

PS

edited by Raymond Friel and Richard Price

number 3

PS

edited by Raymond Friel and Richard Price

PS *number 3 2007*

PS is the Prose Supplement to **Painted, spoken**, which is edited, typeset, and published by Richard Price. Please send an A5 stamped self-addressed envelope for a free copy. Earlier issues have been digitised at: www.poetrymagazines.org.uk

PS's editorial policy is constituted in instalments by the contents of **PS**

PS appears occasionally, from 24 Sirdar Rd, Wood Green, London N22 6RG

Other related projects are outlined at www.hydrohotel.net

Hope Street

Raymond Friel

Hope Street in Greenock runs at a right angle from Lyle Street, across Lyndoch street, and then slopes down to a T-junction with Dellingburn Street. Originally, it was a ravine of handsome tenement buildings with a muscular river of cobblestones. Now the tenements come to a halt at the junction with Lyndoch Street. From there until Dellingburn Street, the cobblestones run on for a while and then they too give up the ghost. On one side there is the estate, or 'scheme', where my parents live, with damp-stained 4-storey walk-ups, stunted saplings, and two sun-darkening 17-storey tower blocks, or high flats. On the other, the low horizons of a light industrial landscape.

No.1 Hope Street is where the poet W. S. Graham was born, or at least lived for much of his early life. A commemorative plaque was unveiled at the site at 3 o'clock on Friday 20 October 2006, a suitable time to nail the memory of the poet to the sandstone building of his formative years. I was planning to be in Greenock that weekend anyway, because of my father's poor health, but was not due in until later on that day. I could have come earlier, but that would have meant taking the day off work *just* for the public commemoration of a poet.

In 1974 my family moved from a tenement in East Crawford Street to a two bedroom flat on the fourth floor of one of the tower blocks: Antigua Court (pronounced locally with four syllables). It was a Council flat but was 'sold' as a luxury apartment, and we thought we had arrived. I have a memory of opening the sitting room door one evening onto a soirée. My parents had invited the McArthurs down from the 17th floor. They were listening to Frank Sinatra and drinking Martini's. But it wasn't to last because my father, unlike my mother, was fundamentally ill at ease in the company of other adults.

After I left home, my parents moved out of the high flat and bought a third floor flat in one of the walk-ups nearby. I urged them to move away, buy a place with a garden and a view of the river, sit outside on a summer morning and pour

out cups of tea, but they were fine, this would do fine, and that was that. With every visit I could see the place disintegrating: boarded up windows in the high flat, sparkling patches of shattered glass, black bonfire circles on what little grass remained. In the last days, Antigua Court was taken over by gangs of feral children who swarmed up and through the stairwells smashing windows and launching whatever came to hand from the upper floors: on one occasion a tin of paint sailed out from near the top of the building and still stains the concrete below with an abstract expressionist explosion of blue.

One day the workmen came and fenced off the area around the Court. A giant crane was inched into place, its long arm looming over the condemned building. There was no room to bring this leviathan down with dynamite so it had to be disassembled piece by piece, like a public act of contrition. Putting this street up into the sky had not worked. In the old tenement, six or eight families could make a community, and they had a 'back green' for the children to run around, with the constant presence of mothers in the wash house (more of a folk memory than a personal memory). In the high flat, 102 families were stacked one on top of the other, like a mission to some distant planet which never got off the ground. At the foot of the building was the 'circle' – a concrete playground surrounded by a low brick wall which we crammed into and simultaneously and chaotically played football, ropes, tag, roller skates and so on.

When I arrived 'home' at tea time on the day of the unveiling, I stood at the kitchen window with my mother and watched another square of sky being put back as a section of building was swung away from the ninth floor and lowered gently to the ground. There had been some unfortunate side effects of the demolition. The workmen had cut an electrical cable and this had led to a sequence of power cuts. Without warning, the houses around the demolition site would be tripped into darkness. Hearing about this from a distance I made a link between this and my father's dementia: how he was gradually, sometimes dramatically, losing memory, not only of his personal history, but of even basic vocabulary, slipping into his own darkness. The link was all the stronger because for forty

years my father had worked for the SSEB (South of Scotland Electricity Board, privatised to Scottish Power), including ten years at the nuclear power plant at Hunterston. He left school at 15 to become a journeyman electrician and retired as an electrical engineer.

After tea, I took a stroll up to Hope Street to see the plaque where, a few hours earlier, the poets and the provost had gathered to honour the 'boy from Greenock'. As I stood and admired the slate, a net curtain twitched and a pale face regarded me with suspicion, fearful perhaps that their home had become a shrine for pilgrims of the word. I did not linger but turned away and instead of the short walk back to my parents' house, I walked the length of Lyndoch Street and crossed Regent's Street towards the Well Park. From here, seventy years ago, Graham would have looked out on a forest of shipyards, the firth of the river and the Trossachs beyond. I think some of his most powerful poetry was inspired by this place, or at least the emotional depths which the memories of the place and the people stirred in him. There was a tender and true note in his voice when he spoke of the haunts of his childhood, the same note of tenderness when he spoke (sang softly) to his wife, and his close friends. Like many of his generation, he had a lot more to contend with than we could begin to imagine, but in his work there is an undertow of hope (or at least a hard-won rejection of despair) despite our best attempts to talk to one another.

Yes, there is darkness, belligerence and vulgarity. There always has been. That is why we need our poets, our visionaries, to speak as they always have done, of hope. We do well to attend to their voice, because at their best they speak with authority, and beauty:

*Listen. Put on lightbreak.
Waken into miracle.
The audience lies awake
Under the tenements
Under the sugar docks
Under the printed moments.
The centuries turn their locks
And open under the hill
Their inherited books and doors
All gathered to distil
Like happy berry pickers
One voice to talk to us.*

...

