours and readings and poetry slams and all the rest of it...

According to Martin Amis we – the readers and contributors to magazines such as *Stand* – are all inhabiting and, indeed, contributing to what he has described as poetry's 'ghoulish afterlife'. With characteristically disarming urbanity, the novelist greeted his listeners at the Hay Festival last summer with the following muted revelation: 'You may have noticed that poetry is dead. The obituary has already been written.' Readings and 'poetry slams' are, for Amis, no more than phantoms, the strangely energetic evidence of this afterlife, while the thing itself, the poem, is now, he suggests, a superannuated form well past its read-by date. Adopting for a moment the studied demotic, he suggests that 'not many people curl up of an evening with a book of poetry'; and the reason is, apparently, that we no longer like 'these moments of communion with the poet' which involve 'self-examination'. Leaving aside what looks like a doggedly autobiographical idea of the lyric mode – communion with the poet, not the poem – the tone of Amis's statement requires some examination. This peculiarly resigned, archly conversational revelation is neither lament nor celebration, but takes the form of a laconic, realistic diagnosis:

the deep chat of the serious novelist pronouncing idiomatically on the progress of history.

It is this progress, particularly the new speed at which 'history' operates, its 'accelerated' nature, as Amis puts it, which has implications for the ways in which the self reads in the contemporary world. The new speed of our time, he argues, makes it more difficult to appreciate or to experience the peculiar form of epiphany poems can offer. A cultural malaise which includes a combination of what he calls 'dumbing down' and 'numbing down' only adds to the problem. Poetry's 'demise' has been brought about by our dominant culture's addiction to forward motion. According to Amis, the poem works in the other direction; it is a stopping of the clock. One might add that the kind of attention a poem can sometimes generate involves not only a stopping, but also a reversing: even forwards and backwards repetitively at different speeds. This is a process which has more often been described by 'meditation', though the word doesn't necessarily carry the possibility of shock and disturbance which can arrive with such attentiveness to the text.

Geoffrey Hill might be more famous for his writing on the poem's capacity, in these time-stopping epiphanies, to offer atonement, quite literally, 'an at-one-ment', but he is equally alert to its 'menace' and to what Charles Olsen has referred to as the 'energy discharge' that a poem can effect ('Poetry as Menace and Atonement' in *The Lords of Limit*). Even more pertinently, Hill has written insightfully on rhythm's capacity to register 'mimetically, deep shocks of recognition' ('Redeeming the Time' in *The Lords of Limit*, 1984).

Just such shocks, I would argue, are all too readily available to us in the dominantly lyrical mode of our popular culture. Amidst the plethora of headphones relaying sounds from mobiles and ipods within the public spaces of trains, planes, buses, and pavements grey one might yearn for the seemingly ancient silence which, we've been told, 'surrounds all poetry', but the turns and returns of lyric rhythms are being played out in all their rich variety beneath those insistent scratchy sounds emanating from the headphones and, of course, beneath the relentless forward movement of the time.

Tishani Doshi and Josephine Hart, among others, have responded (in the pages of *The Guardian*) to Amis's description of demise with forceful reminders of poetry's apparent successes: the increase in titles, the emergence of new imprints, the very proliferation of readings and slams which constitute the 'funny, ghoulish afterlife' of which he speaks. And it's certainly true that the fairly recent and welcome arrival of Salt, Worple, and Shoestring presses, among others, onto the poetry scene might rightly be said to be indicative of energy, enterprise, and life.

One of the other proliferations – of books explaining how to read poems, write poems, and how poems work – provides, however, what I take to be more ambivalent evidence of the health of the current poetry scene. Indeed, it could even be used to prove something at least of Amis's point.

Terry Eagleton's *How to Read a Poem*, Jeffrey Wainwright's *Poetry: The Basics*, Ruth Padel's *Fifty-Two Ways of Looking at a Poem*, Tom Paulin's *The Secret Life of Poems*, and Stephen Fry's *The Ode Less Travelled: Unlocking the Poet Within* are just some of the host of recent books that attempt to explain how poems work. It is diffi-

cult to gauge the extent to which this proliferation of titles simply reflects a healthy demand for more books on the subject or whether it is evidence of a pervasive anxiety about poetry. Certainly, within academe, there seems to be a concern that students need some helpful handbooks in order to allay their fears about dealing with the perceived technical difficulties of verse.

By far the most agonized, the most joyous, and the most irreverent of these recent volumes is Fry's book, which offers itself up in defiance of what it sees as the lazy, undisciplined excesses of contemporary free verse: what he refers to in his familiar idiosyncratic short-hand as 'arse-dribble'. Fry presents himself as a nervous but committed amateur, unabashed at his self-professed traditionalism and belligerently disposed towards what he refers to as the formlessness of much contemporary writing. No doubt because of his celebrity status, his book may well exert undue influence, but, to judge by the conflicted response it has already engendered in blogs and on-line reviews, it exposes a heart-felt difference of view between poetry lovers on the subject of form. In his own inimitable style of eccentric, learned, and bloody-minded belatedness, Fry makes a lively and entertaining contribution to poetry's hectic after-life. To complement it, we would need an intervention from the heart of contemporary culture, from the very 'slams' which Amis categorises as 'funny' and 'ghoulish'. If it is true that in our contemporary culture we are, as he suggests, pushed relentlessly forwards in a limiting linear fashion in our acts of reading, some closer attention to the rhythms of our culture might not go amiss.

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