

N.S. THOMPSON *Review*

Review: Essential Questions

Shanta Acharya, *Imagine: New and Selected Poems* (HarperCollins India, 2017)

Richard Robbins, *Body Turn to Rain: New and Selected Poems* (Northwest Masters Series, Lynx House Press, 2017)

D.M. Black, *The Arrow Maker* (Arc Publications, 2017) and *The Bi-Plane and Other Poems* (Mariscat Press, 2017)

Poetry used to be considered a body of knowledge, a repository where one could find out about the world and its phenomena; one thinks of Hesiod's *Works and Days*, the *De Rerum Natura* of Lucretius and even Virgil's *Georgics*. If it once held up a mirror to the world, it did so more in the Horatian sense of creating a picture and, in the Classical sense, a picture that purports to be more objective than the artist's personal vision. This continued well into the 'gentleman's agreement about taste' that obtained in Neo-Classical times, when 'classics' such as Gray's 'Elegy Wrote in a Country Churchyard' were held to deliver universal truths. Today we see poetry more as an expression of personal emotion or opinion, often both. We can certainly gather a picture of the world from it, but realise this may be (or even, philosophically, has to be) a relativistic view. In short, we do not seek after great truths; and while seeking to tell it 'like it is' this will inevitably only be as we (the poets) see it. But the three poets under review here represent a challenge to the purely personal, even if they start out from that point of view.

A couple of years ago, Eyewear Publishing brought out *The Poet's Quest for God*, a large anthology of 'poems of faith, doubt and wonder' responding to the metaphysics of all faiths (and doubt). The second poem in this multiverse of verse was 'I Do Not Know' by the Indian born poet Shanta Acharya and is published again in *Imagine: New and Selected Poems*. The poem is a reworking of the thirteenth-century Sufi poet and disciple of Rumi commonly known as Eraqi (Acharya gives his full name). To the many questions about the nature of being and the universe, his answer is 'I do not know...'. Naturally, it helps to know something of the philosophy here, especially its ultimate origins in the *Upanishads* where Atman is both the inner Self and yet part of the universal self (also seen as 'the great breath'). It has been described thus: 'The Atman is [...] unknowable in its essential nature because it is the eternal subject who knows about everything including itself. The Atman is the knower and also the known.' These kinds of paradoxes are central to Hindu philosophy: 'He is never seen but is the seer, he is never heard but is the hearer. He is never perceived but is the perceiver. He is never thought but is the thinker.' (*Bṛhadaranyaka Upanishad* 111.7.23).

It is not necessary to be fully cognisant with Hindu philosophy to appreciate the poetry in this volume (although I would recommend a taster in the *Rig Veda*, Hymn 164), but it helps to know where the poet is coming from in her view of the world. And yet, despite the detachment one might expect from the background of Hinduism and Buddhism (which so attracted Eliot), Acharya also exhibits a fully engaged Western Christian tradition of compassion for the oppressed and afflicted, albeit she does so in her own way. She responds to personal tragedy (deaths of close relatives) and to public atrocities (9/11; Srebrenica; London bombings, July 2005). What is striking, however, is the dignified manner in which she does this. One is reminded of Brecht's words: 'in poetry morality resides not in indignation, but in truthfulness' (*Journals*, 10 January 1941). Indeed, morality is at the centre of Acharya's poetry: how to live the good (righteous) life and how to witness it truthfully. If such high intent can be disconcerting, it is both admirable and refreshing and an ambitious programme that she has pursued over five previous volumes and in the recent poems selected here. For Acharya, truth is not to be found in metaphor, although she can use it admirably – ('memories quivering like fanned tails of peacocks' in 'Vigil') but rather in discursive almost prosaic questioning, the language not stiff but possessing a kind of formality to it to match the seriousness. Occasionally she can drop into archaisms, which stand out in the confessional 'Remembering' about a past failed relationship: words like 'unbidden' and 'entombed' sit uncomfortably with the mention of CDs, letters and phone calls leading to the somewhat ponderous conclusion, 'I will be patient like a stone and let Time be my counsellor.' And yet this poem starts with a beautifully articulate paradox: 'The more I try to forget the more I remember.' Furthermore, where she does lament human failings it is with an all-inclusive 'we', which certainly helps to draw the reader in, even if they may not immediately identify with the plural subject. But 'we' are all certainly fallible and vulnerable too.