*Listen. Put on morning.
Waken into falling light.*

'I was only remembered'

Robyn Marsack

The words 'public sculpture' conjure up, in my mind at least, works on a very large scale: Gormley's 'Angel of the North', for instance, or the horse with the texture of mattress-springs that steps alongside the Glasgow-Edinburgh motorway. In Edinburgh itself, the statue of David Hume by the classicising sculptor Alexander Stoddart is life-size, whereas the memorial to Stevenson is Finlay's playful 'Man of Letters': R L S on three brick-size blocks in Princes Street gardens. Walter Scott, of course, has his Monument.

What does it mean, to memorialise writers in public spaces? The blue plaque system in London seems to me both modest and suggestive: it brings writers to mind without the tyranny of an image. Even in a much-changed city, we might be seeing something of what they saw. The plaques remind us of births or deaths or works, but not quite of personality.

The representation of the creative mind – of the thinking that leads to writing, in particular – is almost never successful. Perhaps it is impossible. It comes wrapped in personal eccentricities to make it graspable in film, for instance: Iris Murdoch in *Iris*, Virginia Woolf in *The Hours*, sitting with their pens and dishevelled hair. Writing is not a filmic act, and the texts themselves are not given breathing space – an audience is not trusted to be interested in what these writers would regard as the most interesting aspect of themselves: the words they produced.

So how is a poet best memorialised, and where? In Scotland this has taken two forms in which the Scottish Poetry Library has been involved. There is another, if you count poetry in the landscape – for example, the walk by the River Cree, with poems commissioned from Liz Niven along the route: the work of a living poet in service of the landscape, allowing her a continuing presence for many decades to come.

The SPL was involved in the herms project initiated by Ian Wall of New Edinburgh Ltd, who had the inspired notion that busts of twentieth-century Scottish poets should be placed at regular intervals along the beautifully landscaped lochans

in Edinburgh Business Park. Twelve poets are represented – with varying degrees of success – by seven sculptors: Edwin Morgan and Norman MacCaig by David Annand (who also sculpted Robert Fergusson setting out from the Canongate Kirk in the direction of the SPL); Liz Lochhead by Vincent Bultler; Naomi Mitchison by Archie Forrester; Tom Leonard by Alex Main; Hugh MacDiarmid, W.S. Graham and Hamish Henderson by Anthony Morrow; Sorley MacLean by Bill Scott; Ian Crichton Smith, Jackie Kay and Douglas Dunn by Michael Snowden. On their plinths are names, dates, brief biographical information and a representative poem, chosen in consultation with the poet or poet's executors. So these are educational in intent; they allow the spectator to go further than the portraits. When Jackie Kay sat for hers, the experience gave her a suite of poems and the title for her most recent collection, *Life Mask*.

I recall the bright, cool day on which the first set was unveiled, and the two widows walking together, Renee MacLean and Donaldda Crichton Smith. The sculptors had to work from photographs, of course, and as Bill Scott pointed out, 'one very rarely gets information about the back of the head'. Michael Snowden made drawings from frozen moments of a video of Iain; the result has almost a Roman quality but also the sense of amusement not far from the surface. Renee quietly removed the veil from Sorley's head; Donaldda whisked off Iain's with a magician's flourish: da-da!

Ian Wall and I had several long discussions as to whom should be memorialised – one poet we particularly wanted to include didn't wish to be sculpted – and these sent him back to read W.S. Graham's poetry. Graham's bust was thus in the third set: it shows him as a youngish man and captures an inwardness that is marvellously effective: not so much dreaming as listening, as though perhaps in that park, on the other side of the country, he can hear the sea and bird-cry of Greenock.

How should a poet be remembered where he himself often walked? Anthony Astbury of the Greville Press feels that poets' local habitations – outside London's blue plaque series – should be more often marked. He set about raising funds for a plaque to be set on the cottage at Madron, in Cornwall, where Sydney and Nessie lived for many years. And he

chivvied me into doing the same in Greenock. I sent out an appeal to poets, mainly, and they responded generously. I commissioned the plaque from Incisive Letterworks, whose larger commissions include the Ian Hamilton Finlay inscription in the piazza of the Kunsthalle in Hamburg, and smaller ones his words on the pier of a bridge over the Clyde. The recent catalogue of their work showed some wonderful poem texts on slate with interlinear translations; I thought they would have the right instinct for Graham, and so it proved.

The plaque is small enough to avoid the formalities of planning permission. Raymond Friel, Greenock-born, kindly took photographs of 1 Hope Street when visiting, and I showed them to an architect who suggested where the plaque would best be placed, well above street level so as to escape defacement. It is made of slate and deeply incised with the words 'W S Graham 1918-1986 poet lived here'. Wavy lines suggest both water and hills. I went with the workmen on a windy, grey Thursday to see it fixed. We were regarded with great suspicion by an inhabitant of the close, who said that he hadn't received any letter, and was not really mollified by my explanations.

On Friday 20 October 2006, about 25 of us gathered at the James Watt pub in Greenock, newly smoke-free; Anthony Astbury beaming, with friends from the north of England, Graham's nephew and his wife, Glasgow poets and Thomas A. Clark, another Greenock man, now living in Fife. When we climbed to Hope Street we found the provost already in place, leaning out of the close window to be photographed, his chain of office glinting, and a faintly anxious local councillor at his elbow. A light rain came on as Tom began to speak, but it cleared as he finished reading @Greenock at night I find you': 'They were all there in the Cartsburn Vaults shining / To meet me but I was only remembered.' We lined up to be photographed for the *Greenock Telegraph* alongside the Councillors, who perhaps rated the location the more highly for Chic Murray's home being round the corner.

