

Afterword, David Miller (105pp, Shearsman)
Circle Square Triangle, David Miller (83pp, Spuyten Duyvil)

David Miller's writing has always crossed boundaries: between poetry and fiction, between the confessional and poetically distant, the heartfelt and philosophical. His work has consistently used short texts – often containing quotes or intertextual allusions – in juxtaposition to other short texts to build up a patchwork effect within a text. In the 'Notes' to *Afterword*, he refers to 'independent texts. Yet related.' and 'Ruins, edifices, fragmented architectures.' Adopting a phrase from *Circle Square Triangle* a reader might think of reading Miller more as 'through & past & back'.

But it is never a puzzle to be solved, or a jigsaw that makes a picture with straight edges and is complete. Miller's work is often more like an archaeological tesserae, the remains of a mosaic that has slowly been revealed by digging and then patient brush work. The quotations and allusions, be they from neglected authors, obscure religious texts or other poets' writing, are sufficient in themselves: we do not need to read them for ourselves, Miller has captured the essence of what he wishes to say or mention and embedded that within his own web of writing.

Because the texts are so brief, it means the language and ideas have to work hard on the page. These are poems that have been edited and shaped, revised and rewritten until there is just enough on the page, enough to capture a moment, a thought, an image or idea. These are then allowed to accumulate and link, via association and theme, to produce a complete work. It risks being precious, elusive and cryptic, but Miller's work is consistently clear-headed and precise, carefully sculpted on the page and for the ear.

The back cover blurb suggests that *Afterword* is 'a long poem in fragments, but it might also be seen as a poem sequence of memories and mediations, dreams and visions'. Thankfully, Miller retains his specificity and imagistic skill to keep away from the new age ideas this conjured up for me, although at times these texts can be more abstract than much of his writing, relying on wordplay, visual/aural echo and surprising trains of thought to make their point:

rage

rags | rags we have | rags we become we are

(page 86)

so late | & still it rains

so long ah so long that it rains it rains & it rains

cherries in kirsch | once

(page 83)

Much of *Afterword* references spirituality, belief and love, often within the context of regret and loss, but also in relation to art, theology and relationships, and the book slowly moves towards a kind of resolution which is rooted in the physicality of fingers, speech and lips.

Circle Square Triangle is more of a sequence in the expected way: a long poem in four numbered parts, sometimes divided again into numbered parts, with individual poems (or parts of poems) delineated by asterisks between them, but the whole running on over the pages. I confess that even after several reads (and also as an unnamed character who is briefly present in a poem) I struggle with this work. It is the first time for me that Miller has tried to imbue too much meaning into some of his images or let named artists and writers stand in as a kind of shorthand for what he wants to say. And the title phrase does not resonate or underpin the work as Miller clearly wants it to do.

There are wonderful memories and moments, even compressed narratives, in this text, but there are also poems that moan and poems that seem too ordinary in what they depict. It is clear these autobiographical stories and memories are important to the author, but sometimes they seem slight or disgruntled in their retelling. Others, of course, may disagree and find ways to engage with *Circle Square Triangle*, but for me it is *Afterword*, along with Miller's *Collected Poems*, *Reassembling Still*, I shall be returning to.

Rupert Loydell