'Stein meets the Beach Boys'

*In Darkest Capital: The Collected Poems of Drew Milne* (431pp, £20, Carcanet)

In these dense lyrical poems it is 'as if there the concepts are natural'. It seems they are, although sometimes, when 'Stein meets the Beach Boys' it is 'perhaps more hash browns / than double meaning' that Milne produces. Milne thrives on both formalism and Marxism, but both are subservient to a wit and musicality that makes these dense, complex poems both readable and challenging.

The book is actually pretty overwhelming; a very different reading experience from the original collections on my shelf. Whilst it shows to good effect the variety of forms, as well as ongoing obsessions, interests and diversions en route, it's physically a bit of a brick, as well as a major accomplishment. I love the fluidity of the language: this is poetry to read aloud, listening to the syntactical slipperiness, the echo and sustain of its music. This, for me has always been Milne's major strength, not the 'content' which is often difficult to unravel or précis. It is a strength he shares with John Wilkinson, and sometimes J.H. Prynne, the two poets he is often most associated with by critics.

Yet however abstract this poetry can seem, the reader is always brought back to earth with MIlne's poetic references, jokes, hommages and knowing asides. The litanies of 'the cost of this text' and 'the weight of this line' which make up 'Equipollence' are immediately accessible and thought provoking, constituting a poem which wears its politics on its sleeve. Elsewhere the complexities of 'the bruise that heidegger built', where

 hacker dwelling meniscus how go liquid just
 spans modular thrown open to open plan

slowly accrue meaning until we have

 involvement inthe onsite construction process
 freeing something from someone signed sky ruins

just as this poem plays its part in the sequence 'Blueprints & Ziggurats'.

If I haven't quite got my head around the newer work in here, with its focus on lichens and eco-socialism, how could you not be wowed by the image of rhubarb breaking out its glad rags, or language like this, at the start of 'Silicon Glitch':

 quick and dirty solutions fox in rust
 or find lit nights for global blights
 all plastic pyres over decaying plant
 over every lichen lettered windowsill

It is these kind of linguistic moments and observation, along with the sound of his poetry (just read those four lines out loud), that keep me coming back to Milne's work. Beneath the surface music there is thought and argument and questioning, and I like being made to think.

 © Rupert Loydell 2018