

PS

edited by Raymond Friel and Richard Price

number 7

Ten Richard Price It's ten years since I started *Painted, spoken*. Looking back over the issues of the magazine, two of the central patterns were there from the word go. They're plain as day in the title: the fluid yet directing edge poetry shares with the visual arts, and, somewhere so far in the other direction it's almost the same thing, the porous edge poetry shares with sound or performance, so porous you can hear it in its hollows. Although the magazine grew out of serial offences in little magazineship, the first impulse was to be quite different formally from *Gairfish*, *Verse*, and *Southfields*, each of which had placed a premium on explanation, on prose engagement, and on the analysis of the cultural traditions from which the poems they published either appeared to emerge or through which, whatever their actual origins, they could be understood.

Painted, spoken would be much more tight-lipped, a gallery without the instant contextualisation demanded by an educational agenda (perhaps rightly in a public situation, but a mixed model is surely better than a constant 'tell-us-what-to-think' approach and the public isn't always best served by conventional teaching). Instead, poems in *Painted, spoken* would take their bearings from what individual readers brought to the texts 'themselves' - because readers are never really alone - and also from the association of texts with each other, in a particular issue and across issues.

The magazine went on its laconic way for several years until a different perspective began to open up, a crystal started to solidify, whatever metaphor you'd care to use for time-lapse comprehension (oh there's another one): in management-speak, significant change impressed on the strategy and the strategy needed to change. I was influenced by Peter Barry's reading of the successes and especially the mistakes made by Eric Mottram and the English avant-garde in the 1970s, if one can call the 'English avant-garde' into the unity of a definite article. After mulling further on what I do see as a tactical mistake of Mottram's *Poetry Review* - it carrying practically no reviews, discussion or debate in its pages and so was to a large extent self-fettered as far as generating immediate wider intellectual and public exchange - I began to rethink *Painted, spoken's* approach. Readers - and the avant-garde communities themselves - need to talk, and talk beyond their certainties: they need prose, they need more than minimalism in their dealings with the world and with each other, even if minimalism is absolutely fine as a poetic procedure (among many others).

To review, interview, to re-focus. Raymond Friel joined forces with me and so *Prose Supplement* began: get the facts out, suggest ways of seeing, signpost activities, new thoughts on old texts, new thoughts on new texts; point to possible traditions. Apart from the Playground Songs issue - which understandably garnered the most positive feedback across a large aesthetic divide - it is almost always the prose which has attracted the most attention, way beyond the poems. That is a function of literary history, again of educational interest, and of prose itself, which after all is there for quicker understanding, in fact, *understanding* at all, since poems need not be there for articulation of even complex ideas (this is a pedagogically biased *misunderstanding* about the wider potential of poetry). Poetry is there for painterly compositions and aural pleasures whose straightforward articulation would inevitably play them false: you'd be back to the over-expansive label on the gallery wall.

For this issue, which marks the decade, I asked various poets and artists to give me an account of poetry, art or performance projects they are either involved in directly or have been close to as audience-members or particularly concentrated readers. It is telling that several chose poetry-like procedures that problematise the activity (rather than 'explain'). Perhaps, as one current in poetry becomes more fact-based, more prose-based, more story-based, so writing outside poetry, especially text-based art, becomes closer to poetry's old densities, its old obliquities. Without making any claim for this particular magazine (which really would be preposterous), is all writing, including 'born digital', and not only poetry, becoming painted, spoken, now?

You have forgotten why you asked us here, we cannot remember why we came

Joanne Tatham & Tom O'Sullivan

You have forgotten why you asked us here, we cannot remember why we came
We have forgotten why we asked them here, we cannot remember why they came
They have forgotten why they asked me here, I cannot remember why I came
I have forgotten why I asked you here, you cannot remember why you came
You have forgotten why they asked you here, they cannot remember why you came
They have forgotten why we asked them here, we cannot remember why they came
We have forgotten why we asked you here, we cannot remember why you came
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You have forgotten why they asked you here, you cannot remember why you came
They have forgotten why they asked you here, you cannot remember why you came
You have forgotten why you asked us here, we cannot remember why we came

You have forgotten why you asked me here; I cannot remember why I came
(2007) exhibited at Villa Arson, Nice; *You have forgotten why you asked us*
here; we cannot remember why we came (2006) exhibited at Momentum,
Norway; *We have forgotten why we asked you here; you cannot remember why*
you came (2007) exhibited at Galerie Francesca Pia, Zurich.

Three lean meanings

Is this seemingly leaning towards meaning?
Are you seemingly feeling this meaning?
Is this feeling a seemingly meaningful meaning?

We are seemingly leaning towards meaning (2008) exhibited at City Gallery, Leicester; *Three Lean Meanings and Other Feelings* (2009), exhibited at Marres Centre for Contemporary Culture, Maastricht; *Are you feeling our meaning?* (2008), Galerie Francesca Pia, Zurich; *We are seemingly feeling the meaning* (2007) exhibited at Galerie Rudiger Schoettle, Munich.

Untitled

Does your contemplation
of the situation
fuck with the flow
of circulation

Does your contemplation of the situation fuck with the flow of circulation (2009), Eastside Projects, Birmingham.

This is what brings things into focus

Is this what brings things into focus?

Is this what brings things into focus? (2005), Galerie Francesca Pia, Basel; *This is what brings things into focus* (2002) exhibited at Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle.

An indirect exchange of uncertain value

- Direct value

Direct serious action is therefore necessary and necessary direct action is therefore serious, however a routine sequence of external actions creates an external action of routine sequences and the indirect exchange of uncertain value reflects the indirect value of uncertain exchange.

- Serious action

Serious necessary action is therefore direct and direct necessary action is therefore serious, however a routine action of external sequences creates an external sequence of routine actions and the indirect value of uncertain exchange reflects the uncertain value of indirect exchange.

- External exchange

Serious direct action is therefore necessary and necessary serious action is therefore direct, however an external sequence of routine actions creates an external action of routine sequences and the uncertain value of indirect exchange reflects the uncertain exchange of indirect value.

Direct serious action is therefore necessary (2010), Centre for Contemporary Arts, Glasgow; *A routine sequence of external actions* (2005) exhibited in *Selective Memory/Scotland & Venice*, 51st Venice Biennale; *The indirect exchange of uncertain value* (2011), forthcoming project at Fettes College with Collective, Edinburgh.

At Ilôt 13, Geneva *Peter McCarey*

Alexa Montani, at Ilôt 13, had prepared the upright piano, after the manner of John Cage, with fridge magnets, greaseproof paper and the like. Steve Buchanan sat with drumsticks, guitars and a banjo each with a chopstick through the strings, and various bits of junk he had found in the basement. Marie Schwab played a prepared violin, and Heike Fiedler, on vocals, controlled sound effects with a touchpad and sampled video (projected onto the wall, the musicians and whatever got in the way) using a device with about ten buttons. The audience barely outnumbered the performers.

I had listened to and worked with several of those in the room - poets, musicians, film makers - and I had often been distracted by the novelty of their work: Jacques Demierre eliciting all sorts of noises the harpsichord hadn't been designed to make, Steve clowning with the tuning heads of his guitar, Heike seeking and Alexa shunning attention a little too much in performance - but here, the day Mubarak shuffled off, they listened to each other so intently, and replied so aptly and unexpectedly, that this was it: the avant garde was wheeling over the site where art will settle for a century or so. Techniques dreamed up by John Cage sixty years back, and combinations of music and colour that go back through Scriabin to Telemann and even Arcimboldo, could now be manipulated live at every level. The increasing control exerted by 19th century composers, that had squeezed the breath out of improvisation, had morphed into mastery of formal constraint, freely chosen by artists from Mac Low to OULIPO and, on occasion, set aside when freedom graced the room.

The first set they performed seemed through-composed, such was its balance. The second - which they hadn't planned on at all, but we insisted - seemed to move obliquely into and out of a focused space, ending when it did, having been there. The previous time I had heard Steve and Heike had been in a larger group of performers in front of a big audience at the Alhambra. Steve had played what looked like a large steel plate on the stage (as input device), first with mallets, then by dancing on it.

The Ilôt 13 audience had included Colette and Günther Ruch, who have been making digital films on the basis of super-8 documentaries they had shot in the 70s; it's the resultant richness of texture, and the rhythm of the final products, that stick in my mind. They arranged an event in November last year to which I contributed in absentia: the Syllabary was projected, and Infolipo (essentially a group of film makers led by Ambroise Barras) showed three pieces with torch-sized projectors, to music composed by Pierre Dunand Filliol on the theme of "palimpsests": attributing a musical note to each letter, and rearranging the letters in systematic series, he came up with a fair number of fine pieces of music. We intend to make this an annual or even a quarterly event.

