

Dark And Light

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Peter Porter, *The Rest on the Flight: Selected Poems*, intr. Sean O'Brien,
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Peter Porter died in April of this year, a very sad loss to all those who liked and admired him – a list including almost everybody who got to know him a little. In the same month, Picador were able to deliver into his hands this substantial volume, which will prove to be the essential introduction to the work of one of the most important writers who has lived in Britain since the Second World War. Porter was fertile; O'Brien notes in his introduction, "The 1989 Porter *Selected* drew on eleven books and some uncollected material and weighed in with ninety-six poems. In 2010 Don Paterson and I have nineteen books, over eight hundred poems to choose from. The resulting contents would make a substantial *Collected Poems* for many poets." Indeed, Porter's last new book of poems, *Better Than God*, was only published in 2009, so as well as providing an introduction to Porter's complete oeuvre for the beginner, it is also a first map of the territory for the followers who have been discovering it by degrees.

Porter managed the apparent paradox of writing immediately engaging poetry which was richly freighted with the culture, not just of this country, but also of America and the European mainland. Sophisticated Australasian poets moving here, from Porter to Fleur Adcock and Clive James, do this with an ease which embarrasses the locals. However, there is a particular dimension to Porter's *éclat*; in a letter to the *Guardian* recently, Alan Brownjohn remarked that Porter possessed "the very finest kind of non-academic intelligence". This is not to disparage academic intelligence, but the autodidact can take communicable pleasure in subjects often beyond those for whom it is a job:

Much have I travelled in the realms of gold
for which I thank the Paddington and Westminster
Public Libraries: and I have never said sir
to anyone since I was seventeen years old.

(‘The Sanitized Sonnets’)

In *Distinction* (trans. Nice), Bourdieu writes that the autodidact "is ignorant of the right to be ignorant"; this would not have seemed a very important right to the socialist Porter. The best of art and music are there for everybody who can be bothered to investigate them, especially since the development of the internet: Porter shows us doors, not walls. He liked his art laid on with a trowel, commenting once, "I'm fond of the overdone." In poetry, as well as the obvious presence of Auden from the beginning, Porter was very fond of Stevens and Ashbery (*Better Than God* has the poem 'To John Ashbery', which is not included in this selection), baroque and operatic in their work as Porter was in his musical tastes.

Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to present Porter as only an intellectual poet. An awareness of the barbarities European cultures have proved capable of also permeates his work; the Shoah spits from a holocaust of racked chickens, 'A Hoplite's Helmet' is an expensive antique but still part of the machinery of death. Porter's classical gift for satire runs from 'John Marston Advises Anger' through 'After Martial' on to 'That War is the Destruction of Restaurants'. In this vein, his political could be personal:

Two Nations!
 The Rich and the Poor, the South and the North?
 No, the Attractive and the Unattractive.

(‘Fair Go for Anglo-Saxons’)

Perhaps the first poem showing the emotional depths he was capable of in his work was ‘An Exequy’, concerning the death of his first wife, Jannice. In an old *Stand* review, Terry Eagleton declared of Porter, “the more depressed he gets, the more poetically inventive he becomes”, but it was never quite as simple as that. New wine in an old bottle, ‘An Exequy’ reworks Henry King’s elegy on his dead wife to heartbreaking effect; but humour inspired inventiveness too. Porter was a very considerable technician, yet presently we seem to make a fetish of technique and form, giving them almost moral or political dimensions in themselves. Both are as vital to the poetry represented in *The Rest on the Flight* as in, say, Bök’s univocalic prose poems of *Eunoia*; however, neither explains the achievement of those books in a complete way. What we are really after is art that leaves us with something valuable that we didn’t have before. BNP supporters use the phrase “cultural enricher” as a sarcastic term for “immigrant”, but surely the immigrant Porter did exactly that for British culture, deploying immigrant forms like the pantoum, poetry from other languages, ideas from other arts, revitalizing the gene pool with Australian/British hybrid vigour?

Finally, beyond Porter’s technical brilliance, wit and emotional range, I think what also makes him so valuable to us now is the gentleness and tolerance he personally grew into and developed in his work. He was certainly more horrified by folk music than experimental poetry, but could bear its echoes in other poets in the interests of the larger symphony. He never became a snob, was always able to see the value of directness as well as complexity. Eventually, this sophisticated writer came up with the simplest definition of poetry: as language lit up by life, or life lit up by language. *The Rest on the Flight* is set to be the best window for illuminating existing and new readers of Porter. O’Brien and Paterson have served him, and them, and us, brilliantly.

Ian Duhig’s *The Speed of Dark* was shortlisted for the 2007 T.S. Eliot and Costa prizes.

