*American Outrage: A Testementary*, H.L. Hix (BlazeVOX)

The title piece of this chunky, large format paperback is a 112 page poem consisting of a list of names and brief personal details of around a 1000 victims of shootings in the USA, interspersed with statistics and facts about how and why guns are used and misused. It is a memorial, a litany, a liturgy, a reminder, a representation and a commentary on the addiction to violence many Americans (indeed, many people) have, unable to make the connection between 'the right to bear arms' and events such as mass shootings, let alone the death toll of individuals.

It is a provocation too, with an underlying question: Why did the likes of Alvin Haynes, who 'had a long standing addiction to heroin' or Olivia Stoffel, who 'liked to write notes and stories, and wanted to be a writer when she grew up', die? I was going to write have to die, but there is no *have to* involved. They are part of mostly nameless statistics which count gunshot wounds, casualties, news stories, accidents, homicides, suicides, sales, productivity levels, domestic violence, etc. etc.

The second part of *American Outrage* is a critical bibliography entitled 'Parerga', a word that seems to reference both a volume of six miscellaneous essays by Arthur Schopenhauer (one volume of his *Parerga and Paralipomena*) and the term 'parergon', which *Wikipedia* defines as a semiotic term referring to something as supplementary or an embellishment, also noting that the original Greek word refers to 'an addition to the work'. Both seem pertinent, for Hix's 'Parerga' expands upon his original text, and bears (indirect) witness to Schopenhauer's philosophical discussions regarding how phenomena (the actual) are the result of irrational assumptions and ideas.

It's clear that Hix is bewildered by his nation's love of guns and the deaths which result from this. Not by directly talking or preaching to the reader but by the gradual expansive accumulation of quotes and source material which informs and underpins the first piece. So the phrase 'We would be wise to correlate our fear with what actually threatens us', turns out be from a *Granta* article about police violence and statistics by Patrick Ball, which Hix quotes from at length in 'Pererga':

America is a land ruled by fear. We fear that our children will be abducted

by strangers, that crazed gunmen will perpetrate mass killings in our schools

and theaters, that terrorists will gun us down or blow up our buildings, and

that serial killers will stalk us on dark streets. All of these risks are real, but

they are minuscule in probability: taken together, these threats constitute

less than three per cent of total annual homicides in the US. The numerically

greater threat to our safety, and the largest single category of strangers who

threaten us, are the people we have empowered to use deadly force to

protect us from these less probable threats.

Hix's point here is about (armed) response to fear, rather than simply blaming the police; it is about the legitimization of using 'deadly force'. The longer quote offers the original source and context for those interested, extra material for those continuing to explore themes and ideas raised by the long poem, which is about how humans react to shootings, to death, to hardware and victims, in the widest sense. Hix's mention of 'Empathy after violence' expands in 'Pererga' to discuss race and American identity, with a quote from Artress Bethan White's book *Survivor's Guilt*:

[S]ympathy for a gunned-down stranger does not necessarily translate into   
 tolerance for the same body alive and in need of civil rights... [E]mpathy for   
 those who are different shouldn't just happen after a body has been   
 gunned down and is no longer seen as a political threat.

Politics, fear, violence... I sometimes remember the shock I felt my first time in Manhattan, back in 1980, when two policemen joined me in the lift (sorry, elevator) of the apartment block where I was staying, both holding guns (a rifle and a sub-machine gun) and calmly replying 'Just a domestic' when I politely asked if there was something going on. Nowadays we are of course, bombarded with images on TV and online of armed police, cowboys, armies and individuals, and don't blink at the machine guns and flak jackets of our own UK police force in cities and at airports and stations.

But we need to be shocked and resist making guns an acceptable norm. Hix's book arrived a few days after a failed assassination attempt on Trump, having been posted a few days before that event. Hix's prescience and concern with the nature of things is not a surprise: his previous books have included explorations of dialogue, the arts, the political misuse of language, power structures and a gender free retelling of the Gospel stories. All work by juxtaposition and curation, of language, texts and ideas; all resist fear of the unknown, be that gender, sexuality, race, culture or simply difference. We need to understand, not threaten and kill, make or have enemies. We need to not be afraid and change society, which – like it or not – we are part of.

The most pertinent and challenging quote in this book, for me, is the contextual quote for the phrase 'Enemies are not', which was written by the artist Kurt Schwitters:

There are no values worth defending. Our enemies are just like us. We

should not fight them; we should fight our mistakes. The enemy's right

to live is greater than your right to kill him.

Hix's new book is a powerful, disturbing and challenging read, which points to further reading matter and other ways of thinking. 'The focus', says Hix, 'is on the outrageousness of the violence performed', noting that the word outrage 'has no connection to the word "rage".' More important than feeling is forgiveness and justice, the recognition that (in the words of Jaclyn Schildkraut and H. Jaymi Elsass) 'Violence is always an attack upon a person's dignity, sense of selfhood, and future. It is nothing less than the desecration of one's position in the world.' By sharing his and many others' outrage, by encouraging us to be outraged too, Hix encourages us to grieve, think, understand and take action.

Rupert Loydell