What we find in Geneva now is a focused commitment to exploration, covering at least two generations, and without any Ez & Tom impresarios overdosing on limelight. Vincent Barras (brother of Ambroise) has pointed out that the Geneva authorities, leery though they are of the squat community in the city, are generous with anything they regard as educational, and that includes art. As a result, the same individuals can find themselves both subsidized in their work and evicted from their flat,

by the same regime. Some of the artists (e.g. Jacques Demierre) are full time, some part-time (Vincent Barras, who has been working with Jacques for decades, is a professor of history of medicine); I have a day job, which allows me to pay specialists to do programming and recording I can't cope with.

For example, I need thirty male and thirty female voices to declaim sixty syllables each on Cleikit, the collaborative version of the Syllabary. This is being managed mostly by Olga Kokcharova, a sound artist and recent graduate of HEAD, the Geneva school of art and design. She and Thierry Simonot (composer) have just helped Jacques Demierre to restart his series of post office concerts; Jacques has a studio behind the sorting office in a quiet suburb, to which various artists are invited.

The latest was the New York composer Nicolas Collins, who seemed happy enough with a full house of 40 people, in their 20s and 50s. He staged four pieces. The first (composed when he was 18) had 4 mikes in the corners of the room picking up vibrations and feeding them to a synthesizer, particularly when a singer let loose on one note, now in one place, now in another. In the second piece - here's where it starts to get clever - he explained the previous piece to us and expatiated on various recording techniques. As he did so, a voice-activated mike triggered jazz piano improvisations. In the third, he had wired a circuit board found on a dump to his music system. One performer started applying electrodes to it, eliciting various noises. One by one, a further six people joined him. A camera overhead showed the procedure, like nightmare surgery; at the end, the sound was switched off, and all you heard was the scuttling of fourteen electrodes over the circuitry. In the last piece he put a tiny candle on a photoelectric cell that fed into the synthesizer, and blew gently on it for a few minutes. I asked the composer how the jazz piano had worked: he had set the computer to recognize six different pitch overtones in his voice, and to associate each of those pitches with a note from chords in a Charles Ives piece. (So you cheated! I grinned; well I'm a musician, not a scientist! he replied). He went on to hold a three-day workshop at HEAD, which was attended by several of the above. As I was leaving, Olga told me that the owners of many of the voices on Cleikit had been sitting around me. I may get to know them.

Some links: thesyllabary.com (see also **Collected Contraptions** (Carcenet, 2011); <http://cleikit.com> ; nicolascollins.com (see also his **Handmade Electronic Music: The Art of Hardware Hacking** (Routledge, 2009); [wiki.infolipo.net/index.php/Palimpseste\(s\)_musicaux](http://wiki.infolipo.net/index.php/Palimpseste(s)_musicaux) atelierpdf.com/musiques2/algorithmes2.html ; realtimepoem.com/newspeak/actions.html www.youtube.com/results?search_type=videos&search_query=cgruch .

For books and recordings by Vincent Barras and Jacques Demierre: www.heros-limite.com

LABOUR, BLOSSOM: Ian Hamilton Finlay and Orkney ***Alistair Peebles***

'He has spent nearly all his life in Scotland – often in the islands and preferably on the island of Rousay in the Orkneys – in Finlay fishing-boats seasons lobster-pots & potato-drills never seem far off however loud Edinburgh children play outside The Wild Hawthorn Press in Fettes Row.' *Typographica* 8 (1963)

'Tree and Sea are the same in Sound' (IHF, 'Domestic Pensées 1964-1972', Aggie Weston's Editions, 2004)

Some years ago, I began a series of photographs of Orkney, where I live, in response to the ways in which as the light or viewpoint changes, so does the relationship between the hills nearby and those further off. The islands are mostly low-lying, gently undulating, and very fertile: the sea, much of the time, shares in those characteristics. It is abundant, certainly. (I live in the only inland parish.) The series title, *One Hill Behind Another*, reminds me of Ian Hamilton Finlay's work, especially of a printed work of his from 1972, *They returned home tired but happy*. Along with its short text (that sentence followed by 'The End. '), the card features a pair of seemingly artless, near-identical landscape drawings (by Ian Gardner). It is designed to recall a 'spot the difference' puzzle – though the invitation is no less to spot the similarities.

And the riddle. In each of the drawings, a path leads upwards across what look like grassy braes that roll upwards to the skyline. It dips in and out of view, and leads, on the one hand, rather oddly, to a gaff-rigged sailboat; and on the other to a neat, lone cottage, backed by leafy trees, with an echo of the mast in the way the smoke rises straight up. Soon enough, one picture resolves itself into a series of green waves, and the road becomes the path the boat has taken almost out of sight. Though the graphic style is not really characteristic of his work, anyone who knows about Finlay will recognise at once the poetic and moral territory. And to some extent also, the biographical: though sketchily, perhaps. Finlay's earliest memory may come to mind, as described in the commentaries, of being on a schooner in the Bahamas (he was born in Nassau in 1925), and probably the cottage at the farm of Stonypath in the Scottish Borders, where he lived from 1966, with its Ash Tree and garden: well inland but full of the sound of the sea. 'Tree and Sea are the same in Sound' (IHF, 'Domestic Pensées 1964-1972', Aggie Weston's Editions, 2004)

Recently I began to try and learn something about the intervening years: between the Bahamas sailboat and the Borders farmstead. At first I simply wanted to know more about Finlay's connection with Orkney. I have always known that he had lived there, but somehow it seemed, if I ever thought about it, rather hazily as though it had been a parallel place in which he'd lived, like the Orkney island of Hether-Blether, which appears and disappears. People have seen it, though of course it is on no map, and in days gone by they were able to describe its houses, fields and boats, and how the crops were doing. It wasn't until I found myself talking with Alec Finlay last year about the house in which his father had lived on the island of Rousay, that I began to envisage a more substantial connection, and I realised how little I or anyone seemed to know about it,

as something that had happened in Orkney, in the parts that are actually on the map, among its seventy-or-so islands, holms and skerries.

It soon became clear not only that there was a lot more to the story than was made out in the accounts readily available, but also that the Orkney experiences only had meaning in relation to the his life and work before and after. Something had made him come there, and the place had an effect on him: it changed him, but he left little behind. His fascination, from childhood, with boats and their apparatus grew considerably, fed daily by being among them and the 'blue-jerseyed' men who worked with them. Generally, the poetry that he was writing while in Orkney, that formed part of the collection of lyrics published by Migrant in November 1960: *The Dancers Inherit the Party*, is often explicitly identified with the place, but the islands' longer-lasting influences on his work are not so easy to make out. A good example, to do with boats, and well-enough known as linking this period with the later, is the visual rhyme that he continued to explore for decades afterwards, that occurs – it was thought till recently that it first occurred there – in 'The English Colonel Explains an Orkney Boat': shaped, 'somewhat / As lemons.' (It now appears to have been used in an earlier short story, from 1956, 'The Splash'.) As a further example, while it is clear that *Sea Poppy 1* (1968), comprises mainly Scottish boat registration numbers, it is interesting to consider that two of the three right in the centre were Orkney registrations (though in fact the boats in question had long been de-registered): K47 and K161. And while Yves Abrioux, in *Ian Hamilton Finlay: A Visual Primer* (Reaktion Books, London, 1985) is undoubtedly correct in saying that in this work, 'the citation of dada' is 'essential', and that the circular pattern of the registrations is 'an Aristotelian metaphor from analogy – poppy : stamens : : sea : fishing boats', it seems unlikely that the selection of actual references to place was accidental.

The period in which I have become interested, therefore, extends from the early 1940s till the later 1960s: from his growth to maturity in wartime Glasgow, till the early days at Stonypath. Out of that quarter of a century, which takes us up to Finlay's early 40s, my intention here is simply to outline some of the ways in which Orkney figures in the story, as reality and ideal, and to comment briefly on its relationship to his work of the time, and to the later work. My starting point is that as the most influential Scottish artist of his era, much less is known about this earlier part of his career than it should be, as regards Orkney and elsewhere.

Despite its considerable importance to Finlay, in biographical and artistic terms, Orkney as an actual place is probably as little known to most of his admirers, as the Orkney aspects of his work seem unfamiliar to most islanders. People may know Finlay or they may know Orkney, but it seems they rarely know both. This is to some degree understandable, since his connection with Orkney, though it is often mentioned in passing, has become obscured and mythologised over time: not only in consequence of the islands' relative remoteness, but also because for several reasons, it seems, this situation suited Finlay. Further, the islands do lend themselves to imaginative recreation – as does distance itself, as the agoraphobic IHF was well aware. There are other reasons, too: the character of his work changed greatly over time, and his later audience was very much elsewhere. While the fact that he was resident in Orkney during only two brief periods, in the later 1950s, helps partly to explain

his having faded from view in the islands, it will also come as a surprise to many of those with an interest in his work that he wasn't there for longer.

