

MARTIN MALONE: REVIEW

Complete Poems by John Silkin. Northern House/Carcenet. 915pp; £29.99, ISBN978-1-84777-240-4.

There is an interesting contrast to be made between the image of a young Jon Silkin hustling the early issues of *Stand* around 1950s England – physically taking to the road to descend upon campuses, theatre queues, even restaurant diners – and today’s remote editorial performance via the unromantic superhighways of social media. As a digital immigrant, I can’t help but feel we’ve lost something along the way. And a vague sense of loss is what attends first sight of this weighty monument to Silkin’s own poetic output. How can a poet whose work spanned almost the entire second-half-of the twentieth century slip so readily from public consciousness in the nineteen years since his premature death in 1997? Perhaps it is part of the poetic ecosystem, that one’s shelf life fluctuates both during one’s own lifetime and *post-mortem*. As Jon Glover notes in his Introduction:

[...]as so often happens, after his death his reputation has waned and his key reference point in post-Second World War poetry has almost vanished from recent textbooks and anthologies.

Perhaps, too, this is the dubious fate of an editor-poet, whose considerable academic reputation was also enough to distract from his creative output. In recent years, I’ve encountered a good number of poets with stories to tell of Silkin’s editorial benevolence and encouragement of their early published efforts. But rarely have I been engaged in a discussion of Silkin’s own work and **that** is a great pity, for, as this beautifully produced and impressively edited volume shows, he was a poet of great power, range and commitment, possessed of good instincts and no little technical skill.

Everything about this book is on a grand scale, befitting the life and career it denotes: The Introduction alone runs to 67 pages, and that’s before the 850 that chronicle his 11 or so collections, intriguingly interspersed, here, with reams of uncollected work from analogous time periods. Like most outputs of this heft, then, Silkin’s work might signify different things to different generations. I’d be interested, for example, to hear a younger poet’s take on him from the dominant perspective of millennial experience. As it is, I approach Silkin with a sense of being at least one generation removed and something of an *arriviste* at the feast.

Silkin’s first collection, *The Peaceable Kingdom* from 1954, is justly lauded for its unashamed lyricism and debt to poets like Lawrence, in the face of the Movement’s coming anti-romanticism. Such inclusivity is trumpeted from the very ‘Prologue’ that provides this collection with its cover concept, it is forthright, knowing and self-referential in a manner that has, to some degree, returned to poetry:

All the animals in my poems go into the ark
The human beings walk in the great dark
The bad dark and the good dark. They walk
They walk shivering under the small lamp light
And the road has two ways to go and the humans none.

As well as Lawrence’s visionary fearlessness, this poetry also looks forward, ironically to Hughes’s atavistic energies but also towards today’s ecopoetic concerns and metatextual playfulness. ‘No Land Like It’ is, at once, a bold statement of poetic identity made at the start of a career *and* the sort of epitaph

one could spend a lifetime chasing to earth. It typifies those elements alluded to above, with its Lawrentian shades of *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* and the fox symbol so redolent of early Hughes:

My country is a fox's country
With moors of drenching sunlight and olive trees
And peace hanging from the branches in clusters of birds
There is no country like it.

Yet this country is Silkin's own in the very nature of its Judao-Christian sensibility, wherein the Judaic element is the dominant strand of its vernacular, lending the poem its Psalmic quality. His increasingly profound sense of Jewishness is hinted at in the elusiveness of any fixed sense of earthly home: 'There is no land or part of this land for any of us/ And no land like this'. As Silkin tells us, himself, with the (Welsh) Dylanesque, 'I came out singing/ And the song was a cry into the green world'. Even now, *The Peaceable Kingdom* impresses one as a full-throated and confident debut collection that stands the test of time and contains many examples of that phenomenon recently lamented by Harry Man as being absent from much contemporary poetry, the memorable utterance.

1958's *The Two Freedoms* continues to showcase Silkin's almost rhapsodic engagement with some of the big philosophical questions that can inform human seeing, rendered in the sort of romantic visionary style that might deter many an editor today but which makes for interesting (and favourable) comparisons with feted writers currently rocking the mythic, like Armitage, Oswald or Kate Tempest. There is, too, a Hopkins-like quality to the weight of spiritual engagement in poems like 'And I turned from the inner heart' or 'Hymn to the World' which I find attractive. And, perhaps, it is more the retroactive nature of critical fashion that makes poems such as 'This Resurrection' feel a bit dated in 2017 and may account for Silkin's current neglect.

The 1960s and 70s, of course, coincided with the rise of a resurrected *Stand* magazine and Silkin's own increasing eminence as a critic. One can, perhaps, detect traces of his growing regard for Isaac Rosenberg in the 'spiritual unrest' alluded to at the start of 1961's *The Re-ordering of the Stones*, the title of which pretty much describes the developmental dynamic evident around the same themes, idiolect and imagery as his earlier collections. The Rosenberg of 'Moses', or a shorter poem like 'A worm fed on the heart of Corinth', is certainly not far from the depicted sensibilities of a poem such as 'Astringencies', in which Silkin explores the imaginative ramifications of England's Masada at Clifford's Tower in York, when, in 1190 'eight hundred Jews/ Took each other's lives/ To escape christian death/ By christian hand'. This powerful lesson from history did, of course, lend itself naturally to further examination of contemporary atrocities in the wake of two world wars and the Holocaust, addressed here in chillingly anthropological terms in the poem 'Culpabilities'. It is, perhaps, this willingness to take on such grand socio-political and historical themes which marks Silkin out as a poet of more politically engaged times, both dating his work and germinating the seeds of reappraisal in days like these, when it can often appear that we are reproducing the sleepwalk to catastrophe of a century ago.

