

'Everything *Tutta Gloria*'

Oblivion Banjo. The Poetry of Charles Wright, Charles Wright (hbk, 756pp, \$50, Farrar Strauss & Giroux)

Rupert Loydell: Is it me, or is Charles Wright obsessed with death, old age, and doubt throughout his poetry, even that written as a young man? *Oblivion Banjo* is pretty melancholic stuff from the word go, despite it's many moments of beauty and observation.

Martin Caseley: Death and old age, yes – increasingly so in the recent volumes. As for doubt, I think it's more like an ongoing argument: in one of his interviews he talks about having 'the possibility of salvation' inserted into him during his early Episcopalian education and dipping back down into it regularly. A poem like 'Sky Valley Rider' (from *Hard Freight*, page 17) protests too much to be entirely taken at face value, whereas by the time he's writing poems like 'Invisible Landscape' and 'Born Again' (both from *China Trace*, pages 78 and 79), the argument's in full spate and it rolls onwards through the subsequent volumes...

It has to be admitted, though, that in interviews, he seems unduly pessimistic: 'oblivion' and 'extinction' are what he forecasts for poetry. Incidentally, where does the title 'Oblivion Banjo' originate?

RL: It's not even what I'd call pessimistic, it's that he displays both a sense of time passing ('How soon we come to road's end', he says in 'Apologia Pro Vita Sua', page 353) and also timelessness.

In nature there is no past or future,
no pronouns or verbs.

he says in 'Littlefoot' (page 600), going on to add 'Now is precise but indefinable'. Yet here we have a massive book about both the future and the now. I don't, by the way, know where the title phrase comes from, although I quite like it's sense of invisible music, or perhaps singing into non-existence.

Early on he, or his poem's narrator, says 'I want to be bruised by God' (Clear Night', page 61) yet he resists the notion of (a) God, let alone any interaction with or bruising from him. I'm never sure how any author can spend so much time writing *around* a subject, and use so many abstractions alongside so much precise observation of the natural world. I remember doing a presentation on Wright's poetry to my MA class, and my tutor tearing the poems apart because of this tendency to abstraction. Do you think this is a kind of poetry version of Polos – a hole in the middle, someone selling us air – or is it more simply doubt, or a personal inability to believe or 'have faith'?

MC: I think, biographically, it's more like someone who's been bruised by losing his faith, but still sees evidence of the loss everywhere, especially in the way he sacralises elements of the natural landscape. A later poem like 'Via Negativa'

(page 499) explores some of the paradoxes.

But do you see abstractions balanced alongside fairly precise description as a problem? Why did your students dislike abstraction? Did they want something more dogmatic and inflexible?

The quotation you give from 'Apologia' might be paraphrased: nature recognises no individualism and no actions... more problematic, I'd say. Nature in Wright's work is such a huge ingredient that it's dangerous to generalise about it.

RML: No, it was when I was a student that the tutor tore into Wright's abstractions – I was just doing a presentation to the class! I certainly didn't and possibly don't see the abstraction as a problem, although I sometimes think Wright shoehorns, however elegantly, philosophy or theology into his work.

Sometimes it's a kind of shorthand ('X says this'), which can be annoying if you don't know X's work. I'd sometimes like Wright to tell us himself, although I appreciate the narrator is considering something through the lens of X. But don't the mountains exist for Wright outside, for example, Cezanne's paintings of mountains?

I do think Wright is masterful at description and mood. When I first read his work, we were staying at a friend's house in California and I was reading *The World of Ten Thousand Things*, particularly *Zone Journals*, and I liked the way it tracked time by using separate events, ideas and images to build up both longer poems and a wider philosophical view.

That you might sum up the quote from 'Apologia' as nothing singular happens within nature is perhaps more worrying if you apply it to other poems. It might be why I have found more recent work a little singular in tone, somewhat deterministic and accepting, sometimes even pessimistic to the point of repetition. I miss the epiphanies and wonder of Wright's earlier work.