There were other important local reasons, to be discussed below, that also help to account for this vagueness of connection, and seem likely to help explain the fact that, with some exceptions, Finlay's work is still quite absent from Orkney's literary and artistic sense of itself. Thus, for example, not only is there no reference to him in an otherwise justifiably well-received volume entitled *The History of Orkney Literature*, published by John Donald in 2010 – and developed by its author, Simon W Hall, from his doctoral thesis at a Scottish university – but his absence from this 'first full survey of literary writing from and about the Orkney Islands' passed unremarked in all the reviews. Similarly, Orkney's premier arts event, the St Magnus Festival, which throughout its 35 year history has attracted performers of international renown, audiences from all over the world, and taken justifiable pride in fostering innovation across the arts and celebrating local artistic expression, has never yet made any reference to him. And this has also passed unnoticed.

To an extent these are local issues, but they must also be considered within a much wider context, for example as regards the interaction of literary and visual cultures in postwar Scotland and internationally: something that, for example, Mark Scroggins discusses in an essay on Finlay in *Jacket* #15. (Incidentally, Scroggins' reference there to Finlay's 'Orcadian' childhood provides a typical – and pardonable – example of the knowledge deficit under discussion. Finlay did not come to Orkney till long after his accent had been formed). At this stage, however, and leaving particular issues aside for the moment, I believe it is not only possible, but essential, in thinking about Finlay's work as a whole (and in thinking about Orkney), to acknowledge the force of that mythic or personal, pastoral or Arcadian vision of the islands, which he himself both created as an ideal and also allowed to take hold as history, while at the same time trying to understand the reality of his connection with the place. Whatever he may have said about biography (and he said different things), the life is present in the work.

As far as I have been able to gather, from interviews and correspondence, Finlay visited Orkney on a total of three occasions. His earliest visit was for several months during the winter of 1955-56 with his first wife, Marion Fletcher, also an artist, though mainly, if not exclusively a visual artist. Finlay's work is famously more difficult to classify, but at that stage he was writing, for the most part. In spite of the time of year (though it would probably have been no colder in Orkney than in their cottage in Perthshire – if darker), they had arrived on something like a working holiday, he to write and she to paint. They may have been considering moving away from Perthshire in the longer term, but the history of their relationship after this time suggests that they might also have been trying to put some distance between themselves and whatever difficulties they were experiencing in their marriage (there were no children). While it is not impossible that they had visited Orkney previously, I have found no evidence for that. The story that Finlay had been evacuated to Orkney in the Second World War is invented, part of the myth: see again below.

His second visit was in the spring of 1959, when he came alone and spent about three months on the island of Rousay, earning a wage by

labouring on the roads, while also writing, visiting friends and trout-fishing. He referred later to Orkney as his 'birthplace as a poet' and it was about this time that he wrote many of the poems that were published in *The Dancers Inherit the Party*. Although correspondence shows that for several years afterwards Finlay tried in vain to find a way to return to Orkney, his last visit to the islands took place very much later, in September 2005. This was only six months before he died – he was already ill – when he travelled to Orkney for the installation of a monumental work in stone, *Gods of the Earth / Gods of the Sea*, discussed below, that had been commissioned by Orkney's Pier Arts Centre.

To put these Orkney visits very quickly into a wider biographical context: apart from wartime travels to London in the early 1940s, and Army Service in England and Germany between 1944-47, Finlay's life during this period seems to have been spent entirely in Scotland – as the epigraph from *Typographica 8* suggests, though the phrase 'often in the islands' owes more to the imagination than might at first appear. Geographically, the path leads from Glasgow in the west, to Dunira in rural Perthshire with Marion, then east to Edinburgh, north to Orkney, south to Edinburgh again – during which time he was divorced and remarried – then north to Gledfield in Ross-shire for a time. After a brief pause in Fife, he moved again with his young family to the small upland farm of Stonypath ('Stonypath ("Of life" being understood in brackets, no doubt),' as he wrote in 1966 to George Mackay Brown.) This lies 20 miles south-west of Edinburgh, in Newholm, the family estate of his second wife, Sue Macdonald-Lockhart, with whom he began to create the garden. This itself was a natural development of ideas that had long been forming, and that had begun to be explored in practical terms at Gledfield (to be explored in detail in a forthcoming essay by Stephen Bann – see Notes below).

The itinerary is difficult to date precisely, especially in its earlier years. Doing so depends in part on correspondence, some of it undated – but I agree with Ken Cockburn (in his introduction to *The Dancers Inherit the Party: Early Stories, Plays and Poems*, Polygon, 2004) that between 1947 and 1956 IHF seems mostly to have lived in Perthshire, and thereafter till 1964, mostly in Edinburgh. The chronology is important, not least because his correspondence provides an invaluable record of the working out of his poetic ideas. His connections within the world of literature and art over that period, in Scotland and abroad, are also important, and require to be drawn out much more fully: not just because they contribute to the story of Ian Hamilton Finlay, but because his story is intimately involved with that bigger picture and can help to illuminate its true structure, especially as regards Scotland. Finally – and following on from that – given his long experience of alienation from its cultural life, it is important to realise that, apart from his very earliest years, he did in fact spend his whole life in Scotland.

In terms of his lyric poetry, and in terms of the islands' lasting influence on his later work, it is the second visit to Orkney that was more important, though it is less likely that he would have come to the islands had the earlier visit not occurred. It was then, after all, that he got to know Brown and other Orcadian literary and artistic figures, including Marwick and Stanley Cursiter. It is perhaps natural to assume there is a

connection between IHF's interest in Orkney and the fact that Hugh MacDiarmid had lived from 1933 to 1942 in Shetland – the more northerly group of Norse-orientated Scottish Northern Isles – and indeed there may be. The 16 year-old Finlay would probably have met MacDiarmid (aged 50) for the first time in Glasgow in 1942, soon after he had arrived from Whalsay to work in a munitions factory on War Service, and they were on friendly terms for some time thereafter (MacDiarmid was his best man in 1947), so there would certainly have been opportunity to discuss life in the north. Finlay was in any case very interested in contemporary Scandinavian and North European expressionist literature and painting. However it seems unlikely that there was a deliberate attempt to follow in the older poet's footsteps. Although in *The Dancers Inherit the Party* Finlay includes a set of poems entitled *Orkney Lyrics*, the suite is clearly not intended as a homage to the *Shetland Lyrics* of 1934. Thus in 'Mansie Considers the Sea in the Manner of Hugh MacDiarmid', the friendly animism in Mansie's intuitive response to this familiar element is contrasted with lessons he has learned from his study of political philosophy, as well in fact it might, though Finlay is not simply celebrating his subject's erudition so much as, obviously, using it to take a poke at MacDiarmid's bombast, and not for the last time:

'– All the same I remember what Engels said:
"Freedom is the consciousness of necessity".'

Finlay's third, much later, visit was a consequence of the impact of the second – as are some aspects of the work previously mentioned, *Gods of the Earth / Gods of the Sea*. This is evident not only in its having been commissioned for Orkney in the first place, but also in its specific location, directly across the road from Blossom Quarry in the Sourin (*sour-in*) district of Rousay, at the highest point on the island's circular main road. This newly re-opened quarry was where the roadmen worked, whom Finlay joined in 1959: blasting, crushing, barrowing and shovelling the rock required to repair the main road, and upgrade some side roads. (£82,000 will be Spent on Orkney Roads This Year' was the front-page headline of the *Orkney Herald* on 7th April 1959: £4,600 in Sourin alone.)

Blossom Quarry, Rousay

"Blossom" they call this quarry of grey stone,
Of stone on stone on stone, where never white
Blossom was sweetly blown; wet dynamite
Would blossom more than seeds in this place grown.

And yet as Blossom quarry it is known.
And who knows but the namer named it right?
Its flowers are on the hand with which I write:
Bent backs, sore bloody blisters it has grown.

(Ian H. Finlay, *The Orkney Herald*, 1959: not included in *The Dancers Inherit the Party*)

'Blossom' surely does ask for an explanation. Somewhat ironically, given

the blistered toponymist's (unremarked) southcountry status in this Nordic place, it is probably an anglicisation of 'Blosson'. The subject is discussed by the Orcadian scholar Hugh Marwick (1881-1965) as follows: 'The name is pretty certainly a derivative from ON [Old Norse] *blása*, to blow. It may be an adjectival survival of a compound, eg *mórin blásinn*, 'the blown or windy moor', or it may be that the adjective is to be interpreted in the sense of 'laid bare' or 'stripped of earth' (cf ON *meltorfa blásin mjok*) as the surface of the ground here would be in keeping with such an interpretation.' (Hugh Marwick, *The Place Names of Rousay*, Kirkwall, 1947.)