The 'Flower' poems of 1965's *Nature with Man* return to his debut collection's attempt 'to draw human life in the direction of certain animals, and a peaceful consortium of all animals'. Such Leopoldian harmony between the worlds of man and nature can be seen in the poem 'Harebell', in which language is cleverly used to mimic the proximity it celebrates:

The flower looks down, and if
Lifted, looks fixedly

At the admirer
Its silence halted between primness and beauty,
Its shape is wrung from the sounds of life round it
As a bell's sound forms the bell's shape from silence,
And resumes it demure integrity;

The obvious reference point here is, again, the Lawrence of *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* but Silkin imposes his own distinctive identity upon both subject and theme. By 1974's *The Principle of Water*, he manages to seamlessly fuse these proto-green preoccupations with his social, political and religious concerns in poetry such as the 'Killhope Wheel' sequence. By now, Silkin was living in Newcastle and, as in earlier work written in London and Leeds, the *genius loci* bleeds through into some terrific poetry of place which certainly resonates with someone who grew up in the area during that *Get Carter* decade. The wonderful 'Killhope Wheel, 1860, County Durham' anticipates the current vogue for psychogeography at the very moment this country's industrial purpose was becoming the husk that Heritage Britain now scraps off.

A board says that we're free to come in.
Why should it seem absurd to get
pain from such permission?

The question, here, is significant, informed as it is, by the sort of politicized class-anger that has become similarly marginalized by post-Thatcherite individualism, and its later variant might feel even more attuned to readers of a certain vintage in today's gig economy:

Why does a board, tacked to wood,
concerning my being free to visit
nourish my useless pain?

No longer is the world interrogated in this way, though perhaps, in the chaos bequeathed by neo-liberalism, it is, once more, about to be. Within the same sequence, however, instances abound of Silkin's painterly eye and flexibility of form: rangy verse dramas such as 'The People' knock up against short imagistic pieces of the sort exemplified now by the likes of Michael Longley:

The bird is ligamented without a soul; it is lifted
in a wind from the silica furnace.

And there are fascinating moments when the poet takes earlier impulses into new territory, such as in the final lines of 'Tree', when it seems he is renegotiating the romantic artifice of poetry in accordance with a sense of thwarted pantheism that, somehow, represents a tougher consolation:

I can't fudge up a relationship, but it gladdens
you, as the sun concentrates it, and I
want the creature for what it is
to live beyond me.

As Jon Glover reminds us in his Introduction, Silkin believed in an organic process of writing which eschewed pre-existing stanzaic forms or intellectual overviews for something truer to the subject and its moment. This leads to a startling versatility and restlessness of form throughout the collections and

accompanying ‘uncollections’ here compiled. We witness an artist continuing to set himself challenges and respond in new ways to a calling that spanned so many decades. In keeping with his organic principles of composition, long lines overhang short within stanzas of variable length, couplets and tercets give way to single lines, and long, stanzaically unbroken poems are allowed to grow under the pen, occasionally divided by section breaks, titled or untitled. This is not to suggest a free-writing sloppiness, however; rather one encounters an impressionistic method underpinned by a keen sense of the inner music of his subject. And everywhere is evidence of an intellectually ambitious poet seeking to engage the world at micro and macrocosmic levels, with lyrical shifts along the continuum between the two.

Silkin’s work from the 1980s and 90s frequently revisits themes from earlier collections, refining and re-scoring his discourse: ‘A peaceable kingdom’, from 1980’s *The Psalms with their Spoils*, self-consciously revisits his earlier realm whilst employing a new vernacular to sing it into being:

from the arctic’s pursed mouth
the white breath howling nebulae, of which
noise is the greater, stars the less. And still
the mouth’s milky obedience, cherub of storms:
the north’s machinery blows itself on stage.

From his final collection, 1992’s *The Lens-Breakers*, poems like ‘Civil War grave Richmond’, ‘Trying to hide Treblinka’, ‘Semite’ and ‘Tangled in war’ show Silkin yet grappling with the perceived burden placed upon poets to bear witness to history’s dark and complex narratives which might, otherwise, be ‘disappeared’ in the manner of their victims:

Everything is war. The share is beaten back
into a sword, the storm is a house
that splinters it. (‘Tangled in war’)

The inescapably bleak conclusions of these mix, as ever, with those small moments of transcendence when Silkin manages to catch the everyday miracles offered him by nature, from a world where human beings can escape ‘the bad dark’ and ‘walk shivering under the small lamp light’:

A sunk plot, in this city
of nurseries: the herbs, flowers
and branched forms moistened
in their warm sections. I stare
at what will shed
sugary plums. (‘Gifts’)

Reviewing Jon Silkin’s *Collected Poems* for *Stand* magazine, itself, feels like something of a responsibility and, clearly, it’s impossible to do justice, here, to a driven lifetime’s worth of work. Final plaudits are very much due to editors Jon Glover and Kathryn Jenner who, having painstakingly constructed such a thorough and intelligently sequenced summary of Silkin’s poetic output, have also managed to make a compelling case for reappraising his reputation as more than a poet of his own time. Jon Silkin’s poetry appears newly relevant in so many ways that should, perhaps, shame us. Within this comely breezeblock of Post-Second World War verse, there is much that ought to interest, inspire and concern our own faltering century.