It's both warming and haunting to think of the plaque there, a mark of living readers' affection and admiration, a reminder that will snag attention occasionally, perhaps set some who notice it in search of the poetry – that's the main

thing. Haunting to think of his name fastened there, often unnoticed, a marker of all the complexities of his relationship to his family and that place, of what a great poet makes out of apparently unremarkable circumstances.

That returns me to the matter of privacy and visibility. The acts of writing and of reading are mostly invisible, they are not the acts of a queen or a general, of an Edith Cavell or a William Wilberforce, with their discernible consequences. Marking the birthplace or habitation of a writer is, then, a way of conjuring her or him into momentary visibility, reminding us of a different angle of vision. As Gerald Mangan wrote in his poem 'W.S.Graham, Reading':

We counted him a king
of space, bound in the shell
that speaks of the sea only
when the tenant is gone.

“Fashioned in the image of the devil”: the Elephant and Castle and regeneration

Will Montgomery

In an 1895 article on “Unknown London” the *Windsor Magazine* introduces the reader to an “English Hades”:

“The first few minutes of Saturday night spent in the Walworth Road are filled for the visitor with confused impressions of crowded pavements, of people fighting to secure bargains at the butchers’ shops, and of the evil odours of flaring paraffin lamps and innumerable fried fish bars, from which there comes a constant stream of people bearing pennyworths of fish in bits of newspaper.”

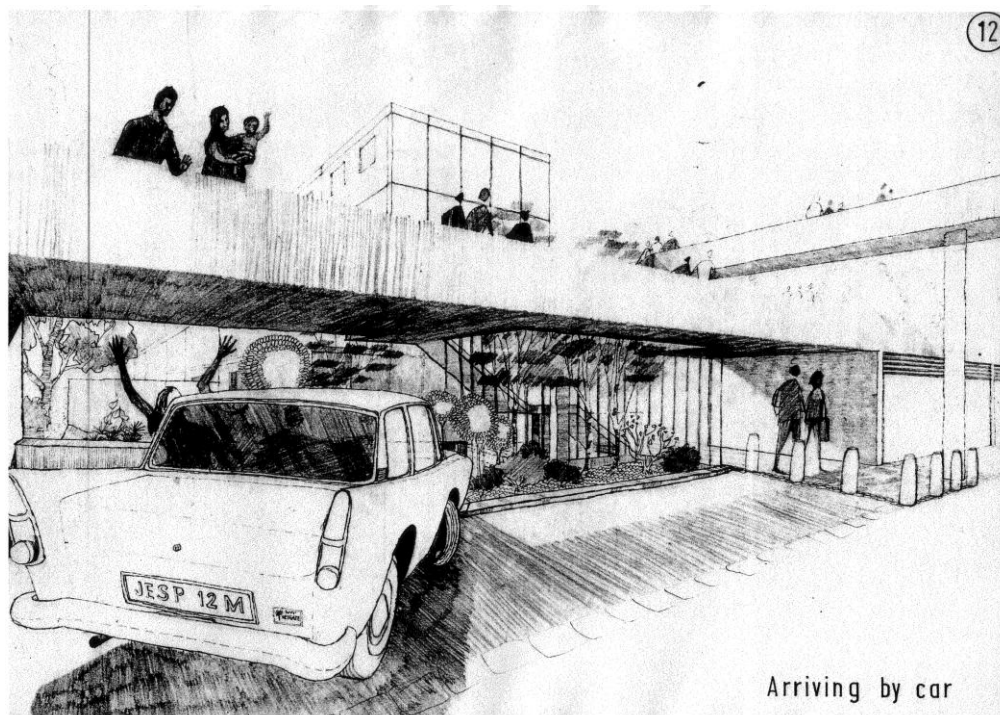
The author then reassures the reader that, despite all appearances, the inhabitants of the part of London around the Elephant and Castle could “hardly be more respectable”. This mixture of seediness and honest authenticity has often coloured accounts of the area, which has recently drawn much attention due to a large regeneration project. To this day, the Elephant is represented as, on the one hand, seething and sordid, and, on the other, as a prime locus of *echt* London working class experience.

The Elephant and Castle shopping centre, completed in 1965, is one of the most reviled buildings in London. It is certainly ugly. There are good (and bad) reasons for reviling both it and the last-gasp International Modernism of the Heygate estate, which sprouted at its rear in 1974. The two large roundabouts to the north and south of the retail complex, which squat on a network of dark, dangerous, urine-slimed subways, are also usually held to be a damning example of the failures of urban planning. The Elephant, in short, exemplifies the shortcomings of the postwar architectural imagination: run-down retail space, underground tunnels, elevated walkways, system-built housing, poverty and endless bullish road traffic.

However, behind this modern Hades is an essentially progressive vision. Even if the end result was the bullying of the helplessly poor by idealistic housing professionals, those

ideals are worth taking into account. They indicate the persistence of a desire to remake the world that is now rarely seen either in contemporary architecture or politics.

The guiding impulse behind the Heygate estate was to provide decent, sanitary housing – over 1,000 dwellings – for the poor. Some of the first to move in had never had a private source of running water. It is a late example of buildings born of the hope that large-scale civic intervention might, at the expense of the taxpayer, improve living conditions for significant numbers of people. The aesthetics were progressive in intent too: there remains a vestige of the aspiration that a new, more equitable world would begin to emerge as the hieratic classicism of the past was finally sloughed off. It is often forgotten that this state-sanctioned modernism was once viewed with some pride by the first generation to benefit from the Welfare State.



