

# Anthologies *De Nos Jours*

SEAN O'BRIEN

Roddy Lumsden, ed., *Identity Parade*, Bloodaxe, £12, ISBN 9781852248390;

James Byrne and Clare Pollard, eds., *Voice Recognition*, Bloodaxe,  
£9.95, ISBN 9781852248383;

James Byrne, *Blood/Sugar*, Arc, £9.99, ISBN 9781906570286;

Tony Williams, *At the Corner of Arundel Lane and Charles Street*,  
Salt, £12.99, ISBN 9781844715176

**D**o you long to be accused of prejudice, ignorance, corruption and nepotism? You could become an MP. Or if you want to do the job properly you could edit an anthology. Few things bring out the reviewer's inner taxi driver more powerfully than a new anthology. It will be too inclusive, too exclusive, based on a false premiss, anachronistic, tendentious, elitist, populist, xenophobic, incoherent, excessively programmatic, deaf to what's really going on, cripplingly hip, naff, dim, highbrow, corrupted by faction and woefully neutral. It will fail. It will be an opportunity missed. It will be regrettable. Does this sound like the job for you?

In editing *Identity Parade*, which surveys poets emerging since the mid-1990s, Roddy Lumsden might as well be carrying a large sign reading "Hit me", for he has included a great many poets (eighty-five) and avoided offering a manifesto: instead, he simply suggests that there is interesting work here. What a bastard. (The real test, though, is the quality of the omissions. But they know who they are, even if no one else does.) Lumsden is correct. There is a great deal of interesting work in the book – "poems in both conventional and innovative styles and which take their influence from both traditions at once." The gender balance is redressed and the cultural diversity of the present day suggested.

Nevertheless, as usual "We are too many", as Yeats remarked, and at anything less than essay-length it's impossible to deal fairly with the contributors to *Identity Parade*. Some have already established themselves quite prominently – including, for example, Colette Bryce, Paul Farley, Sophie Hannah, Gwyneth Lewis, Alice Oswald, Jacob Polley, Deryn Rees-Jones and John Stammers. It would be very difficult to claim (though somebody will) that these are all poets of any one tendency – other, that is, than the conspicuous tendency, Oswald excepted, not to be published by Faber, a fact which suggests, given the quality of some of them, that for some time until very lately Faber were missing a trick, or the point.

Perhaps the most interesting feature of the anthology is the representation of those who seem likely to make a larger impact – which necessitates another list, as incomplete as the one before. Likely names include: Paul Batchelor, Polly Clark, Frances Leviston, Patrick McGuinness, Daljit Nagra, James Sheard and Tim Turnbull – and all these poets really have in common is the English language. Batchelor's renewal of elements of northern modernism brings a remarkable ear to bear on a wide range of original and translated material. With him as with Leviston, McGuinness and Sheard, the reader notes that learning is in the service of imagination rather than a substitute for it. It's not the kind of work that endears itself to administrators, since accessibility is at best a secondary consideration. Leviston's 'Scandinavia', already a well known piece, is in part about the duty owed to sentience and contemplation, while Sheard's dense, musical lines repay the extended attention we're often told people nowadays can't manage. His Germanic literariness is matched by McGuinness's fascination with Belgitude. None of this work carries instructions on how or when

to be 'moved' by it: it assumes the reader's autonomy. Imagination, intelligence, scope, ambition, technical power and musicality: these, rather than attitudes or stylistic similarity, are what mark these writers out. While both Nagra and Turnbull have a strong element of performance in their work, the significant point is that their poems would be of interest even if this were not the case.

The awkward but critically productive fact is that the most famous anthologies of the last fifty years – Alvarez's *The New Poetry* and Morrison and Motion's *Contemporary British Poetry* – make introductory arguments which only small part of their contents can actually support. Read as a map, *Identity Parade* is very useful, though for want of serious editorial controversy it might end up being neglected. *Voice Recognition*, edited by James Byrne and Clare Pollard, undertakes what may be a slightly trickier task, that of identifying interesting poets almost before their emergence: in this case twenty-one of them. Unlike Lumsden, the editors do have a thesis of sorts, which is set out in an introduction whose slovenliness will take some beating. It's hard to imagine they actually wrote this:

Over the last few years there has been a surge of interest in young poets. The main reason for this seems to be that support for emerging voices has increased exponentially. Once being a new poet was a lonely business, which involved years of posting off new work to magazines, only to receive rejection slips a year later. Now opportunities to workshop, perform and publish have boomed. In fact, there are more avenues to gain attention as a young writer than at any time before.

This grimly hilarious paragraph seems quite unaware of the fact that poetry might require an investment of time and patience, and that publication might come not as a result of wanting it but of deserving it. The preoccupation with "being a poet" is part of the contemporary fetish of 'creativity', whereby an attitude and an identity as part of a scene are assumed to be the real thing, rather than the work itself. In their treatment of Creative Writing MAs the editors go on to emphasize this: "In the graduate workshop setting, poets are able to improve as technicians of poems and, more importantly, develop a relationship with student-poets of their own generation." It's hard to imagine they actually meant to say that networking is more important than learning to write, but the truth will out. And "technicians of poems"? They'll be talking about "creative process" next. Oops. They also manage to suggest that enjoyable, well-run, well-attended poetry readings are a recent invention. See this? It's a wheel.

What about the poetry? Some of it has a guarded, trivial, preliminary character in which 'the contemporary' serves as an all-areas pass for those who above all don't want to be fooled, but thankfully the editors have chosen quite a lot of work that simply bypasses the introduction in order to begin to make its own case. There are some very talented poets here. Toby Martinez de las Rivas (another poet, like Batchelor, wise enough to live in the North East) is outstanding, a visionary in the making. Jack Underwood is more earthbound but witty and able to sustain his inventions, and Ailbh Darcy, Joe Dunthorne and Adam O'Riordan among others are certainly worth watching.

James Byrne's own second collection, *Blood / Sugar* is packed, ambitious and absorbing, so heavily tattooed with allusion that at times the author's own abilities – his sense of line, weight and timing – are obscured. The comparison that comes to mind is with Christopher Middleton, with whom Byrne shares a restless hunger. Again, it's hard to believe that this Byrne is the same one who is listed as co-author of the introduction to *Voice Recognition*.

A poet who figures in neither anthology (a matter of timing, I hope) is Tony Williams. His first book, *The Corner of Arundel Lane and Charles Street*, has allusiveness in common with Byrne,

but in Williams's case this is drawn into the service of a distinctive imagination obsessed with place and history and the need to confer meaning if it can't be discovered. Some of the influences are quite easily recognizable – Peter Didsbury, Roy Fisher, Geoffrey Hill turned upside down, urban pastoral – but Williams is also an original, placing the city- and landscapes of Sheffield and Derbyshire at the centre of a universe where mundane observation crosses into the visionary, generating a strange blend of dry, scabrous humour and awed love of place. The Marvellian title poem is stunning. To read Williams's work with the best of the others here is to be convinced afresh that this is an exciting time for poetry.

Sean O'Brien's *The Drowned Book* won the 2007 Forward and T.S. Eliot prizes.

