

Auden – the sequel

TIM KENDALL

James Fenton

THE STRENGTH OF POETRY
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known facts. Dorothy, her journal testifies, did christen her drinking can "Kubla". What is less certain is that Wordsworth "suddenly burst out laughing in a rather horrible and forced way, and said, 'I say Dorothy, that's awfully good – Kubla Can – do you get it, Coleridge?'" Fenton also informs us that a crestfallen Giambologna went back home to have his friend call Michelangelo "a complete tosser".

These biographical flourishes may have raised a chuckle in the lecture hall, but on the page they come perilously close to silliness. Perish the thought that the Professor of Poetry should want to sound like merely another academic, but Fenton's tonal uncertainties reveal genuine confusion about what his lectures are for, and to whom they should be pitched. Eliot's "trilling wire", we are told, is "a telegram people used to send to Professor Lionel Trilling, begging for his help in elucidating passages like these". The joke shows its age, and fails to work even as the most throwaway of asides. Elsewhere, Fenton spends almost an entire lecture earnestly persuading the button-

holed audience that imperialism is a Bad Thing: "People's lives are ruined by it", he sombrely intones. And elsewhere again, describing a reading given by Seamus Heaney and Ted Hughes, Fenton makes a pitch for inclusion on an embarrassingly effusive dustjacket: "It was exciting before it began, and it just went on from there. And now, with his new collection, *The Spirit Level*, [Heaney] keeps up the provision of pleasure." Fenton's lectures keep up their provision of pleasure partly through these unpredictable modulations, but occasionally they leave the reader exasperated rather than entertained.

Whether the reader will be illuminated is another matter. As chatty and clubbable introductions to their chosen authors, Fenton's lectures are excellent. But these are not challenging new readings. Fenton has done well to exclude from the book the most obviously *réchauffé* of his lectures: the attack on T. S. Eliot, which slavishly followed Anthony Julius's accusations of anti-Semitism. Nevertheless, several of the published lectures still feel dully familiar. The problem with Fenton's biographical approach is that it relies on a degree of ignorance. The more the reader knows about the subject, the less enthralling the lectures become. Lingering over Wilfred Owen's sexuality, Fenton repeats a conventional narrative with which anyone who has studied Owen will already be familiar. Owen, we learn, was homosexual, his apprentice verse was very bad, and (most of) the poetry he wrote after Craiglockhart was much better. And that, with one or two minor finesses, is that. When it comes to Sylvia

Plath, Fenton's inability to take his eyes off the biography produces eccentric results. He excuses the "Nazi/Jewish imagery", for example, on the basis that Plath may have suffered anti-German prejudice as the daughter of a first-generation Prussian immigrant. Whereas Heaney had criticized Plath for rampaging "permissively in the history of other people's sorrows", Fenton maintains that she was in fact "drawing on the history of her own people's sorrows". This yoking of German immigrants with Jewish Holocaust victims begs more questions than it answers; infuriatingly, Fenton halts his argument at precisely the point where the detail and the justification should begin.

Fenton is most effective when writing about those poets for whom he feels a natural affinity: Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop and, especially, Auden. Auden makes cameo appearances in several of the lectures, but *The Strength of Poetry* comes alive in the last three chapters, as the ephebe poet-critic finally gets to grips with his master. "Auden had the greatest gifts of any of our poets in the twentieth century", Fenton asserts; the reader can disagree, while still admiring his passionate advocacy. Fenton on Auden on Shakespeare's sonnets is the most impressive chapter, convincingly defending Auden's notorious reluctance to "secure our Top-Bard as the patron saint of the Homintern". Auden was wrong about the sonnets (although Fenton doesn't quite admit this), but he was wrong for significant and revealing reasons: quoting from David Luke, Fenton argues that Auden's theory of love "rests on an essentialist view of the human person, deriving ultimately from Plato, which is now out of fashion". The earlier lectures may be slightly disappointing, but this and the other chapters on Auden make *The Strength of Poetry* an important book.

Woolly whispers of the past

SALLY CONNOLLY

U. A. Fanthorpe

CONSEQUENCES
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minster Abbey. Henry's effigy by Torrigiano is exposed as nothing more than a "red herring in stone". Instead, the power to move and impress is vested in the humble hassocks given by the Richard Society to Sutton Cheney church (where Richard prayed before the Battle of Bosworth). It is their "woolly whispers" that prompt us to remembrance, not only of Bosworth's dead, but "all the obliterated". Bringing the bellicose up to date, "The Young Person's Guide to Arms" provides the reader with a Devil's Dictionary of modern warfare, exposing the way that euphemisms such as "ethnic cleansing", "collateral damage" and "friendly fire" are used to justify and neutralize atrocity.

The remaining poems pick up and amplify these early themes along with some of Fanthorpe's abiding concerns. There has always been an autobiographical (though rarely confessional) element in her work, and *Consequences* takes us back to her childhood and

memories of her mother. In "Neé", Fanthorpe develops an ongoing interest in, and identification with, Shakespeare's sisters. She depicts her mother as bitter at having had her identity and opportunities swallowed whole by marriage, and is uneasily aware that her mother's thwarted chances were, to some extent, a consequence of her own existence:

Vaguely we knew we'd missed something by happening.

We were the children of Mrs Humphry Ward.
Marriage is burial, she used to say.

I could have

written novels, or played the french horn.

For the Poetry International last year, Fanthorpe choose Robert Browning as her "Presiding Spirit", and once again she demonstrates that she is often at her best when using the dramatic monologue.

In the first poem of the collection, she exhorts us to "Choose, England!", and in Fanthorpe's moral schema, nothing seems worse than a missed chance or a wrong choice for society or the individual. Consequently, she sees the greatest danger in being misled and misinformed. Fanthorpe argues against received ideas and for the value of plain-speaking in the didactic poems "Against Speech", "Popular Fallacies" and "Words for Months". Her most urgent duty seems to be to tell the reader the truth, the most enduring instances of which she frequently finds in the quotidian. The daylight of "Post-Op" which reveals "The unexpected awfulness of the tiles on the kitchen floor" is infinitely more truthful than the stagey three-dimensional chiaroscuro of the tomb by Torrigiano, "the master of the cast shadow".

Fanthorpe seems to have an unfaltering desire to bear witness, and her poetic voice is direct as she shuns the oblique and ambiguous. Though bald statements such as "Atrocity / Is what we

haven't got used to yet" sometimes strike a mawkish note, Fanthorpe is aware that verity does not always make for the most elegant verse. In "Another Swan Poem", she comments: "This is not a good poem about a swan / But it might be the bravest. It is also true". Though plain-speaking, *Consequences* is a densely textured and deeply structured collection. A number of footnotes direct the reader to diverse and fascinating sources, while the poems encompass many levels of causation and coincidence.

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