It is true, of course, that British local councils generally practised a degenerate modernism-on-the-cheap and that large building firms with off-the-peg solutions, rather than architects, were the people they usually did business with. However, the impulse to reshape the world through the transformation of urban space seems worthy of nostalgia – especially as this particular example will soon be demolished

(no doubt in one of those show demolitions staged to exorcise the bad spirit of modernism).

The Heygate is a late version of 20th century vanguardist architecture, late even as an example of the 'new brutalism' – a tendency which had its roots in an early 1950s reassertion of le Corbusierian values against their populist detractors. The much-criticised elevated walkways, for example, were an attempt to develop le Corbusier's work by establishing connections between separate buildings and between the estate and the surrounding area. (It was at one point thought that the Heygate, Aylesbury and North Peckham estates would all be linked by walkway – placing a lattice of 'streets in the sky' across a huge territory.) Even if the estate is unpleasant in some respects to live in, there remains a grand and imposing ambition to such projects. The remorseless horizontals of the three main blocks are still impressive to the eye. Many would argue that the worst features of life on estates like this have more to do with entrenched poverty than architecture.

The Elephant's endemic impoverishment has for a long time provoked hyperbolic visions of regeneration. Much of the area was blown to smithereens during the Second World War. A desire to remodel it emerged very quickly at the cessation of hostilities. In 1945 there were redevelopment plans that would "put Trafalgar Square into the shade". In 1946 London County Council unveiled a scheme, described as the "most revolutionary scheme in the country", that involved a three-tiered construction with a roundabout raised 12ft above ground and a system of subways. When the contract for a shopping centre was touted in the 1950s the winning design – the one that is now facing destruction – was billed by LCC as "an extremely fine architectural composition". As late as 1963, it was thought that the centre's transparent roof would open gloriously during fine weather.

When finally realised, the shopping centre was less appealing. The place soon became a cipher for precisely the urban misery that it had been designed to replace. A low-budget revamp in the early 90s, which entailed painting the centre bright pink, only underlined the building's shortcomings. Yet the area continued to attract grand schemes. In 1996, architects proposed a 1,000 ft long 'Brighton pier', made of

timber, across the roundabout to replace the subways. The current regeneration scheme dates back to 1997. Plans are now well advanced for the complete redevelopment of the whole site. A timetable that extends until 2014 will see traffic rerouted, a new 'civic square', a 43-storey 'eco-friendly skyscraper' and shops. There's a familiar hyperbole to the regeneration rhetoric: "one of the largest regeneration programmes ever seen in Europe" says the website. The errors of the 60s and 70s are dismissed as easily by council spokespersons as were the old tenements by their postwar predecessors. The politics of regeneration are now very different, though: the area needs to "feel the pulse of the City and share in its success" says the head of the scheme.

I've never lived on the Heygate and I'm glad of that. However, the Elephant has often been near at hand. In 1991, I commuted by bike most evenings from New Cross to Kings Cross. One night I was knocked over by a car on the Elephant's north roundabout. The impact destroyed the joint at the base of my left thumb and the Elephant, like the fused joint, has nagged at me ever since. Shortly after the accident I moved to Camberwell, clocking up many hours waiting for buses outside the shopping centre. Then, in the late 1990s, I lived for a couple of years on an estate on the Blackfriars Road, north of the Elephant. In 2006, I found myself in Kennington, again close to Walworth.

What interests me now about the shopping centre is its sound. In the late 1990s I began to admire its peculiarly roomy, dreamy acoustic. I made some recordings then and I've made many more over the past year or so. In the shopping centre you get, of course, voices speaking many languages – the second level, for example, has many Latin American businesses. But more important is the combination of overlapping human voices with piped pop songs. Often you catch some ancient love tune – the Commodores, the Bee Gees, Roberta Flack – floating by. Perhaps some of the more worn-down users of the shopping centre went for those songs once. For me, the romantic love hymned decades ago by these tarnished old hits tallies with the pathos that now marks the hopes of betterment expressed in the architecture of the area.

In 1849, Charles Dickens wrote a bitter letter to the *Times* after witnessing the execution of a Mr and Mrs Manning at Horsemonger Lane gaol, midway between the Elephant and Borough's Marshalsea prison (in which his father had served time for debt). The hanging took place in the early morning and it was preceded by a riotous all night gathering of local people. Dickens arrived at midnight:

"As the night went on, screeching, and laughing, and yelling in strong chorus of parodies on negro melodies, with substitutions of 'Mrs. Manning' for 'Susannah', and the like, were added to these. When the day dawned, thieves, low prostitutes, ruffians, and vagabonds of every kind, flocked on to the ground, with every variety of offensive and foul behaviour. Fightings, faintings, whistlings, imitations of Punch, brutal jokes, tumultuous demonstrations of indecent delight when swooning women were dragged out of the crowd by the police, with their dresses disordered, gave a new zest to the general entertainment. When the sun rose brightly – as it did – it gilded thousands upon thousands of upturned faces, so inexpressibly odious in their brutal mirth or callousness, that a man had cause to feel ashamed of the shape he wore, and to shrink from himself, as fashioned in the image of the Devil."

His language betrays fascination as well as disgust. In this particular south London Hades the vitality of the ghoulish collective makes itself strongly felt. The "zest" with which the dual execution is celebrated infuses Dickens' prose. The Devil, as ever, has the happening tunes: it is remarkable that the spiritual "Oh Susanna" should have had a vigorous life in London's popular culture so long before the age of mass-distributed recordings of American music. This was 24 years, even, before the Fisk Jubilee Singers, a black American choir, had given a hugely popular performance at the Metropolitan Tabernacle, just opposite the current shopping centre. Hundreds were turned away on that occasion. The Fisk Singers sang "Go down Moses", "John Brown's Body", "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot", and many spirituals. Charles Spurgeon, the Reformed Baptist 'Prince of Preachers' who hosted the event, was cheered as he spoke of the ending of slavery in America and of a "real mystery and deep theology in this singing that we can hardly understand".