It is interesting, of course, in the broader Finlay landscape, to consider this accidental juxtaposition of blossom and bare moor. (And blisters too, no doubt.) Stonypath lies on the very margin of horticultural possibility, and is all the more remarkable for that.

The hillside at Blossom has an outlook to the north, high across the sea towards islands including Eday and Westray 5 or 6 miles distant. It is also possible to see some parts of Shetland (though not Whalsay), as much as 80 miles away. With the openness, the discomfort of the climate and the bareness of the soil, this does seem a place of transition, endlessly unsettled. A fit place from which to call on the gods, as the father of Aeneas does when Italy is first sighted across the Strait of Otranto: 'Gods of the Earth, Gods of the Sea, Gods who have rule over storms, give us a wind to help our voyage, and may your breath bring us aid.' (*Aeneid* Book III, Virgil, trans. W F Jackson Knight, Penguin, 1956.)

Gods of the Earth / Gods of the Sea, carved by Nicholas Sloan, was the only installation of Finlay's, outwith the garden, that he actually travelled in person to visit. Previous installations in Britain and Europe had been arranged with Sue Finlay or later Pia Maria Simig, and seen by Finlay at a distance, through photographs.



The Pier Arts Centre, at least, has recognised Finlay's Orkney connection. As well as other works of his in their collection, a commission on this scale (part of their millennium project, *The Constant Moment*) shows their regard for his work. Carved in Portland Stone, the work measures approximately 7.5 x 2 x 1 metres and weighs around 14 tonnes. Quarried in Dorset and carved in Somerset, it was transported for more than 1,000

km by road and ferry. As may be seen from the following extracts of correspondence between Finlay at Little Sparta and the Director of Pier Arts Centre, there was no lack of real fondness in Finlay's memories of the island, last seen 40 years previously:

14.5.99

... For Rousay, I have been dreaming of the enclosed project. I do not like to transfer a work planned for one site, to another, but in this case the essential site is the same: "the landscape of sea and sky, stone and cloud": quarrying and shipping too, (as the Proposal says), which made me smile, as Blossom Quarry in Rousay was only too well known to me, it being the source of the stones which we put in the holes in the road. I had a poem about it in the Orkney Herald!

But to the point: I made the Proposal for Portland ... but it would be a perfect project for Rousay; Pia would find a site; at the moment, and since I had your first letter, I have thought of the work being in the moorland above the road, in some really wild and isolated spot. However, it has to be said that it would have to be on a really large scale ...

5.10.99

... Thank you so much for your letter. Fancy your having written to the Rousay Community Council.

..... (Long pause, while I imagine the steamer at the pier, though I know it won't be the same steamer; I think it was Monday it used to come, if I remember correctly.)

The proposed work needs to be large, or it will get lost totally. I think something like a metre and a half, by two metres ...

I have every faith in Pia finding a suitable site. I can hardly wait to see where it will be ...

In Edinburgh in early 1959, Finlay was longing to escape. Though he had spent much of the previous year as an advertising copywriter (unable to do any work of his own) he had little money. By this time he and Marion were separated, he at least was under considerable emotional strain, and the agoraphobia that had begun to develop a few years previously had him in its grip. Having published a collection of short stories in 1958, *The Sea Bed and Other Stories*, (which Brown reviewed very favourably, 'a real achievement', in Edinburgh University's *Gambit*, and J.J.G. positively too, a few years later in *The New Shetlander* 57: though much less impressed by many of the poems of 1961) and had several plays performed, he had begun again to write lyric poetry. (His first known poem comes from the mid-40s, 'A Postcard from Glenlednoch' – which like, 'An English Colonel...' also contrasts Northern and Southern landscapes – but no others are known till the late 50s.)

Thus exiled, alienated in the city, he remembered Orkney as a place where he might be able to be happy, free of the anxiety if not the agoraphobia: where he might feel as much at home, and able to write, as he had in Dunira, itself a place from which he was now quite cut off. As it

happened, the husband of their landlady on the first visit to Orkney was the foreman of the road squad in Rousay. IHF was in contact with her, as he was with those literary friends he had made previously, whose company he enjoyed. There would be accommodation, modest but adequate, there would be work, peace, and seatrout fishing at the door. In early March, he sailed north out of Edinburgh to Aberdeen, then on to Kirkwall, and from there to Rousay, his 'dear black sheep'. His situation was known, he was among people he knew, and he was made to feel welcome. (In some respects, one might compare this feeling of close relationship with a place to George Mackay Brown's feelings towards the valley of Rackwick in the island of Hoy.)

Before long, he was joined in Rousay by others, first, by the younger poet John Sharkey, who, having met Finlay in Edinburgh, had come north on the strength of the impression he had acquired, that Finlay and he could work together earning money on the roads, and writing. There was certainly plenty of roadwork, and in fact Sharkey remained on the island for a few months on his own, but Finlay just wanted solitude, and he evidently found the close company difficult to accept (JS, having set fire accidentally to the caravan he had been allocated, had been accommodated in the small premises allotted to IHF). Notes of this frustration can be detected here and there in *The Dancers Inherit the Party*, as well as some marks of sympathy. Later, Sharkey also became interested in concrete poetry, although when subsequently he was editing an anthology of such work (*Mindplay*, Lorrimer, 1971), IHF showed no interest in participating. By then, of course, his work had moved on.

Other friends from Edinburgh also visited him, and Finlay himself paid visits from time to time to Marwick and Brown on mainland Orkney. Life was relatively pleasant, but the trouble that took him from even this (partial) Arcadia is alluded to in the poem 'O.H.M.S.', also in *The Dancers Inherit the Party*. The business of 'Assistance clerk' mentioned in 'O.H.M.S.', is likely to have been connected with his financial arrangements with his wife, and to deal with these he had unexpectedly to travel back to Edinburgh. Thereafter he would have made a quick return to Orkney, but since it was summer he was unable to secure a cabin on the ferry north (his agoraphobia required this), and also because in Edinburgh before long he met Jessie McGuffie, a classics student with whom he later founded the Wild Hawthorn Press. Other opportunities appeared, and soon there were more reasons to stay in the south, meantime, than to find a way back.

The crisis that accompanied the protracted breakdown of his first marriage had important and lasting effects, not just in taking Finlay out of Orkney. Marion Fletcher was a Glaswegian, who before they married in 1947, had been his girlfriend for several years, and they were evidently very close. It seems clear that it was during that long process of separation – a time for him of generally, and periodically very, considerable emotional and financial difficulty that – among other events and to put a complicated matter rather simply – the agoraphobia became established. There is no space here to try and account further for the condition; however one later consequence was that having arrived at Stonypath in 1966, Finlay did not leave it again until, so to speak, the agoraphobia left him, in the mid-1990s.

Agoraphobia in his case, and not unusually, was really an acute

anxiety about being out of sight of a safe, known place, particularly about being out in city streets. Clinical treatment he received in the late 50s and early 60s, in Edinburgh and Aberdeen respectively, was medically ineffective (at best), though it seems that in confirming his condition officially, it did at last help secure National Assistance on a less troublesome basis, there being no other source of public support available for someone in his position. (See, eg, the short story, 'The Money'. Although the tone of this story is essentially one of polite bewilderment, he knew well enough that in reality the price for his status as 'a free man' was to be stony broke. Many letters from this period are written on scraps of paper, torn covers of books, etc.) As is well known, following his return from Orkney in summer 1959, for several years he rarely left the flat he occupied in Edinburgh's Fettes Row – or other shorter-term accommodation – at least in daylight hours. While his reasons for remaining in Edinburgh at the time were many, his inclination was always, constantly and with nostalgic longing, towards life in the countryside – for its purity, simplicity and clarity of definition as a territory and a home, for opportunities it could ideally provide for uninterrupted discourse with visitors, which he never lacked – and of course as a way of coping with the illness.

