Review - Gillian Allnutt, J.R. Carpenter, Camilla Nelson

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Seferis is not only making sketches, but also doing something extraordinary, all the time, with time.

The most compelling poems in Gillian Allnutt'sbook exist in a tension between silent solitude and quiet sharing which is signalled in the first poem ‘York Way’. The poem is gnomic but compelling; I think it records someone witnessing the moment of another’s death. The first two lines run, ‘It happened to her. To her alone. / It didn’t. He did it. On his own’. Allnutt’s sharp linework makes it clear that this is not from what’s gone before it. He is always trying to get to the place where he can hear the ‘rhythm of the other life, beyond the broken statues and the tragic columns’. It’s like a haunting, or a recovery. As Keeley and Serrard say in an earlier introduction, Seferis is a modern Odysseus, trying to get back to a place he left behind. And like the shade of Odysseus, whom he encounters in ‘Reflections on a Foreign Line of Verse’, he tells ‘of the harsh pain you have to withdraw or depart’. I think it records someone witnessing the moment of another’s death. The first two lines run, ‘It happened to her. To her alone. / It didn’t. He did it. On his own’. Allnutt’s sharp linework makes it clear that this is not from what’s gone before it. He is always trying to get to the place where he can hear the ‘rhythm of the other life, beyond the broken statues and the tragic columns’. It’s like a haunting, or a recovery. As Keeley and Serrard say in an earlier introduction, Seferis is a modern Odysseus, trying to get back to a place he left behind. And like the shade of Odysseus, whom he encounters in ‘Reflections on a Foreign Line of Verse’, he tells ‘of the harsh pain you have to withdraw or depart’. I think it records someone witnessing the moment of another’s death. The first two lines run, ‘It happened to her. To her alone. / It didn’t. He did it. On his own’. Allnutt’s sharp linework makes it clear that this is not from what’s gone before it. He is always trying to get to the place where he can hear the ‘rhythm of the other life, beyond the broken statues and the tragic columns’. It’s like a haunting, or a recovery. As Keeley and Serrard say in an earlier introduction, Seferis is a modern Odysseus, trying to get back to a place he left behind. And like the shade of Odysseus, whom he encounters in ‘Reflections on a Foreign Line of Verse’, he tells ‘of the harsh pain you
Asylum-seeking lies at the heart of this collection; the safety and stability of home is questioned whilst the difficult nature of welcome is emphasised creating a common human need for sanctuary. For example, ‘desueteude’ is another poem dedicated to ‘Tom’. A law is said to fall into desueteude when it is no longer used but has not been formally repealed. Our legal system is designed to leave asylum-seekers in a state of limbo, forced to wait in a state of uncertainty over the line breaks, as meaning depends upon where this state using unpunctuated verse where shifts in experience and feeling and dependency, where it is unclear whether their state of limbo, forced to wait in a state of uncertainty and dependency, where it is unclear whether their rights are enforceable or not. The poem responds to this state using unpunctuated verse where shifts in thought and feeling roll delicately over the pause between lines.

Either the computers are waiting to be repaired or the computers have damaged us and ‘we’ need repair: All that remains by Gysip is a suspicion that modern technology ‘Predictive Text’ wittily rattles against the editing of meaning by technology: I want no more to do with things that are understandable. There there. This is because modern technology is linked to predictive rationality and thus shields us from a more realistic experience and feeling. The poem ‘prayer’ does not want to take place in: the mind Le Corbusier’s machine for living in his signed environment – but in the tent or tabernacle of the heart a fa hi A ‘fab’ is French for “screened from” but the notes tell us the wording is taken from the title of a novel dealing with the so-called Calais ‘Jungle’ encampment. Modernity seems condemned as a self-contained, fully rational, heartless environment whilst the marginalised person seeking sanctuary is linked to sacred prayer. Of Camilla Nelson’s ‘Apples and Other Languages’ is less sceptical about technology. Indeed, the first set of poems, ‘A Musical Introduction’, are a response to Bjork’s Biophilia album which explores the links between nature, technology and life. ‘Miracle’ announces Nelson’s overarching concern with the body:

Our legal system is designed to leave asylum-seekers in a similar State of limbo, forced to wait in a State of uncertainty and dependency...

with song so thin it breaks the ice we stand on stir this miracle into waking

The reader is encouraged to become aware of their body’s automatic activities and to experience their body as miraculous. We are the miracle but need to become aware of our body’s automatic activities and to experience their miraculousness. For example, the second poem ‘A Purse of Sky’ ends, ‘and the pale desert sky went slowly mad with waiting’. Many of my favourite poems appear in the third section, ‘Other Languages’, and use page space and repetition to capture the body’s experience of place shaped by sound. ‘Full’ begins with ‘My body vibrates with the sound of top of cell’ but then uses this sound to locate the body within environment and amongst other creatures: but then the bells begin and when they stop there’s swallowed song they swallow song they’ve swallowed song

the seagulls scream them bells

‘Kynance’ brilliantly embodies the actions of a light house through the simple spacing and repetition of the word ‘here’ whilst ‘hill snow car speak’ convincingly suggests that a hill could speak to a road through repetition to capture the body’s experience of place. Wind stirs snow on the hill

Hills white breath rolls of the hill

saw slowy into the road

This mixing is particularly explored in the middle section of Nelson’s collection ‘Apples’ which responds to audio field recordings of the writer’s various interactions with an apple tree. She wrote words on apples from the tree and responded to the apples’ gradual decay. She took copies of poems which resonated with her experience of being with the tree out to the tree and tore out fragments on text that particularly resonated with the experience. The poems in the middle section are the result of transcriptions from audio readings. ‘Through Skoulding’ is the result of one of these experiments which takes fragments of texts from the post-Zoe Skoulding’s work and concludes with an Allmunt-like fragment:

The reader is encouraged to become aware of their body’s activity and to experience their body as miraculous.