The poetry in these two hundred and fifty pages is so wide-ranging it is impossible to give an overall view. Certainly, it moves effortlessly between India and the West, even if the reader may not enjoy that same ease of transit. There are poems that reflect perceptions of natural phenomena (insects, birds, flowers), of art, both Western and Eastern, via the many metaphysical meditations outlined above and on to later poems that address jazz musicians such as Benny Goodman and Sonny Rollins. There are wonderfully comic poems that could almost come from the pen of Sophie Hannah. Having registered with a dating agency in 'Shaadi.Com' the speaker sets out the qualities of her ideal man ('A Brahmin would be nice but not essential'), but finds no takers. She meditates painfully on why this may be, which leads to the final stanza:

Age: Doesn't matter. Marital status: Doesn't matter.
Children: Doesn't matter. Country of residence: Doesn't matter.
Height: Doesn't matter. Education: Doesn't matter.
Religion: Doesn't matter. Occupation: Doesn't matter.
I was inundated with suitors, crashing my computer.

Similarly, there is the epistolary pair 'Dear Tech Support' and 'Dear Customer' that wittily adopt the language of computer programming and apply it to the search for, again, the ideal man:

Last year I upgraded Boyfriend 5 to Husband 1
and noticed a distinct slowdown in the performance
of the flower, jewellery and other network applications

that had operated flawlessly in the Boyfriend system.

Overall, then, a richly varied collection from a poet rooted in Indian culture who subsequently made London her home after first coming to Oxford on a scholarship in 1979. She then worked in asset management, but also found time to be a trustee of the Poetry Society. For anyone jaded by the excesses of many of the current fashions, this collection will bring them back to what should be one of our central concerns, namely the philosophical nature of the self – rather than its expression in solipsism and narcissistic neuroses – and how we perceive that self in relation to the rest of existence.

If forgetting and remembering were crucial to Shanta Acharya's quest for knowledge, they are equally central in a poet with a radically different background, but one whose work is inspired by the same querulous poetic investigation of the metaphysics of presence; that is, rather than the usual (Derridean) deconstructive one. Indeed, it is interesting to wonder if Richard Robbins had been born into an Eastern culture, whether his questions would have been formulated in the same way as those of Acharya. Then again, those questions are universal: one only has to think of Gauguin's tripartite title to his 1897 painting 'Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?' (inscribed in French in the original). If we take these questions as a template, they can be partially answered by reference to a poet's location here. What is apparent in Robbins's work is the search for identity and meaning among the wide-open spaces of Minnesota. It is refreshing to see the natural beauty of that state come into its own here as a stimulus to the quest. On this side of the Atlantic we are familiar with poets of the East and West Coasts, but seldom do we get poetry from what are often pejoratively called the 'fly over states'. The work of B.H. Fairchild is one instance of a poet who has made the landscape and experience of the rural Midwest his own, particularly Oklahoma, and Robbins's work too benefits from the location out among rocks, lakes, dams and plains with their rich array of flora and fauna for which he shows due appreciation and reverence.

And yet this was not always so. The poet was actually born in Los Angeles and several poems reflect the strange contiguity of years ago when the children of builders and bank clerks would mingle in school with the children of the film stars and you never knew who you might meet on the street or in the supermarket, as seen in 'Lon Chaney, Jr., at the Supermarket in Capistrano Beach' where the old star play acts for the kids, much to their delight. California features too in 'The Owens Valley' about an unauthorized visit to the site of the great 'water grab' by the city of Los Angeles at the beginning of the twentieth century, which continued into the twenty first and was featured in Polanski's film *Chinatown*. Despite the later Minnesota grounding, the poems also range widely geographically, including Scotland, where the poet enjoyed a retreat at Hawthornden a few years ago. Most deal directly with the location rather than meditatively and eschew metaphorical description in favour of action and participation. There is an intimacy of man and nature, as the title of the collection suggests; certainly a kind of liberation promised by this connection, a liberation from the ordinary everyday self.

Body Turn to Rain distills the production of five previous collections. Its very first poem 'Turpentine', one of the new poems, is typical: an elliptical and breathless anaphora of directions about 'forgetting':

Sometime try forgetting the roar of melted glacier
falling over stone toward whispering
cities in the basin.

and it continues with a list of apparently random things or events to forget then contrasts these with things to remember (including the smell of turpentine):

Then the small tug from the world
under water. The reeling. The flashing
coming your way. Its dance across roils. Its breeding
each side of itself on the sand. Sometime
try forgetting what you know.

Is this the kind of excise T.S. Eliot proposes in 'East Coker III' (out of Hindu philosophy, to be sure)? Eliot says:

In order to arrive at what you are not
You must go through the way in which you are not.
And what you do not know is the only thing you know
And what you own is what you do not own
And where you are is where you are not.

This kind of querulous paradox is given concrete shape in many of Robbins's poems, such as 'The Invisible Wedding':

I fished
until I forgot beginning, and we slept there
on a dry bank that wouldn't stop its talk:
the creek full of names, that bank
which in our dream we took the shape of.

and the poem ends again on that familiar opposition between knowledge and forgetting:

To fish, to always forget
the beginning. We didn't care to regret. We were
here. Something was going on. We didn't know.