Artistically, during this period as a whole, as Ken Cockburn notes in the introduction mentioned earlier, Finlay moved sequentially through several literary forms: 'from painting to short stories, to plays, to poems, to concrete poems, to poem-objects and then to the garden, where in a sense, everything came together.' During the 1950s, his work appeared in Scottish magazines and newspapers, in the TLS and on BBC Radio, and as mentioned he collected it for publication in the late 50s. In structural terms, this was evidently a one-way journey, though culminating as Cockburn suggests, in a partial synthesis (as for example in theatrical aspects of display in the garden, in regard to camouflage and costume, and in his engagement in wars – from the real theatre of battle in the Little Spartan War which began in 1978, to the bruted zeppelin attack on the 1962 International Writers' Conference in Edinburgh). In thematic terms, however, and in terms of subject matter, clarity of vision, ambition and formal intensity, there was much continuity. To give some fairly obvious examples, one can find throughout his work references to burns, ponds and boats, as well as marine references, a valuing of intimacy and a fascination with names and the qualities of place.

Born, as it were, on the ocean (or at least, apparently, coming to self-awareness there) and drawn by instinct and illness away from the city, he was strongly attracted to Orkney, as a place both rural and maritime. While in reality it was beyond his reach, it served in his imagination as both a place of origin and a home; and it remained an ideal. If it now seems worthwhile and important to consider the biographical relationship between the completed work and the Orcadian and other sources of inspiration (Perthshire, Gledfield), then, while still acknowledging their value as ideals, they do need to be understood in the context of what those places were actually like. In particular, in this context, this includes the ways in which those aspects of Orkney that meant most to him are reflected in what he wrote and what he made in the later work in the landscape.

On a larger scale, and while there is no room here to go into much detail, one might note that comparisons might be made, for all their differences, between the topography of Stonypath and that of Rousay. '...Many visitors find the treeless vistas and wind-swept landscape very beautiful,' writes Charles Jencks in his essay 'Aphorisms on the Gardens of an Aphorist' in *Wood Notes Wild*, Polygon, 1995, describing the landscape around Stonypath – but it could just as well be Orkney. Another architect, Malcolm Fraser, who worked as a student with Finlay and who later visited Orkney to see Rousay for himself, gave this account of the comparison, following a discussion of those congruences: 'He told me of his exile to Rousay in the 1950s: of a small, round island with a single hill strung round with ancient tombs, and that he worked on its single road, tarmaced it round the island, circumnavigating it. I thought of simple work and honest toil and the virtues of a metalled road, and the loneliness and loveliness of a perfect, singular wee island. And I thought of its hill and shore, and the little glen that Little Sparta coories in, and for a fleeting glimpse saw the cone of the little hill invert and slip snug into the valley of Little Sparta, with Ian walking the edge of both and beyond him the unknown roll of the far Pentland Hills, or the deep roll and roar of the Atlantic.'

The climate feels similar too, Stonypath's 300m altitude seeming to even out some of the differences in latitude, even if the temperature range is more extreme, and the wind less. Last summer, for example, I was very struck, having arrived at Stonypath only a few days after leaving Orkney, by just how similar were the wildflowers, almost as though one might be looking at a patch of ground transplanted; and the surrounding agriculture had a familiar appearance. (Another lingering pastoral myth is that IHF had been a shepherd in Orkney – as he had in Perthshire. He was not, though there are plenty of sheep, and as Sue Finlay writes in her essay in *New Arcadian Journal* 61/62, 'When we arrived at Stonypath the sheep were grazing at the door.')

A major geographical difference of course is the distance from the sea, but – and this is neatly suggested in Fraser's closing comparison, as in Finlay's own 'domestic pensée' above – it doesn't take much awareness of Finlay's work in the garden and in print to see how that element was imaginatively brought close, or indeed, how the near and the far were so often held close in the work – and, crucially, still allowed their distance.

To give a different kind of example that I think might agree with IHF's sense of Orkney, and perhaps match something of the way he viewed the world from Stonypath, I spoke recently to an elderly lady from the island, who was living close by when he was staying there himself. (In the terms that Finlay seems to have used to distinguish between poetic response to the domestic-Stonypath aspects of human experience, and the power-related Little Spartan aspects, I offer this tale as a 'fauve-suprematist synthesis'.) Like most of the islanders, the lady has no recollection of Finlay, but I also asked her about an earlier time, the Second World War, when the British Home Fleet was based in Scapa Flow. (Rousay is on the opposite side of the Orkney mainland from Scapa Flow and none of the 60,000 service personnel was stationed there.) Had that had a big effect on them?– Oh yes, she said, a big effect, we could send as much butter, eggs and cheese as we could spare. My mother could

have sent them a ton of butter! At that time we only got a scraping on our bread, it was all for selling. – And did you ever go to see the Fleet at anchor? – No, she replied, we never saw the ships in the Flow, but we always knew when they were in, when we had to start sending the eggs and the butter and the cheese.

A network of awareness of that kind, operating through long-established patterns of connection, is a typical feature of life in islands, driven essentially by simple need and plain common sense. And in this particular case by the fact that it was neither practically possible nor necessary to go and look at the Fleet in order to know that it was there. The connections grow out of patterns of neighbourly and familial interaction, near and far, long established and relying on intuition as much as calculation or analysis. Continual adjustments in awareness of that kind, as suggested for example in the supposed response of the community (the 'island') to the visit described in 'O.H.M.S.', are also apparent in other poems in *The Dancers Inherit the Party*, interlinking not butter and battleships, but rather more bizarrely, lobster and cuckoo-clock, or quarter-moons and the growth of wireless-poles. These are responses that despite Finlay's brief and comparatively separate existence on the island, do connect his poetry with a sense of genuine encounter with that place as a living community.

Another story tells of an occasion during the war when a naval helicopter landed in Rousay, in the part of Sourin where Finlay later came to live. It had flown in from a warship to pick up provisions. Perhaps this story made its way obliquely into the poems in *The Dancers Inherit the Party* about the 'helicapster' and its companion 'lobstercopter'. Since the latter was dedicated to the local folklorist par excellence Ernest Marwick, it's not impossible some authentic detail lay behind it. Indeed it's not unlikely that lobsters would have been in the cargo. A great many of these poems are derived from actual places and events, and who knows what stories were swapped years later in the tea hut at Blossom Quarry. The poems suggest that his attraction to the islands as a cultural place was based in part on his appreciation of a quality of intelligence in a world-view that retains something close to, but that is clearly not innocence.

There are better known stories that tell of the character of the islanders. George Mackay Brown, in *An Orkney Tapestry*, published in 1973, provides a handful. He begins the recital with the statement: 'In Scotland when people congregate, they tend to argue and discuss and reason; in Orkney they tell stories.' Thus, in one example, a brother returns to the farm he left abruptly, without explanation, a dozen years previously. In the meantime, he has worked at Hudson's Bay in Canada. When asked by his stay-at-home sibling where he had been, he replies, tersely – Oot.

Another, from a different source: a fisherman is selling haddocks from a barrow in Kirkwall when a customer, surprised by the prices, or pretending she is, asks if he has no conscience. – No, madam, he replies. – None today, just haddocks.

It seems likely that in Orkney, Finlay will have sought the company more of writers and literary people, where possible, 'to argue and discuss

and reason', but like anyone else he will have listened to folk gossiping and telling stories of this kind, that mix shrewdness and simplicity, irony and patience: characteristics that reflect a life that on the one hand could not be more stable and settled, and on the other hand is connected by sea to anywhere you might wish to go.

However, though it is perfectly straightforward to travel to and from the islands, then as now, and however close to Finlay's heart he might have kept them, for people from his part of the world, at that time, they are definitely, and in some ways definitively, at a distance. The first Rousayman I spoke to about IHF told me that no one had been evacuated to Rousay in the 1940s, despite what he'd found written (at that time) on Wikipedia. And it really does seem far-fetched, that a 13 year-old with no Orkney connections would have been sent, as the mythic version has it, 350 kilometres away from his family home in Glasgow in wartime. In fact Finlay was evacuated less than 40 km to the village of Gartmore in the Trossachs (see eg, *Little Sparta* by Jessie Sheeler). Given the unlikelihood, one might well wonder how the story came to be repeated so often. (It's perhaps just the way that stories get around, of course.)

Again, despite Wikipedia, he also thought that it was most unlikely that Finlay had ever been a shepherd there: 'He might have helped move a sheep, but no more than that'. Note that this is more than 50 years later. If Finlay's memory of Rousay was clear after all those years, Rousay's memory of its past is no less so, though interestingly, as mentioned, it has very little recollection of him. Apart from the historical and biographical revisions, perhaps the most unexpected awakening came after I'd read out one of the short Orkney Lyrics, where Mansie considers Peedie Mary, this time in his own terms. It was the first time he had heard the poem, but his first response was 'Alice Mary. 'That'll be Alice Mary L...'