If this all seems overly intertextual Nelson’s use of fieldwork means she retains a connection with par-

"Miracle" announces Nelson’s overarching concern with the body: this is the result of one of these experiments which takes fragments of texts from the post-Zoe Skoulding’s work and concludes with an Allmunt-like fragment:

"Miracle" announces Nelson’s overarching concern with the body:

What might be seen as nature talking to technology is taken up by “The Lichenous Page”. This poem is not about lichens but about technology, a lichen which is found covering tree bark. It is commonly called handwriting lichen because its black fruit emerges from a white background. Notes from Black Rock Form Page this letter

A long pose block mixes up human writing, computer technology and lichen writing as what is commonly not noticed – the act of writing emerging from the white page made from wood pulp is foregrounded. Lichen are both symbiotic and parasitic so writing, digesting and information-exchange mix, “digital glyphs collaborate to form a machine for living in the white page...”

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keen doubt in the venn keybank of black fruiting coe this thallius shaped page this letter
Carpenter is an accomplished digital writer but this is the first time her web-based work has been turned into a book... and so on. It is difficult to quote from this text and give the full effect as the reader needs to be overwhelmed. There are other poems which fill the page completely with instructions or repeating words and use minor variations which are particularly effective. Sometimes, I wasn’t convinced that the effect worked as well on the page as it would in the digital original. ‘Ten Short Talks about Islands...’ and by Islands I mean Paragraphs’ is another text which includes word choices. However, the texts chosen in each paragraph often came from one source. For instance, ‘Crusoe in the Galapagos’ consists of texts from a single Elizabeth Bishop poem so when reading on the page I began to miss the original and wonder why it has been edited. This concern doesn’t happen often though and most texts are threaded throughout the volume so that the whole collection has a coherence as voices emerge, merge and re-emerge throughout."

"An Ocean of Static" ends with:

At dawn an ancient tractor trundles along the busy beach, harvesting the tide’s leaves. The world’s plastic.

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THEOFLUS KWEK
Jay Bernard, Surge, 80pp, £10.00, Chatto & Winds, 20 Vauxhall Bridge Road, London SW1 2SA
Vahni Capildeo, Skin Can Hold, 120pp, £9.99, Carcanet Press, Alliance House, Cross Street, Manchester M2 7JD

At times, we hear the rhythms and routines of individuals resurrected from the records at others, it is Bernard speaking...

"Ark") strike the reader as two layers of a single image, an imperative – ‘we were brought here from the clear waters of our dreams’ . ‘Ark’ , gesturing to the biblical become mixed. Sometimes the reader is given marks of code to give a sense of worlds or for satirical effect: 

The sea’s weeds.

The owl said. ‘Birds of a feather stick together’. ‘Loose lips sink ships’. ‘Everywhere we go there we are’.


I found myself reading all of the quoted text and swapping between them, enjoying the variations in meaning, the often funny juxtapositions, imagining a text in constant flux, like the sea.

At other times voices are combined together. ‘Instructions and Notes Very Necessary and Needful to be Observed on the journey’ and ‘A Descriptive Account of Cathay’ says that it is a ‘collaborative essay in three voices’ and edits together three accounts of voyages. To begin with they are separated out and dated but I think they sometimes combine. The effect is like reading a morphing version of one journey with similarities and differences throughout time. Particular powerfully and pointed are moments when repetition is used to describe weather or for satirical effect.

Of the strong Wind Very strong And cold Peculiarly cold impetuous and extremely cold declared from the cold the wind was fair being not quite fair

an Englishman been an Englishman cultivated in England trained in England brought up by Englishmen two Englishmen

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Inspired by a residency at the George Padmore Institute, an archive of radical black history in Britain, Jay Bernard’s Surge is less a collection of individual poems, than a narrative and performative palimpsest that shifts between multiple viewpoints on the New Cross Fire of 1981. At times, we hear the rhythms and routines of individuals resurrected from the records; at others, it is Bernard speaking, of the frustration and impossibility of reversing the silence of the archive. For instance, the two opening poems (‘Arrival’ and ‘Ark’) strike the reader as two layers of a single image, each adding to its depth of field. ‘Arrival’ recalls the historical backdrop of empire, not as a distant fact but from within the living past – ‘remember’ – it starts, an imperative – ‘we were brought here from the clear waters of our dreams’ . ‘Ark’ , gesturing to the biblical, narrative shifts focus to consider the poet’s own role in the work of contemporary myth-making: where does one begin, to ‘consult the life of a stranger’? Are we merely ‘[taking] this morning from its box’ , or giving new life to ‘damp smoke and young bones’?