Despite this lack of knowing, the reader is made aware of an almost surrealist clarity of vision, something like an Edward Weston landscape, as warm and healthy as those sunlit vistas captured by his camera.

D.M. Black has had a remarkable renaissance since publishing his *Collected Poems 1964-1987* (1991). *The Arrow Maker* is his second full collection for Arc, after *Claiming Kindred* (2011). Black is what also may be described as a philosophical poet, one who questions 'being' rather than affirming its joys or protesting against its injustices. Like Cavafy, he often pulls his subjects out of odd corners of history, but will also confront major figures head on as in 'M. Lévinas Advises the Prince' where the French philosopher delivers a monologue on 'being' to Shakespeare's doomed prince, concluding:

We arrive here at the supreme question: not, why is there being rather than nothingness? but, what am I, in the light of this claim on my concern of an Other to whom I cannot be indifferent? In what universe do I discover myself to awaken?

As with the two previous poets, it is the speaking voice that dominates the poetry. Many poems are indeed dramatic monologues – as above – and are quizzical and meditative rather than lyrical. Two voices contrast ‘Classical’ and ‘Christian’ views in ‘The Uses of Mythology’, the first addressing Ezra Pound on how to recognise wisdom, the second on how Christ’s baptism then martyrdom prefigures present-day martyrs in our ‘war-lit landscape stunned by war’s machinery’. Christian figures form the subject of ‘St Augustine’s Eulogy for his Mother, Saint Monica’, ‘George Fox in Lichfield’, ‘Saint Francis in Winter’, ‘Rebecca Beside the Well’ and ‘The Size of Things’, which is, as the subtitle says, ‘*A reflection on the doctrine of the Trinity*’ which marvels (ironically) that we ‘little people’, especially ‘we’ of the Middle Ages,

Without laboratories, without research grants,
alone and furious, desperate with worship,
they interrogated the void and found this cradle,
this structured emptiness, this Three-in-One

But the abiding message seems to come from the words of ‘The Buddha Amitābha’:

for to perceive love is to become love,
and to love is to learn to wait
with infinite kindness.

This message could well have come from Dante who declared at the very end of *Paradiso* that his desire and will were ruled (literally, were turned and rolled like a wheel) by that love that moves the sun and the other stars (*l’amor che move il sole e l’altre stelle*). Black turns to Dante to conclude his rich compendium of voices, translating two Cantos from the *Divina Commedia*, namely *Purgatorio* XVII with its crucial tercet saying that not only the Creator but all creatures are naturally moved by love, together with its reminder of the Aristotelian concept of the ethical mean (*Lo naturale è sempre sanza errore/ma l’altro puote errare per malo obietto/o per troppo o per poco vigore*, ll. 94-96) which Black translates as

The natural is always without error,
but the heart can err by choosing a wrong object
or by excessive or too little ardour.

This is followed by *Paradiso* IV where Dante is moved by the personal history of Piccarda Donati who was removed from her religious order to be forced into marriage and wonders how amends can be made, while Beatrice looks on him with compassion. *Paradiso* IV also shows Dante full of anguished queries about much else philosophically and spiritually, of course, and Black gives useful basic notes to both Cantos. These translations give a weighty ending to a collection that offers a very wide array of interrogatory attitudes to the essential queries of our existence.

On his own admission in the 'Afterword' to his Mariscat pamphlet, *The Bi-Plane and Other Poems*, published after *The Arrow Maker* last year, the poet wanted to create a balance here, he says, with light verse and does so with both sharp wit and gentle humour, although always with some underlying seriousness. We learn of the aquarium in the O2 Shopping Centre where the exotic carnivorous fish from African lakes are fed vast quantities of crustaceans each night to stop them devouring each other so that – like the shoppers, we imagine – 'they mill about all day glassy-eyed in a state of stunned amiability'. At least, we hope the shoppers do, rather than going for each other's throats. 'Leaving the submarine' is a spoof manual using tropes of birth to sympathise with the submariner who will have to cope with a world where he has no rank (however low), no role and there is no solidarity among the people. There are short 'Pencil Sketches' I & II, which remind one of Auden's various 'Shorts', and also the 'Miniatures' in *The Arrow Maker*.

The work of all three of these poets gives the lie to the fashionable and facile view that we live in a post-truth society. Humanity has ever been interested in large questions of what is real (truthful) and what is not and ever will be. These mature but very different poets are to be congratulated for both addressing and asking the questions they do and not flinching from them, especially when the answers may inevitably seem imponderable. There is life still in the old essential questions; the poetry is in knowing how to ask.

This review is taken from [Stand 218, 16\(2\) May - June 2018](#)