And indeed, though she is not actually the 'Peedie Alice Mary', and there is no cousin named Mansie, a woman of that very name yet lives, though not in Orkney. From what I have been able to learn, it seems very likely indeed that many other poems from that period – including uncollected lyrics, many of them unpublished – have an overlooked relationship to their place or circumstances of origin (not necessarily Orkney). However regrettable or unavoidable – or perfectly natural – this neglect may be, it has undoubtedly limited its appreciation – including in its place of origin. In fact, as far as Orkney is concerned, there can be few more striking examples in Scottish writing of the alienation of one from the other: of poem from place. Arguably, it has also obscured fundamental aspects of Finlay's art in a wider sense, and some ways in which the experience of Orkney (and elsewhere) makes itself felt in the later work have already been suggested. All of which urges a thorough examination of the earlier material, and, for obvious reasons, without delay.

'Blossom Quarry, Rousay' is very different from the work that Finlay began to produce in the early 60s, and though Marwick had been pleased to take such poems for the Orkney Herald (it folded in 1961), he declined the offer of copies of *Poor.Old.Tired.Horse*. (POTH) to sell through his Orkney Herald Bookshop in Kirkwall in 1962. This was a poetry sheet that Finlay edited with Jessie McGuffie (the first issue credits McGuffie and Paul

Pond, later Paul Jones, of Manfred Mann) and published by their Wild Hawthorn Press. Information about POTH is readily available elsewhere, but suffice it to say that the kind of poetry included was not at all in line (and there was no intention to make it so) with the established taste of Edinburgh literary circles. 'Utterly vicious and deplorable,' was MacDiarmid's summing up. The periodical set its sights on principled and eclectic (though never explicitly argued) celebration of new and overlooked ways of using language and image, but there was also certainly an intention to subvert MacDiarmid's dominating influence. POTH received harsher treatment elsewhere, but the impact of its rejection in Orkney is suggested by a remark in Pete Brown's recent autobiography, *White Rooms and Imaginary Westerns* (the first two poems in the first POTH being his): 'Some of the hostility resulted in [POTH] being banned in Orkney'.

Whether it was banned or politely declined is perhaps a matter of judgment, but though it sold widely elsewhere, like most of the Scottish literary establishment, the writers Finlay had come to know in Orkney had limited interest in the less conventional poetic forms in which he had become interested. George Mackay Brown contributed poems to POTH 23 (teaPOTH) and 25 (one-word poems), as well as to the second issue, but one does not get an impression on his part of much enthusiasm, and only one poem was included in a collection of his own (Part 3, 'Afternoon Tea', of 'Tea Poems' in *Winterfold*, 1976). For several years, Finlay did continue to try and find somewhere to live in Orkney, and for a while continued corresponding, but the geographical distances were too great and eventually more interesting opportunities lay elsewhere.

In effect, as suggested above, his work in relation to the islands was largely forgotten about in Orkney (and the reality of Orkney largely overlooked by the critics and commentators). Apart from other circumstances (and not to disregard the fact that, after a certain time, it might have suited Finlay to draw a veil) the disconnection must have much to do with the simple and extraordinary fact of the sustained local presence of a writer with the exceptional poetic gifts and personal and literary sympathies of George Mackay Brown. In an Orkney context certainly, and much more widely, the accent and compass of Brown's voice made it a thrilling, authentic new utterance, rich with a fascinating elemental glamour of seafaring, community and legend. Enough in itself for (most of) the islands – new enough and old enough – and able to carry that world-view convincingly abroad. (It has not impressed everyone, however, and though Simon Hall seems untroubled by the notion that Orkney's literature is 'historically fixated', Kenneth White will have none of it. There is no room here to put into context his description of Brown as 'stubbornly naïve', and 'a 'christological folklorist', 'militantly anti-Enlightenment, anti-democratic, and anti-Protestant', (and then some) but his lecture for those who are interested, and John Aberdein's response are online – see below – and it appears in Kenneth White's *On the Atlantic Edge: A Geopoetics Project*, Sandstone Press, 2006.)

But effectively George Mackay Brown came to represent contemporary poetry in the islands, and in part to represent the islands themselves. This was owing to the essential power of his work, and his rootedness in the islands, but it depended too on the way in which the culture gathered itself around him and lifted him onward. This situation

has a parallel in the way in which, as Maggie Fergusson shows in her biography (*George Mackay Brown: The Life*, John Murray, 2006), in the face of many obstacles, Brown's friends and admirers helped him practically to achieve that eminence in the first place (his exceptional gifts themselves were clear). Finlay also relied on a network of supporters: one of many interesting points of comparison, in both biographical and literary and artistic terms, that wait to be explored.

There is of course a great deal more to be said about Ian Hamilton Finlay's early career, and not only as regards Orkney – though it is a central place in his life, as I have tried to show – but about himself and his work in relation to the whole period mentioned previously. As Jessie McGuffie (now Sheeler) told me almost as soon as we met: 'Everything he did, he did because he was an artist.' This clearly makes a study of his life necessarily a study of his art. My interest lies ultimately in trying to understand the circumstances that led to the creation of the garden at Stonypath, and especially the journey made towards it, through the length if not the breadth of his troublesome and inspiring nation, and through the aftermath of its Renaissance, by an extraordinarily precocious and single-minded individual. If it sheds light as well on unexpected areas of some familiar landscapes in Orkney and elsewhere, then so much the better for that.

Orkney, June 2011

Notes

They returned home tired but happy. See <http://www.ubu.com/historical/finlay/finlay10.html>

'"The Horizon of Holland": A Poetic Prelude to Ian Hamilton Finlay's Gardens', will be published in Stephen Bann (Ed), *Interlacing Words and Things: Bridging the Nature-Culture Opposition in Gardens and Landscape* (Dumbarton Oaks/Harvard University Press), to appear 2012

For Mark Scroggins' essay, see <http://jacketmagazine.com/15/finlay-by-scroggins.html>

Access to the letters quoted was provided by the Director of the Pier Arts Centre, Orkney

'A Sense of High North' by Kenneth White: see http://www.hi-arts.co.uk/geopoetics_project.html

The photographs are by myself, taken in Rousay, 2006

Margaret Tait: Film-maker and Poet *Richard Price*

It's a mistake to write a poem that seems more certain
of a policy or a belief or anything than you really are.
Express the doubt too.

from "It's a mistake...", *origins and elements* (1959), p.4

Margaret Tait was a remarkable film-maker whose often short pieces are intense, beautiful works of art. She was born in 1918 and died in 1991. Rightly she is known as one of the UK's finest film directors – known, but not well-known. What even fewer know however is that she wrote short stories and was an accomplished poet – and a provocative one.

My first encounter with her work was in 1993 when her only feature-length film *Blue Black Permanent* was released. I was very taken by *Blue Black Permanent* and very soon after wrote two poems inspired by the film. I am hardly ever moved to poetry by cinema but Tait's detached handling of an intimate family mystery and her exceptional attention to natural detail (in this case, the sea edge) were catalysts for writing within an area of a particular kind of sound sensitivity, as well as to a certain kind of domestic atmospherics, the protection of being in a good family as a beautiful soap bubble against a hard social world and perhaps a harder natural one.

Much later I learnt about her other films. These include *Portrait of Ga* (1952), a quietly loving tribute to her mother; *Colour Poems* (1974) which use the animation technique of direct painting onto the film stock; *Tailpiece* (1976) a meditation on an abandoned house; and *Hugh MacDiarmid, A Portrait* (1964), a cleverly indirect film about one of the giants of modern Scottish literature.

Although Hugh MacDiarmid published her work in *Voice of Scotland* in the 1950s, she herself published several poetry books in the late 50s and early 60s, Antonia Fraser included her poetry in *Scottish Love Poems* (1975) and Ali Smith championed Tait's poetry in an essay in Peter Todd and Benjamin Cook's *Subjects and Sequences: A Margaret Tait Reader* (Lux, 2004) I'm afraid Tait's significance as a poet escaped my attention until 2009. Talking with others I find I'm not alone. By chance it was a routine enquiry at my place of work that led me to look more closely at what I now think of as a fascinating figure in modern Scottish poetry, and a truly great film-maker.

Tait's short story collections are *The Grassy Stories* and *Lane Furniture*, both published in 1959. There is much to say about these two books but now is the time: it's the poetry I'm concerned with here. Together with the stories, the poems appeared within a relatively short period of literary activity. Tait published three collections: *origins and elements* (1959), *Subjects & Sequences* (1960) and *The Hen and the Bees: legends and lyrics* (1960).