The "Oh Susanna" that Dickens heard had somehow made its way from ante-bellum North America across the water into the ports of London. This journey is, for me, emblematic of the spread of cultural motifs by acoustic means. In my own work on the Elephant, what I'm aiming for is an encryption of the acoustic environment and a recovery of the ethic of renewal that animated its architecture. I'm putting selected field recordings online along with photographs of the area. Next, I want to reorganise the field recordings – processed, this time – into a larger piece of electronic music.

For Walter Benjamin, the street is the "dwelling place of the collective" and the shopping arcade the "drawing room" of the masses. For us, numerous incursions on the idea of public space – CCTV, laws governing assembly, gating, ASBOs – have thoroughly trashed such aspirations. Even taking photographs inside the shopping centre is prohibited these days. When the Heygate's 33,000 cubic metres of concrete and 2,200 tonnes of reinforced steel come tumbling down, I hope that its failure is not all that is remembered of it.

Tower Blocks: A High-Rise Heritage?

Mark Tripney

The architecture of the Modern Movement has, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, found itself in a perhaps unanticipated condition - that which was essentially a celebration of the new, that which articulated an imagining of the future, has itself become old and, in some cases, dependent. Indeed, the remains of the Modern Movement, the utopian 'campaign for the present', have undergone an ironic, though inevitable, subjugation to the sweep of history which they were at least partly a reaction against. They now *are* history, and representative of an age which for many is a distant past. However, it could be argued that a material culture born of modernism is still of particular relevance to today's society in a way which that of the Middle Ages, for example, is not. We are still 'living through' modernism, still victim to the turbulence which a modern society must endure, and, as this short article will illustrate, still caught between the opposing poles of a forward-thinking pragmatism and a sometimes confused nostalgia for the past. Nothing captures this contrast between 'then' and now, or the social agenda of architectural Modernism, better than the period's most iconic form, the tower block. Indeed, the multi-storey block continues to lend a particular character to Britain's urban environment, demanding that we consider its failings *and* its successes. Should tower blocks be considered a positive part of Britain's built heritage?

Biography of The Tower Block

In a brief history of the tower block, it seems reasonable to begin with the post-World War Two years (necessarily overlooking the form's origins in both functional, engineering-oriented advances (articulated most satisfactorily by Le Corbusier, and essentially an evolution away from traditional load-bearing technologies) and philosophical, modernist modes which demanded new forms of architectural expression). The excitement of post-war reconstruction, following years of hotly-debated wartime planning, created something of a *tabula rasa* for Housing Departments all over Britain - here was an opportunity to break free from tradition, and to embrace the possibilities for social betterment which Modernist thinking offered. The drive for

improvement is exemplified by Glasgow's 1950s 'slum' clearances. In short, the Town and Country Planning Act of 1947 had given local authorities the power to purchase and clear land, leading to what were termed Comprehensive Development Areas (or CDAs). Glasgow Corporation's 1954 Housing Study identified the city's Hutchesontown/Gorbals area as being most urgently in need of improvement, and this would soon form a vast CDA of over 100 acres. However, the politically motivated desire to maintain relatively high population densities demanded a vertical solution – the tower block. Despite initial success, and the coincident creation of some iconic elements of twentieth century architecture, the form would quite quickly tarnish, both literally and abstractly. The reasons for this were partly social, related to poor management; partly structural, related to short-sightedness in design and subsequent poor maintenance; and partly environmental, owing to the application of technologies which were often developed in more temperate climates. This said, the form's dismissal was really a conglomeration of various factors, culminating in one infamous technical failure.

The partial collapse, in 1968, of London's Ronan Point tower block – a tragedy in which one tenant was killed – may have signalled a decisive turning point in the rejection of the form, but it could be argued that the process actually began with the emergence of an *avant-garde* faction of 'designer-critics' in the 1950s. Their calls for a less 'crude' solution to housing provision led to a confused overlap of 'recipient' (those who would use social housing) and 'author' (those who would design it) whereby housing projects began to be billed as houses fit for the architects themselves, with clear implications regarding the status of the eventual tower block-dweller – a shift away from socially-aware housing provision can already be detected. However, even this development was nonetheless couched within an overarching anti-tower block polemic which would, after Ronan Point, gain official approbation. Thus, an initial flurry of demolitions gave way, through a complicated blend of disaffection, economic downturn and vote-winning opportunism, to a shift towards improvement rather than construction. The age of the Modern Movement tower block, the flawed symbol of the drive towards an urban utopia, was effectively over. Public and 'expert' opinion was almost unanimous in condemning the tower block concept, and its slide towards cultural rejection

was effectively complete. Tower blocks did not disappear, but their existence was perceived almost as the symptom of some temporary aberration, a phenomenon whose continued existence would attract a mountain of ill-feeling, often anecdotal, sometimes deserved.

However, recent years have seen a change in this attitude. From a position of 'rubbish', the tower block has been resuscitated, and this critical element in Modern Movement history has been selectively commodified and recognised, albeit obliquely, as heritage (see examples, below). That this has happened at all is remarkable – it is an unfortunate fact that historically important buildings may not always be appreciated, often because they are considered outmoded, out-with our present-day cultural norms. In other words, they are no longer culturally valid. That there is a current revival of the tower block must, therefore, be examined - what has happened to revive this architectural 'rubbish', and, more importantly, why?

