

The Science Of Possibility

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Charles Tomlinson, *Cracks in the Universe*,
Carcamet, £7.95, ISBN 1903039797;

Peter Redgrove, *The Harper*, Cape, £9.00, ISBN 0224077937;
Peter Redgrove, *A Speaker for the Silver Goddess*, Stride,
£8.50, ISBN 1905024169;

Philip Gross, *The Egg of Zero*, Bloodaxe, £7.95, ISBN 1852247266;
Greg Delanty, *Collected Poems 1986-2006*,
Carcamet, £14.95, ISBN 1903039827

A poem's design, or the design of a single poetic line, should suggest possibility, not cast-iron certainty; even though its structure may be as super-involved as the genetic design of a rose, or an eye. Let a poem carry the argument. This is the entirety of Charles Tomlinson's 'A Rose from Fronteira':

Head of a rose:
above the vase
a gaze widening –
hardly a face, and yet
the warmth has brought it forth
out of itself,
with all its folds, flakes, layers
gathered towards the world
beyond the window,
as bright as features,
as directed as a look:
rose, reader
of the book
of light.

The cellular life of a poem is its language, and Tomlinson's language is numinous with life. Alert, evocative, precise language of this standard is not too far from the best observational nature writing, or writing that arises from scientific enquiry. Obviously, a botanist would not reach for the image of the rose as a "reader of the book of light" while writing a paper; but might, were they tilting their findings into creative non-fiction.

Charles Tomlinson is light-years ahead of so many other English poets whose reputations are more visible if less sturdy. Why do we not celebrate him more than we do? It is an old question; and it will not go away. Is he too good for us? *Cracks in the Universe* is a volume brimming with excellences; it extends a body of poetry which has few equals in achievement, perceptual alertness and audacity. I've little doubt that when we look back on poetry from England in fifty years Charles Tomlinson, with Geoffrey Hill and Ted Hughes, will be seen as the figures to reckon with, and to re-read. It is abjectly Little-English to ignore him while he lives – and writes so well – among us. If you are unfamiliar with his work, this book is yet another marvellous place to begin.

Good poetic design engenders possibility. The *oeuvre* of a poet suggests similar strains of possibility. However we tend to read in picks and patches, rather than taking a complete view. It is possible to take that completed view with Peter Redgrove now he has passed on: a scientist and a poet of such range and strangeness that his work arouses as much confusion and talent-blindness among critics as it does curiosity and devotion among readers. I personally feel that, as with Charles Tomlinson, Peter Redgrove is foolishly under-rated but we are beginning to catch up with him at last and, in both cases, that this is our gain.

For some poets, writing poems requires an excess of process in order to create discrimination: their volcano vomits sky-high ash, but there may be a few diamonds scorched into being. This was never Redgrove's project. There is a sense that you need to read his whole output as one long white-hot flow of which these two books are fresh tributaries. Penelope Shuttle quoted that fine critic, the late Philip Hobsbaum in a recent edition of *Stand* as stating, "...the dedicated reader needs to accept Redgrove *en bloc*, demanding though the task may be". Yet Redgrove's work demands only to be read out loud (as Shuttle indicates) for its apparent mysteries to become what they are: open-minded enquiries, clear-eyed explorations.

Personally, I find Redgrove's work beguiling in both its fragments and its wholeness. His balance of science and metaphysical exploration is rigorous and intelligent, alight with parallaxes and possibilities. I was first drawn to his poems because I was a scientist, as was he. But this balance and play of mind has been overplayed by critics who know nothing about science, or who have not grown beyond the image of scientist as anti-imagination empiricist. In my experience, scientists are among the most innovative and lateral workers with language, ideas and images. There is nothing unusual in Redgrove's absolute refusal to stop exploring the inner and outer minds of his worlds; it goes with the training.

What Redgrove knew from the long experience of writing poems is that

form must seem inevitable, be near-invisible, a presence in dialogue with the writing. In his later work, he embraced a three-step line; and this allowed him a huge elasticity in voice and pacing. One thing it allows the reader is *speed*: the three-stepped line runs downhill at a clatter. For the poet, the line's shape props and pistons the work forward within the superstructure of a book. Reading Redgrove therefore has never been easier; and both these posthumous collections complete a most remarkable *oeuvre*.

I've admired Philip Gross's poems since his first collection, *Familiars*, in 1983; and never understood why Gross's poetic reputation is not a little more electric, until I discovered that some commentators consider him 'safe', whatever that means. However, one supportive critic commented that Gross's excellence is not just a matter of his imagination but also what he chooses to write about. That goes some way to making a case, but underplays his literary style which is considerable in its linguistic panache. As a poet, Gross can be as experimental and left-field as any self-elected avant-gardist, and in this new collection he plays compendious games with stanza and sound; and also pushes punctuation and numerical marks into open spaces where they begin to sprout into little words and images all by themselves, for example in 'The Channel':

...Our first week apart

I found myself doodling its symbol: brackets
inside-outed. Trust a man
to translate sadness into mathematics

) (

or ink on the page – like opening a *river*
of type, so space might flow...

I was particularly impressed throughout this book by the interplay between line, line-break, various connecting patterns and stanza-shapes; but not distracted to the point where I forgot about the words – the poems indeed – and just enjoyed the technique. Some of the poems are marvellous, not because they are candid, not because they are brave about subject, not even because of the technique on display, but because they are electrifyingly well-observed and beautifully written. Perceptual acuity at this level, like that of Charles Tomlinson, is an act of extreme attention. There is nothing safe or lame in that endeavour; it is one of the hardest of poetic feats.

Lame poems are like lame jokes: they surprise us into boredom. As Greg

Delanty would probably argue, a good joke is itself a decent poem. There is little lame about Greg Delanty's poetry but, in contrast to the sifted compactions of Philip Gross, Delanty creates cocky, wordy, cheerful poems, as well as something we used to call "verse". For purists, any of these gambolling qualities could send a poet to purgatory. Yet good humorous verse is tough to pull off and the best comedy is the thorniest to write.

Within the 'vasty fields' of a complete works, there are bound to be etiolations of poetic energy ("the froth / of goodwill bubbling up like cappuccino" is the kind of image starved by the writer's sheer goodwill). These etiolations occur when Delanty switches all the power from the poem to the *joke* of the poem. Mostly, the wordy bravura keeps the poems alive. By reputation, he is a brilliant performer of his work, and the enlivening syntax of poems such as 'The Natural World' and 'The Shutterbug' wake the ear with their spoken confidence. Of course, all writing *is* performance. Style performs our voice. Our syntax and diction perform language. In Delanty's *oeuvre*, those syntheses are beautifully entangled; messy sometimes, but honest in their occasional clumsiness. In fact, I like this poet a lot more for the faults he shows honestly than for those hidden by technical gloss-paint. Possibility, even the possibility of failure, yields more to the reader than certainty or professionalism.

David Morley's 'Songs of Songs' appears on pp. 18-19.