Once you've read these poems perhaps the first aspect that strikes you is how *fresh* they are, how lithe (though not, I should say, 'primitive'). They are, generally speaking, in a supple free verse. They have clearly learned from the later poems of D. H. Lawrence, the spiky rhythms of opinion in *Pansies* and *Nettles* and, especially, from the poems of the natural world in *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*. Some poems, which are still "free", use a jazz-like rhyme, others yet are more formally rhymed

ballads. Many have an improvisational rhythm and sometimes a sense of testifying urgency. Like a classic artist's sketch they risk as-if immediate witness, declaring themselves as approximating or querying something they can only outline as yet. Paradoxically, the inscribing and making public of such tentativeness does, though, assert a certain confidence and draws attention to itself as art. These poems are laid before you by a reporter from the thinking, feeling emotional front whose quick reactions, the publication of these poems implies, are those you should trust.

This complexity is also signalled by the idiosyncratic bibliographic designation that Tait gives to each of these self-published poetry collections: each is an 'interim edition'. In the book world such an editorial state barely exists. What these collections would normally be called is, simply, *first editions*, but Tait imagines something more intangible and more individual (to my knowledge no other edition was ever published, no 'final report'). Their self-published nature confirms their personalisation-as-testimony and, with the "interim" label, that curious and fascinating zone between the private and the public, a zone within which her films of course live and breathe.

Perhaps there is also something more about that phrase 'interim edition'. Of the many millions of books in the British Library, which must constitute a fair sample, a catalogue search reveals that barely thirty have such a designation; when you look at the kind of publication they are a pattern emerges. They are typically reports, statistical tables, surveys, and planning documents, the genre known in librarianship as 'grey literature'. Seen in that light, Tait's poems appear to be coming from a social policy environment: they are not just poems, they are best-guess ideas, pressing questions; initial data. Incidentally, this intersection of the emotional with the factual is further alluded to by another bibliographic code: the logo Tait uses for all her self-published books is the heartbeat trace of a hospital monitor, a nod to Tait's profession (she was a doctor), and another suggestion that her work will be a detached but earnest investigation into matters of the heart.

The subject range of Tait's poetry is wide and the individual architecture of her poems is nuanced: they have a knowing naivety and play but also a subtle intertextuality, and a kind of scientific distance. Tait has an acute interest in environmental and sexual politics, but occasionally will go straight to very personal topics, such as "Alex" from *Subjects and Sequences*, which appears to be about her life-long partner Alex Pirie ("I think nothing of your thought-out thought, / But value you for thinking it"), or the poem, "Allison" from the same volume, which is addressed to her sister-in-law, her friend and "my sad sweet sister". It's an elegy, Allison having died as she miscarried:

All she did is as alive as all we did.
In her house I feel her presence.
Essential child girl and woman affect us and will do so.
In her little son who cannot remember her I see her.
And in her bigger boy who remembers her well I see her too
And hear her.
Unbroken survival of the germ makes of brief being a heritage.

Textually this poem braids the utterance of profound personal sorrow with a high, epic, register of lament, a prosody that sounds in several sections like Ecclesiastes and Whitman (to me, at least) and meditates on the genetic continuation of her sister-in-law's life-loving qualities. Finally it touchingly incorporates the anonymous medieval poem "Alysoun" to conclude the poem, Tait having told the reader earlier that Allison loved medieval poetry:

And so she laughed her life away,
As she dismissed all weary cares,
And so she sang and so he told us
Happy hopeful genial airs,
Until the day the blood came pouring,
Tore placenta from the wall,
And Death leapt out from his lair in the dark,
Bytuene Mershe and Averil,
And lyht on Alysoun.

There's only a little room in this article to describe other kinds of Tait poem and though I'm loath to force Tait into being 'only' an eco-poet or a feminist poet those aspects of her work are worth registering for those as yet unaware of her work. Here's an extract from "Hooray, Hooray, Hoo Ray Ray Ray," from *origins and elements*. Tait was an Orcadian and this poem was probably prompted by the recently constructed Dounreay nuclear power station in Sutherland, facing the Orkneys. The play in the title is more to do with the rays of radiation than the sonic qualities of the word for the locale, "Dounreay", but the occasion for the poem surely still stands. Actually, the title is more typical of the poetry Tait uses in her films than she collects in her books (her page poems being more conversational; her film poems a kind of sound and concrete poetry). There is a scrupulous attention to the sound of apparently ordinary words in her films (witness if you can the veer Tait manages to elicit from the word "Aha" in the short film of the same name) and a remarkable fecundity of meaning within a minimalist aesthetic. In "Hooray, Hooray, Hoo Ray Ray Ray," the first word, "Hooray" announces the celebration Tait will go on to describe in this poem as the initial response to the wonder energy source of nuclear power as it is first exploited for peaceful means.

But "Hooray" is also a childish word – the sort of word children are taught to use 'spontaneously'. By the end of the poem's title the naivety of the celebration has decomposed into the lower forms of the substance that constitutes it – Hoo and Ray, as, indeed, radioactive material decomposes into lower elements in the periodic table (achieved giving out its dangerous rays of radiation). The chain of accountability in setting up the nuclear power stations – "Hoo" homophonically is "Who?" with a hint of the classroom chill of "Who Killed Cock Robin?", but the title moves on from political cause to leave only the radiation of rays, rays, rays, as bleak 'echo'.

The following *is* an extract, so you have to know that this almost prose tone has emerged from a more generalised discussion in the poem about the strange unexplainability of science's explanations. The poem has opened with the lines "I think the satisfaction / I have got from Science / All my life / Is the realisation / That it's all completely beyond

us". What we as readers find out is that Tait doesn't just mean science is beyond the layperson but it is, at a fundamental level, beyond scientists themselves. No-one can really understand the most fundamental aspects of existence. But here is the more political ending of the poem, transmitted in that beguilingly informal delivery:

It's not so easy to get rid of your empty tin cans and
your waste radiation.
There's something deadly about ragged sardine tins
under all the house windows
And about clots of radiation in the sea.

Maybe we think we can change all the atoms of the
world, including ourselves,
Into radiation, helium and lead,
With a few bright photons
For an aurora at the poles
- We can put the poles in a different place, too, if we
want to -
And maybe we're right
But maybe we are thinking through our hats.

Tait's feminism is noticeable and in UK poetry of this decade I believe extremely unusual. In "The Maiden's future", from *origins and elements*, Tait accuses the Church of sanctifying what she regards as the prostitution of 'respectable' marriage. In another key poem, "Secrets" she takes issue with Lawrence relishing the 'secrecy' of women, a reference to his erotic poem "Figs" in *Birds, Beasts and Flowers!* (1923) in which he asserts:

That's how it should be, the female should always be secret.

[...]

Folded upon itself, and secret unutterable,
And milky-sapped, sap that curdles milk and makes *ricotta*,
Sap that smells strange on your fingers, that even goats won't
taste it;
Folded upon itself, enclosed like any Mohammedan woman,
Its nakedness all within-walls, its flowering forever unseen,
One small way of access only, and this close-curtained from
the light;
Fig, fruit of the female mystery, covert and inward,
Mediterranean fruit, with your covert nakedness,
Where everything happens invisible, flowering and fertilisation,
and fruiting
In the inwardness of your you, that eye will never see
Till it's finished, and you're over-ripe, and you burst to give
up your ghost.

Till the drop of ripeness exudes,
And the year is over. [...]

This is a rich, sensual, strange poem that, as you can see, emphatically confines women to a sexual, sticky, physical, 'natural' (but also alien and exoticised) role, and, above, all, a life of concealment.

As Lawrence works through what figs / women mean to him – the equivalence itself is of course as scandalous as the rhetoric is accomplished – something even more disturbing emerges. For all his dwelling on the fig's qualities – that is, he slows down to marvel - that line "Till it's finished, and you're over-ripe, and you burst to give up your ghost", Lawrence seems also to be imagining women as mere intermediaries fulfilling a suicidal aspect in the cycle of life, with men the unspoken but obvious centre and beneficiaries; women, for Lawrence, seem to be agents of mere delivery. Perhaps this is being unfair to Lawrence, being too literal – Lawrence's psalmist lyric is a shapeshifter that may well resist such reductive analogies and perhaps this sort of improvisation is supposed to open a dialogue, even with a confident assertion, not shut it down – but I find it disquietening all the same.

Later in the poem, the language thins and, as so often in Lawrence's free verse, meanings have slightly shifted or arguments moved on (this is one of the valuable formal characteristics that I think Tait takes from Lawrence and runs with). Here, the ending of the poem, the women are now alive but, as it were, over-ripe:

Ripe figs won't keep, won't keep in any clime.
What then, when women the world over have all bursten into
self-assertion?
And bursten figs won't keep?

