

**Review of poetry collections by Alan Halsey and Eric  
Langley - 'Collected Poems 1992-2016' and 'Raking Light'**

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error message title, for example 'WINSOCK ERROR: CONNECTION TIMED OUT' and 'PROBLEMS ON GREEN ROMP RESOLVED'. The prose sections are made up of jumbled variations of sentences that combine Homer, Hegel, Humphrey Bogart, Barnsley, Jack Russells, Andrew Morton and Donald Dave amongst other names. The results are frequently hilarious using mis-heard words and meta-statement to combine facts, scrambled philosophy, historical and comic observation:

One hundred and sixteen people left Barnsley in 1997. I can't see anything funny about this message unless it's got something to do with Humphrey Bogart. Rejection is a subtle form of abduction and I think that's why they don't cut me off when I'm phoning my mother. The middle ages was a place and there aren't many left where the tourist industry could be wrecked overnight by a few non-believers.

Halsey is also fascinated with printing as a technology and printing errors, writing a letter to 'Dear Johann asking, if the book is printed the right way / but bound the wrong is the poetry / the poetry it was?' The letter playfully takes us into the idea of who possesses the poem by considering a poem's position, concluding:

So if the poem is the poet  
 who stands language on the page  
 on its head then on my head  
 be it if the poet disposes  
 becomes his or my disposition.

If Halsey deliberately uses error to stand language on the page on its head, Langley's second section, a sequence called 'Of those on the ships' explores the idea of original text and copy, retaining a belief in the importance of an original. The poem takes off from the story of Prometheus a King of Egypt who was so keen to amass a library that he ordered the books of everyone who sailed there to be brought to him. The

books were then copied into new manuscripts. He gave the new copy to the owners... but put the original copy in the library. The poems explore codes and libraries but lacks the energy of the first section. I think this might be due to lack of tension between visual and verbal: whilst the section is intellectually playful it seems too controlled and obvious; the poem's speaker almost seem to know this, two examples from the end of the first two poems of the sequence: 'Of course I knew your Alexandrian law, / I knew you'd come, and knew you'd take them; you dear and tender monks second guessed each stanza, / in accuracy they never broke my scene, interleaved or intervened.'

The most intriguing poems in Halsey's collection are those explicitly designed for group performances. These hand over authorial control to those involved in the situation so that they can't be 'second guessed'. 'Pilot Likelihoods' exemplifies this as it draws upon interviews with scientists about the significance of uncertainty. The piece is designed to be performed alongside an improvisatory jazz band and gradually allows the poetic voice a greater freedom of choice: by the third movement the voice 'improvises text generated from the grids' and during this movement a second voice unexpectedly enters. The cutting together of different scientific voices frees language to mean something different:

I make a lot of assumptions because  
 we've only got one Earth  
 a region inside which you can get some  
 badly behaved errors we can't get rid of altogether  
 this particular parameter this inherent instability this

If Halsey actively generates error my favourite third section of Langley's volume looks to uncover error. 'Yellow Milkmaid Syndrome' draws upon the language of museum curators to continue Langley's obsession with copy and original. The poem considers the implications of putting the high resolution image of Vermeer's 'The Milkmaid' as a free image on the internet as a way of ensuring the public can distinguish the original from

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a poor copy (most copies are too yellow-ish) Langley deftly uses page space to give a sense of the curator's confused location as a private-public body interacting with the implications of new technology:

People simply didn't  
 Believe  
 That the postcards  
 In our shop  
 were showing  
 the original  
 Mecednia should be seen  
 As advertisement  
 For content. An opportunity.  
 And although potential loss  
 Of phantom income  
 Should be seen  
 As very real.  
 We don't  
 Necessarily  
 Want to make money  
 ourselves, but

Langley's final poem 'Reminents' enacts the process of *Riding Light* by seeming to expose the crossing outs and revisions of an earlier poem. In the volume also called 'Reminents': 'The poem ends by contemplating a painting by Ashlie Gorky called 'The Artist and his Mother'. The image is based on a photo Gorky found of himself as a child with his mother; Gorky's mother had died in his arms from starvation. Gorky painted this image over and over each year, each time moving the mother figure further away from the child. Langley again uses page space to capture this moving story:

their touch  
 painted over and over as his  
 memory  
 or  
 other  
 fades

This ending seems to appropriately capture Langley's attempts – which he knows are doomed – to fix origins and memory with a male gaze. Halsey doesn't have this desire for fixity. One of his uncomfortably funniest poems – 'Blake's Vala: Nine Sketches' – gathers together various commentaries on a Blake sketch and veels in their increasingly bizarre sexual and misogynistic interpretations. In this poem Halsey both knows and embraces the fact that 'error cannot be redeemed'. This makes Halsey incredibly productive and this review has only given a glancing view of the riches contained in selected Poems which should be read and re-read because 'remembering is always revising'.

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#### About the author

Andrew Jeffrey is completing a PhD in Creative Writing at Sheffield Hallam University that documents his various encounters with the inhabitants of the Moss Valley on the Sheffield/Derbyshire border. Recent poems have appeared in *Plumwood Mountain Review* and *Green Letters*. His blog is: [www.kyleandrewjeffrey.com](http://www.kyleandrewjeffrey.com)