If it's suppose that those with cultural 'distinction' – those who are in a position to influence cultural tastes - might be able to cause the shifts in opinion necessary to elevate an historical artefact from 'rubbish' to 'heritage', then it should be possible to find evidence for such a process in the context of tower blocks. Elevation through such a process would, in the case of mid-twentieth century social housing, require a transformation from the generic to the abstract, from a stridently functional to a polysemous, intellectually dense element of material culture. A tower block cannot easily be rarefied - it is necessary to force the form from perceptibly worthless to valuable and from culturally covert to overt, implying that the opportunity for both economic profit and cultural validity must be realised. In other words, such a process requires an attitudinal as well as an 'economic' shift.

The Tower Block as Icon

Since the introduction of the 'Thirty Year Rule', a general guideline which offers a chronological delineator for heritage objects, a number of examples of Modern Movement public housing have been listed. However, it is immediately apparent that many examples are of a clearly 'iconic' nature. They include, for example, the Alton Estate (1952-60) by LCC

Architect's Department, a supreme example of a landscaped, multi-level housing development by one of post-1945 Europe's most powerful housing departments; Erno Goldfinger's multi-function *tour-de-force*, Trellick Tower (1968-72), conceived just as the tower block backlash was beginning, but now one of London's most sought after addresses; and Denys Lasdun's Keeling House (1957-59) in Bethnal Green, a mature example of his distinctive 'cluster' concept, once condemned as uninhabitable, now redeveloped and enormously prestigious. Given such esteemed designers, it's not surprising that these blocks are now listed, 'official' elements of Britain's heritage.

This situation might well reflect the fact that architecture, within its current neo-modernist state, is increasingly in thrall to capitalism, manifested in the built environment as commercialism and property development. The consequences for architectural heritage are grave - the most fundamental ideals of the Modern Movement (most particularly its desire to improve social conditions through the built environment, and a generally self-effacing lack of overt iconicity) are being subverted, and the dialectic between Modern Movement place, designer and society is increasingly corrupted. The branding of figures such as Lasdun and Goldfinger allows commodification to proceed with relative ease - exhibitions and monographs further perpetuate the worth of certain places, because designed by people deemed worthy of such attention, and consequently take part in furthering an abstraction-led profit. However, not all examples of commodification lend themselves so readily to the 'iconic' class. That most 'ordinary' signifier of the Modern Movement, the tower block, embodies a wealth of anecdotal negativity and yet it too has been 'promoted' to iconicity, irrespective of the fame of its designer. Indeed, developers in Manchester's Irk Valley deliberately play on this perceived 'icon value', baldly stating that what were, to be honest, rather unremarkable high-rises are 1960s classics and duly worth a great deal of money - although they are now redeveloped to a very high standard, it is the 1960s incarnation which drives their promotion.

Such processes are typical of the traditional, speculative art 'system', and demonstrate that, in fact, the processes which elevate 'traditional' works of art to the realm of culturally

durable, or heritage – that of authoritative intervention – are exactly the same as those which remove buildings from the ‘ordinary’ realm, and transform them into commodities. When tower blocks are abstracted, intellectualised by what we might refer to as an art-consuming element of society, then commodification becomes possible. This done, the place might assume some elevated position in the wider political economy. Let us return to our example of the commodified tower block. This example of Modernist architecture has a number of ‘original’ values which we might contrast with perceived contemporary values. For example, tower blocks may have been conceived in response to ‘slum’ clearances, as at Lasdun’s Keeling House, or in Glasgow’s Gorbals area. Thus, we have a manifestation of the Modern Movement’s socially-driven agenda. However, in the tower block’s commodified state, there can be little argument that this associative cultural significance has been lost. Certainly, commodified tower blocks are still being used for their fundamental purpose, that of providing shelter, but their modern, stridently capitalistic manifestation is divorced from their original egalitarian function.

However, this conflict may not be irresolvable. Controversies over ‘upgraded’ Modern Movement places are effectively arguments over ownership, between those who *actually* own the places and those who assert a broader, cultural ownership. The very fact that tower blocks must be considered in the context of a capitalist society indicates that an associative value *must* be severed - there can be no continuity between ‘then’ and ‘now’ because, in very basic terms, the social ideals which inspired this particular architectural form have failed. Thus, an absolute insistence on cultural significance for tower block conservation, or the conservation of other Modern Movement forms, is contradictory. Who could lay claim to cultural ownership, with its implied ‘stop the clock’ sympathies, when to do so would be to apply a historical determinism which is at least as incompatible with Modernist ideals as commodification? That tower blocks failed is irrefutable, but this should not be blamed on the architecture itself – more intangible factors, as I have noted above, might often be more culpable. Further, the present use of tower blocks, as status-defining places loaded with irony and a smug ‘knowing-ness’, is indicative of the capitalist-mired practice of modern housing provision. The

idealism of the mid-twentieth century Modernists is still manifest in high-rises, forming an incredible record of a period of Britain's post-War history. They cannot all be 'saved', nor should they be, but they should be acknowledged as a critical element of our built heritage, and not only when a clear profit can be identified.