Well, there is a question-mark at the end of that poem, as if Lawrence is about to come to his senses himself, but that's hardly enough to turn around the powerful rhetorical assertions he has been making. Tait's answer to this, "Secrets", uses animal analogies rather than botanical. The animal is the dog, clearly an object of disgust for Tait:

Why does Lawrence want us to be secret?
Why does he say that women's secret mustn't be told?
It isn't a secret really, it's only a mock secret
Kept secret on purpose for some purpose of man's,
Kept secret to keep women under covers,
Hidden so that men can hide women away for themselves,
Each what he can get for himself,
Like a dog burying a bone.

Elsewhere for Tait, the dog is a symbol of servility – in another poem she says "I hate dogs. / Disgusting caricatures of human and of animal life, / Neither one thing nor the other, / Pets / Made to function for human diversion – / to divert people. [...] No wonder they give people asthma!". ("Dogs", in *The Hen and the Bees*, p.1) – but in "Secrets" men aren't slaves. Rather, they "invented the idea that woman is sin", they "go to the African tribes and tell them to cover up and consider themselves sinful," and "They hand them hideous calico garments sewn reluctantly by unhappy schoolgirls / And say to put them on and hide themselves." Tait continues: "The Bible says batter the women, / Hide the bones of your

women in a corner of the garden, / "Your" women, / Keep them secret, all
happened up in the idea of sin, / Then you'll be safe, old man."

Well, Tait does not accept Lawrence's 'secrecy' – "Ah yes, Mr. Lawrence, you are wrong" she says in the closing lines of the poem – and in the same way that she offers the possibility of a radically open society in the poem "Locklessness" (in *The Hen and the Bees*, p.5) she looks forward, in the very near future to a world where women, contra Lawrence, do indeed self-affirm: "Because the time of women is at hand / And the good will come of the secret not being secret any more."

"Hooray, Hooray, Hoo Ray Ray Ray," and "Secrets" are explicitly political poems: their subject is clear and, with the exception of "Hooray"'s compressed-meanings title, their delivery relies on the lower frequencies of rhetorical rhythm to maintain that clarity. That rhetoric is of course in part borrowed from preacher-patterning, even when it is anti-religious. In this Tait is not only like the apparently straight-talking, satirical Lawrence of his later poems, of *Pansies* say, but also like the Beats. Lawrence, Tait and the Beats are in these poems 'prophets'.

As far as palpable connection between Tait and the Beats is concerned this is probably more a sign of the times than a real link between contemporaries, though I'd suggest that they are all in Lawrence's debt. While the Scottish poet Helen Adam was literally among the Beats in California at this time, a friend of Robert Duncan, Jack Spicer and Allen Ginsberg, I'm not sure that Tait ever had such a direct connection. True, Edinburgh, where Tait had her home at this time, was one of the first places in which the Beats were published in the UK – Burroughs, Ginsberg, Kerouac, Corso and Gary Snyder appeared in an unnumbered issue of the magazine Edinburgh University magazine *Jabberwock* in 1959 – but Tait's poetry books are collecting poems which, according to dates on them, are clustered round the 1955-58 period and go at least as far back as 1952. One or two of these had already been published by Hugh MacDiarmid in his *Voice of Scotland* magazine, a fact which causes pause for thought when you think of the later polarising furore between MacDiarmid and Ian Hamilton Finlay (Finlay and, by association, the Beats, became trivialised by the grand old man of Scottish letters but this somewhat backfired on MacDiarmid, painting him into a reactionary old guard corner). MacDiarmid's publication of Tait suggests that there was more to it than either subject or formal considerations.

I suppose what is striking about this formal aspect of these discursive, arguing poems is that they are so unlike the films, which are indirect, subtly rhythmic, focussed not on large structures but supposedly incidental ones (the texture of the sea-edge, close-ups of moor grasses being blown by the wind, the legs of men walking in a commemorative march; the tops of walls and the patterning of pavements and roads). I'm afraid I don't know my art-film well enough to give a context for these films, though note here that Tait had studied experimental film in Rome from 1950 to 1952. I do see certain images in later Scottish cinema – Bill Douglas's child immersed in smoke on a bridge, Lynn Ramsay's child playing with the net curtains in a Glasgow tenement – that seem to follow the intensity of Tait's camera. It's actually in fiction I see one affinity with Tait's films – the novels of Neil Gunn, especially those of the 1930s, and particularly those envisaged from a child's point of view: think of the

sensual opening paragraphs of *Morning Tide* (1931) when the young boy Hugh walks gathering sea-weed along the shore. Gunn, from Caithness, was also a lyrical experimental artist whose work, like Tait's, explores childhood and old age together.

Tait's films are characterised by the spare use of spoken or sung words; one characteristic is that though the language use is minimalist it is not usually 'haiku-minimalist' but rather a concentration of word play (not always humorously, if you see what I mean). So far, most of the poems I've discussed aren't really like that but how about this, an extract from "Water", from *origins & elements*:

Hydrogen,
Light and explosive.
And oxygen.
Business-like, useful oxygen,
Combustible,
Ready to combine with anything.
I've always liked oxygen.
Oxygen.
Orkney.
Ozone.
The air we breathe,
Oxyhaemoglobin,
Life-blood

Now this is unlike the overtly political poems: there is microlinguistic attentiveness here. Actually it seems to me this is closer to the animations that Tait made when she painted directly on to the film stock (the forming and re-forming dancing figures in *Jock MacDayen* for example). The word Oxygen, its chemical O, is literally attaching itself to become Orkney and Ozone and even Oxyhaemoglobin, as well as being a lovely testament to the importance of Orkney to Tait. You might think of MacDiarmid's poetry of fact but MacDiarmid tends to pile up science as an aspirational simile for "The Kind of Poetry" he wants: Tait is going in the other direction, trying to find comparisons to comprehend the material facts that science is disclosing. Francis Ponge's lyrical prose-poems come to mind, too, but Tait's line is much shorter, marking the breathing and then moving into the field of the page, playing that little step-down of "Oxygen. Orkney. Ozone." Tait's work really is a breath of fresh air.

A small selection of Margaret Tait's poems was made in the excellent A Margaret Tait Reader, edited by Peter Todd and Benjamin Cook (Lux, 2004), which rightly concentrates on the genius of Tait's films, but the time has come for a generous Selected. In fact, since writing this piece in 2009 – writing up my thoughts about Tait's work after appearing with Lavinia Greenlaw to talk about Tait on Radio 3's The Verb – Carcanet have announced there will be such an edition, edited by Sara Neeley and due to appear in 2012.

About POLYply Kristen Kreider 6.5.11

POLYply is a series of events including poetry readings, performances, film screenings and installations foregrounding cross-genre writing. Each event is organised around a particular theme, with a diverse range of practitioners invited to participate including poets, artists, musicians and architects. The aim of POLYply is to promote dialogue and discussion amongst creative practitioners writing in an expanded field by providing a space for the dissemination of new work within poetic practice.

The POLYply series is run by members of the Poetics Research Group at Royal Holloway (University of London), all of whom teach on the MA in Poetic Practice, and hosted by the Centre for Creative Collaboration on Acton Street in King's Cross.

Q: "Yes, but *what about* POLYply?"

A: Here are a few things about POLYply:

- There is no book about POLYply.
- There is an air of mystery about POLYply.
- POLYply is about my height.
- POLYply is about 5 miles from here.
- Dinner is about POLYply.
- POLYply was up and about while the rest of us still slept.
- There are quite a few POLYply's about these days.
- It's about time we went to POLYply.

POLYply was an adverb in a former life and is about:

ENERGY – VOICINGS – ANIMALANIMAL – PULP – TRANSLATION – SCORE – FEAR - FRANK O'HARA - EMILY DICKINSON - TESTING IN BUILT-UP AREAS.



(so far ...)

POLYply is a story about a circle of latitude crossing Europe, Asia, the Pacific Ocean, North America and the Atlantic Ocean. There was so much of interest along the way! Like that vociferous band of bacteria-strain troubadours singing merry news-speak through a chamber of echoes. Or the foxy young lady with her speaking monkey stalking storks on Chernobyl plains. There was that Bollywood star who, with Carrie in the shower, spiced up the detectives with some lesbian porn. The Scottish bard with his dandelion; Bognor, pho, a beeper & squash; those lips synching stories of home. And what about the dancers, tipping lightly the fantastic, finding solace in a fragment of meatloaf? London burning, water-boarding, planes tracing slow loops across grey skies ... And who could forget Frank? Or find Emily? Who, caught in the explosion of a totalising myth (our Utopic fantasy), walked in the rubble of 'architecture ... architecture'?

(There's an alarm going off somewhere in the building.)



<http://polyply.wordpress.com/>

[LAST EXIT TO KILMACOLM]

PS

a prose supplement

Joanne Tatham
Tom O'Sullivan

Peter McCarey
Alistair Peebles
Richard Price
Kristen Krieder

Almost Free