MC: Yes, I think you're right. The poems in the last collection, *Caribou*, are pessimistic and, in some cases, despairing. 'I've been sitting here thinking back over my life' (page 710) and 'My old clinch mountain home' (page 712) utilise some of his characteristic abstractions and throws around some religious language, but the conclusions are undeniably bleak: 'there is an afterlight that follows us, / and fades as clockticks fade.' 'Lullaby' (page 719) and other poems succeeding it seem to be a farewell, and the use of blues phrases in places seem to evince a sense of mortality. The blues idiom always has this, but there's usually an accompanying sense of gospel redemption, except in the very darkest songs (e.g: Robert Johnson). I think these may be conscious references.

They're certainly not as uplifting and full of wonder as some of the *Black Zodiac* and *Zone Journals* pieces. Having said this, Wright has always looked back in his poetry, evoking time and again his days in Italy, for example. The newer pieces exemplify this more.

What do you make of the more relaxed first-person voice in the 'Chinoiserie' poems? This seems to come close to telling us what Wright thinks, as per your comment above.

RL: I don't particularly find the 'Chinoiserie' poems any different from the others in *Caribou*, to be honest. And I always try hard not to conflate narrator and author; in fact I spend half my time as a lecturer suggesting students keep them separate! The narrator at best, even in so-called 'confessional' poetry is a construct, a mediated text; and the language should be prime, not the content or effect it may or may not have on the reader.

I guess part of my confusion is that – as a grumpy middle-age white male – I seem to be drawn into Charles Wright's grumpy middle-aged poetic angst, and I don't know if that is a good thing or not. One either accepts there are a lot of shared assumptions which happen to 'speak' to me, or one resists it as a sign of privilege and generalisation.

That doesn't mean I think for one minute any poet can write for everyone or anyone, but I can appreciate how abstract and privileged this poetry could be perceived as, however relaxed the tone is. Perhaps that remains the problem with confessional, even intelligent and erudite, confessional poetry? That assumption of speaking for everyman, when perhaps it doesn't and the mythical everyman turns out to either not exist or reject being spoken for? Or maybe Wright accepts, as many of us do, that poetry has a small audience in the 21st century?

MC: I understand your desire to separate narrator and author, and in many cases it's necessary, but what about those occasions when they are obviously the same? Having just watched the excellent BBC documentary on Seamus Heaney, it's strikingly evident there is very little difference between narrator and author in some of his biographical poems – to argue that there is would be simply perverse.

Shared assumptions aren't necessarily signs of privilege, are they? That (which is itself a generalisation) seems a bit reductive. The notion of an everyman is very problematic, I think: where would it leave a writer like Geoffrey Hill or, at the other extreme, Carol Ann Duffy? In the case of the latter, I don't share all of Duffy's feminist assumptions, but don't have a problem with the notion of audience she works to (and writes for). In the case of the former, Hill doesn't even assume he speaks for everyman. I think, like him, Wright has stopped worrying about everyman, whether he exists, or whether he writes for him. In one of his interviews in *Charles Wright in Conversation* he talks of poetry communicating 'emotional value to the tribe', which probably supports your comments about privilege a bit, or may support your comment about poetry's audience.

RL: My problem is more with ideas of ego ('I speak for all') or that a poet's personal experience is somehow intrinsically interesting. I don't, I'm afraid, enjoy Heaney's poetry on any level, nor most of Carol Ann Duffy's work beyond

her first couple of volumes. I'm afraid they seem to want to exist purely by empathy, mass appeal and the work is often mawkish and shallow. Hill is the opposite for me: I feel I am being lectured to, although *Mercian Hymns* is a fantastic sequence.

Communicating 'emotional value to the tribe' is a superb phrase, and one I've not noticed myself. Emotional value seems different somehow to emotion *per se*, it implies more a leavening or adding an extra layer to live. Still a bold claim of course! And although it has perhaps shamanistic overtones, which I won't pursue, I would probably read it as a quiet statement of intent rather than a declamatory manifesto.

I'd argue that the generally quiet, discursive tone of his work and the incredibly precise lineation (all those split or hinged long lines) and imposed forms make the reader slow down and read in a contemplative way. This isn't a poetry to rush through looking for quick epiphany or summary.

MC: Yes, those in search of a quick awakening in a Wright poem may need to slow down and listen carefully to his particular music. Then they will find they recognise the landscape of his poems – or maybe the inscape even – then look around for certain familiar cloudscapes, far horizons and memories.

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