Only For One (*Dark Light*: Alison Watt, Ingleby Gallery)

David Kinloch

Usually, when I have waited in darkrooms – silent except for laboured or anticipatory breathing and the drip, drip of an overhead pipe – it has been for the anonymous touch of human flesh. This dark room, however, enclosed within a 2.5 metre anodised aluminium cube offers art painted onto stainless steel walls, paintings barely lit by a dim, downward rim of light close to the ceiling, images of black convoluted, involuted folds that will only become visible after fifteen solid minutes of patience, of looking, of staring at and into the dark. As the gallery assistant ushers me into the cube, I murmur something pathetic and jocular about claustrophobia. I stand there semi-frantic, waiting for the zap of art, my fix, my fix, please my fix! But Watt has succeeded in slowing the spectator down. That at least. She has managed to reel me back into the nineteenth century when some of the Chardins, the Ingres, the Courbets, the Zurbaráns that lie behind this installation were painted and when –presumably– a different economy of looking, a different quality of patience was available. But to begin with, deprived of sight, I am singularly aware of my own body – as I was in those other, sexual rooms – of the slightly sulphurous smell of ...plastic is it?...of something, of red floaters coasting the film of my eyes, of my own fidgetiness, my extraneousness, intrusiveness, fallibility. I cannot see what matters. Ever my curse. Then the deliberate attempt to suppress ego, to surrender to whatever might be making its way towards me in the dark. I am frightened I will see nothing. That it won't 'work' for me. What will this say about me, about my bloody eyesight? Me! Me!

The downbeat of the archangel's wing is preceded by a glimmering movement on the wall opposite. I think of fish first. Of a whale's rump drifting lazily into the terrible obscurity of an ocean. But the angelic wing is definitely there and clarifies itself in a way that is unsurprising and comforting. I am expecting epiphany and sex. That the religious comes first seems predictable and something for the developing clitoris in the bottom right hand corner to aspire to. The walls begin to flower with labia, shady hammocks – that long stretching sheen offering you in the end a place to lay your head – the squash of crashed car tires, the wreck of

James Dean. Yet these walls don't seem nearly as interested in becoming folds, in exploring the nature of folds, as Watt's previous white paintings done after Chardin. Each dark wall seems to float inexorably, although not always in the same direction or from the same angle, towards a black mouth or gap, an oblong fissure. These gaps seem to be the point of the walls. This strikes me now as a simplification and an impoverishment. I will not lose myself in these folds, nor experience nearly the same degree of almost excruciating intimacy with lips and tucks discreetly offered and withheld, as I did with the white drapes. Paradoxically, this darkness does not lose me and I am not lost in it. Nor am I fearful before voids as some critics have instructed me to be. If anything there is a gentleness, an extreme peacefulness within this box, a desire perhaps to pacify. Do I want to be pacified? It is at this point that to my dismay the door opens, light floods in and a man steps in beside me.

Before the darkness engulfs us, we are able to exchange brief and slightly embarrassed salutations. But this does little to reduce the initial feeling of discomfort. The space is not large. My companion is slightly out of breath, is wet, breathes hard and drips occasionally onto the floor. I begin to perspire. We drip together. After a few minutes I think we both consciously make an effort to relax and resign ourselves to the fact that our epiphanies are likely to occur simultaneously, although my eyes have had more time to adjust to the dark than his and I am slightly ahead of him on this score. Of course I think of leaving but dismiss this quickly on the grounds that it might be interpreted as cowardice. My ego is definitely resurfacing. The man is relatively young and from the brief glimpse I have caught of him suspect that he might be attractive. I suppress other thoughts therefore, including images of scabrous tabloid headlines. This cube is *about* sex and the metaphysical but being metaphysical *in* it with another soul is definitely out of the question. I realise that my companion has displaced or somewhat reconfigured my experience of the art and conclude that this installation is only for one, for solitary pleasure indeed.

Again I become aware of my own body and its necessary accoutrements: this time my glasses and understand that one of the reasons it has taken so long for me to become fully aware of the images before me is that the dim light from the

ceiling has reflected off the frames of my glasses minimally increasing the volume of light within the cube as a whole. The physics of this is probably wrong but it seems like it at the time. In fact, Watt's desire to invite the spectator into the heart of her paintings fails to take account of his – in this case – spec-y nature. People who wear glasses normally see the world through a frame. Mostly they screen out this fact but this installation's contemporary ambition to bypass the traditional frame overlooks the habit humans have of carrying their frames with, about, within them. I try, then, to overlook my frames – brought once more to my attention – to overlook the young man – I'm sure he's young – beside me. For a moment we coast together. He is very still. So am I. We are definitely getting this. But we need more space, the space of a cathedral perhaps with all the stained glass windows blocked up: a quiet, black corner for votive lights, this tabernacle and its dark sublime. A canvas the size of a cathedral nave! And then the sheen of the archangel's wing would have freedom to swoop. Not this pinchbeck cube. This throw of a dice. And canvas, yes, not stainless steel! Watt's great skill is to evoke texture from and on texture and light shining upon it and in this black shiny box the light does not seem to catch, its detail less than visible. There is the *idea* of folds but not the swags themselves. I recall an interview with the artist in which she refers to several portraits in the London National Gallery that haunt her. A hooded, lugubrious St Francis by Zurbarán and Napoleon's Chief of Police, M. de Norvins, by Ingres. It is line, a shape she is looking for, pursued by, these men reduced to the minimalist dip and flourish of line and direction, emptied of content.

