*Selected Early Poems*, Chris Torrance, ed. Ian Brinton (Shearsman)

The British Poetry Revival is a complex, not easily-defined thing; an ever-expanding umbrella term, it now seems to include not only the UK equivalent of the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets, intent on political and linguistic deconstruction and experiment, but also a bunch of pseudo-romantic lyricists, tapping into occult and earth mystery obsessions on the back of the Beats and hippies; and everything inbetween. New centres of activity and lines of influence constantly emerge, are made visible or invented: London, Cambridge, Brighton, Essex University, Newcastle, Oxford, Hebden Bridge, Liverpool and Cardiff are linked by poetic ley lines which cut through arts centres, bookshops, pubs and anywhere with a photocopier or duplicator. Especially pubs.

Chris Torrance can be linked to a number of places and people. Based in Carshalton, Surrey, Torrance became friends with Lee Harwood, one of the more lyrical poets attached to linguistically innovative poetry, and had books published by Iain Sinclair's Albion Village Press, providing a context for earth magic, conspiracy and mystery. After moving to South Wales via Bristol, Torrance was part of Cabaret 246 which orbited Peter Finch's Oriel shop in Cardiff and involved the likes of (Chris)Topher Mills and Ifor Thomas. Cabaret 246 – via Finch's sound poetry interests and antics – performed at the London Musician's Collective and had links to Bob Cobbing et al. Allen Fisher seems to have known him (he wrote an elegy and some drawings i.m.), which provides links to Fluxus in Britain (Fluxshoe) and more science-based experimental writing; Andrew Crozier published him, providing a Cambridge connection.

Of course, most poets have this kind of web of associations, contacts, friendships and influences. Andrew Duncan is especially good at teasing some of them out in his critical books, whilst Ian Brinton explores some of them in his introduction to this newly published selection of Torrance's early work. Brinton also offers some more influential and perhaps surprising links: Prynne 'alert[ing] readers to the connection between Hölderlin and Torrance', a review essay by John Freeman, and Torrance's love of Charles Olson. So far so good.

Phil Maillard's 'Preface' however, takes a different tack, noting Torrance's exciting encounters with 'a volatile Mob of nascent artists, writers and musicians' and reporting 'validation' of being a writer by 'The Carshalton Steam Laundry Vision', when 'his vocation was revealed to him': '"I'm *going* to be a *poet*." It wasn't a "vision"; it was a powerful voice that had to be obeyed ("I accepted it completely").' Maillard goes on to write, apparently with a straight face, that 'Torrance, though serious minded and precise on one level, had magical feelings about his own life' and notes a later 'tendency towards psychedelia and a broader spirituality becoming more evident.'

Ignoring the later sprawling multi-book project of *The Magic Door*, *Selected Early Poems* shows a documentary approach to the confessional, poems mostly consisting of straightforward arrangements of events and emotional responses, interspersed with observations such as:

 cars whoosh by in the street

 outside the wind

 blows again a clock

 strikes a candle burns

 ('Poem Marked by an Exegesis')

or banal haiku:

 Two old beggars sit

 with their pipes by a warm fire

 cracking their toes

 ('Winter Haiku')

Am I missing the symbolism or importance of such events? And what am I to do with the whining and generalisations of 'I Am So Lonely'?

 I am so lonely

 no-one is with me

 no-one is with me

 I can eat, then

 sleep the tired night through

 and resume my work in the morning

 but now I am so lonely, I am so

 lonely, I am so lonely

whose narrator eventually finds solace in the mosquitoes, who

 sing, lonely, lonely, lonely

 join in the sexual dance, join in the swarm

 around the tall chimney in autumn twilight

 & the love will be found in the swarm even

 the love will be found in the swarm

There is little evidence of Olson's depth and inventiveness here, little open form or use of the page as a compositional field, no intensity akin to *Maximus*. Torrance's poems here are as mundane as the likes of a hundred other forgotten poets, full of forced epiphanies squeezed from the everyday around the author, full of emotional angst, 'opaque mood[s]' and 'the dark hail of self'. Unfortunately for the reader, visions, connections, conviction and self-assurance are no guarantee of good or interesting poetry, and this attempt to shoehorn Torrance into some kind of alternative canon is undeserved.

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(745 words)