I look hard into the dark: which of these black swirls was the curls of M. de Norvins' deliciously glossy hair? I reproach the anecdotal impulse in me. But the gesture is fatal. Suddenly I see the police chief before me reclining – no, he doesn't recline, he's alert, tipped slightly forward in his chair – against a dramatically scarlet cloak that spreads around him like a lake of blood. He must have spilt plenty of it in his time. M. de Norvins, a youngish, very competent looking cavalier. Not to be messed with. The floor creaks as my companion shifts from one foot to another and then, of course, I imagine that this young man is himself a constable, off-duty, taking in a spot of art during his lunch hour. What other kind of person could conceivably devote his lunch hour

to such a pursuit? It suits his metier exactly. He is a detective, a veritable Rebus no doubt, drawn by a weary, wary, minimally eager impulse to get to the heart of Ms Watt's art. He is on her case. Is he on mine? M. de Norvins disappears but I have the strangest sensation that he has coalesced behind me in the shape of the young man. Oh my police chief! I have stood in dark corners with policemen before, or men who conducted themselves as such, and there is no doubting this firm presence. What swags pleat his living room? What curtains drape the intricacies of his existence? I turn in contrition towards my police chief, tempted to kneel on the dark confessional's floor. What do I wish to confess? What ecstasies of suffocation could these steel drapes perform? I sense a door behind a dark green velvet curtain, one that excludes drafts and whispers and then on the wall before me the shadows of a figure – de Sadian – glide with slight, mocking laughter into the gloom. The door opens and we stand together for a moment, my police chief and I, framed and dazzled in sunlight, an archangel with his novice on the threshold of a photograph. Our eyes blaze in consort, the gaps of our mouths are golden, our flesh black as carbon. There is a sigh but it comes neither from M. de Norvins nor myself. I take this as a cue to exit and do so.

I hang surreptitiously around outside the cube, running my fingers over its cold, sleek surface, determined to get a better look at my companion when he leaves. How he must be savouring my absence! But after a while I realise no one will emerge, no bright and cheery student clad in his red anorak will step forth. Nor will I look after his departing figure with certain, lugubrious relish. For my pleasure has been solitary. I have had M. de Norvins all to myself. And he is still in there. Still. As I buy another small catalogue of Watt's white paintings, the gallery assistant enquires witheringly after my claustrophobia then hands me some small change.

An Information **Richard Price**

Booked

Alec Finlay's book of minimalist poems *A Slower Shower* is published in characteristically soft full-colour as *Island 15* from Julie Johnstone's Essence Press (essencepress.co.uk). **Bill Broady** and **Jane Metcalfe** co-edit *You Are Here*, short stories by Anna Ball, Jim Greenhalf, Glyn Hughes, Alexis Lykiard, David Rose, David Tipton, Emma Unsworth, Gerard Woodward and others - from Redbeck Press, 24 Aireville Road, Frizinghall, Bradford, BD9 4HH. Meanwhile Broady's novel of punk pressure-cooker Camden 1976, *Eternity Is Temporary* (Portobello Books) has appeared in paperback: you'll never see a care-home in the same way, or *The Stranglers*, and the idea of tragic-comic mysticism might just become a welcome commonplace. **Donny O'Rourke** follows up his *Aus dem Wartesaal der Poesie / From Poetry's Waiting Room* (Nürnberg: Spätlese, 2005) with another beautifully designed book, addressing place, *One Light Burning*. The locale this time is Glasgow: O'Rourke responds to Harry Magee's near-silhouettes of late night city skylines, black on blue, reproduced gorgeously here, each with a single window lit by yellow light (does a constructivist rectangle merge with a lovingly drawn visual guide to known and lesser known Glasgow?). The keenness of lyric observation is met by substantial but lightly worn historical knowledge and wit of both the intellectual and performative kind; life is vividly imagined behind the midnight lamp. Magee and O'Rourke have made a poetry sequence and artist's book of great charm, the best welcome to the new imprint Bonny Day Books (0/1, 11 Laurel Place, Glasgow, G11 7RE). **Carol Watts** publishes her first collection *Brass, Running* from Equipage, c/o Rod Mengham, Jesus College, Cambridge CB5 8BL - "what is it that brings breath to metal / as if the wind lifts her alert to gulls / and tides outside her door the bell". These are poems inspired by the simple fact of a memorial to Elyenore Corp, died 23rd April 1391, about which next to nothing else is known. || Compilations Corner, but with all-new translations attached: *Dreuchd an Fhigheadair: The Weaver's Taks: A Gaelic Sampler*, edited and introduced by **Crisdean MhicGhilleBhain** / Christopher Whyte (Scottish Poetry Library) - several contemporary Gaelic poets translated or versioned by contemporary Scots / Anglophone poets; pocket-sized and very handleable, as is **Virna Teixeira's** *Uma Antologia de Poesia da Escocia do Seculo XX* (Lumme Editor), an anthology of modern Scottish poetry with the compiler's translations. And also try: *Ten Seasons: explorations in Botany*, edited by **Gerry Loose** with photographs by **Morven Gregor** (Luath / Scottish Poetry Library).

Contributors

Raymond Friel is the author of the collections *Bel-Air*, *Seeing the River*, and *A World Fit to Live In*.

David Kinloch's collections include *Un Tour d'Ecosse* and *In My Father's House* (Carcanet). He lives in Glasgow

Robyn Marsack is Director of the Scottish Poetry Library. Her published work includes studies of Louis MacNeice and Sylvia Plath and the translation into English of Nicolas Bouvier's *Scorpionfish*.

Will Montgomery is a research fellow in contemporary poetry and poetics at Royal Holloway, University of London. Details of his sound-related activities, including the Elephant project, are at www.selvageflame.com .

Richard Price's poetry includes *Lucky Day* and *Greenfields* (both Carcanet) and *Earliest Spring Yet* (Landfill Press). With David Miller he is the author of *British Poetry Magazines 1914-2000: a history and bibliography of 'little magazines'* (British Library)

Mark Tripney studied at York and Edinburgh, lives in Glasgow, and is currently researching the relationship between 'heritage' and the broad, profit-oriented commodification of architecture, particularly that involving Modernist places. He works at a delicatessen. He can be contacted at mtripney@gmail.com

PS

the prose supplement to Painted, spoken

Raymond Friel
Robyn Marsack
Will Montgomery
Mark Tripney
David Kinloch
Richard Price

Almost Free (just send an A5 stamped addressed envelope -
two first class stamps will cover the postage)