

A Metre of Life

The Revisionist and the Astropastorals, **Douglas Crase**, Carcanet, 2019, pp.131, £12.99 (paperback)

Night Philosophy, **Fanny Howe**, Divided Publishing, 2020, pp. 144, £10.99 (paperback)

Douglas Crase's poems are objects of profound and gentle beauty, both in their deliciously poised idiom, and in being monuments to the protean moments of a vast genera of life: civic, environmental, economic, stellar. Such monuments as his enable us to better understand how different levels of life and earth interact or displace one another. The incremental movement of the dracaena towards light on the window, the slow growth of timber, swamps and ammo dumps, biphenyls in the blood, the gap between rental leases and the loss of love all figure and by figuring, change one another.

Working in the transcendentalist tradition, Crase's poems are philosophically discursive and aesthetically wrought. Like Williams and other American moderns, the poetry also feels utterly relaxed in its own demotic. I wonder if this might be a consequence of the coincidence of the development of the modern vernacular and a variable poetic metre in much American poetry. In contrast, verse in English often exhibits an ambivalence about the correspondence between poetic form and spoken language, the demotic in UK and Irish poetry developing much later, relatively speaking, within its poetic tradition. One product of this may be that the demotic can seem to operate on a discrete level of language, rather than developing with and through poetic form. When I read a poet like Crase I am astonished by the ease with which demotic language and form coincide to make a poetry as 'natural'-sounding as it is sweepingly declarative.

And this is a book of North America and its power: the land of possibility founded on imperial violence. In a quite miraculous flourish, Crase renders the continent around the letter 'M': a shape of 'Two almost

immediate peaks' is the letter 'M', used to spell both Montauk (Long Island) and Monterey (California), which might be imagined as bookending the width of America. 'M', the emphatically pronounced consonant in the word 'America', brings to mind the 'mamma' sounds humans have in common with the nonhuman. This 'M' murmurs agriculturally through the soil enwoven with Massey-Ferguson fertilizer, 'turning over / A train of little m's behind the plow'. This is the soil of landscapes deriving in name from displaced Native American communities: Menominee, Michilimackinac. Presumably also a pun on the origins of 'verse' (Agamben has linked it to the Latin 'versure', turn of the plough), Crase recognises that the modern pastoral (or 'astropastoral') poet farms the languages of infrastructure and exchange, electric fields and quarks, as much as historic and literary frontiers. In 1987 Crase wrote of the kind of 'civic meter' he seeks to inhabit (Crase has enjoyed a separate career as a speechwriter): 'the meter we hear in the propositions offered by businessmen, politicians, engineers, and all our other alleged or real professionals'. Such a metre in Douglas's delicate application scales up the imaginative, omniscient scope of poetry.

What makes Crase a very modern poet is the amiable provisionality that might recall Elizabeth Bishop, combined with a far-reaching, unanxious propositionality that is very much John Ashbery, a poet who can easily make the 'alleged' collude with the 'real' in cool syntactical strides. Ashbery urged Carcanet to publish Crase in 1981 when *The Revisionist* first appeared in the USA, advice heeded now with the event of this book, his first in the UK. *The Astropastorals* were published in 2017 in a beautiful chapbook by Pressed Wafer, and Carcanet includes both publications here, Crase's only two books of poetry, with an enriching forward by Mark Ford. If all this doesn't already indicate Crase's New York School credentials, he can be found immortalized in James Schuyler's 'Dining out with Doug and Frank', despite being too overrun with his speechwriting work to attend the dinner in question in the events of the poem.

Like Ashbery, Crase is more often self-consciously tuned into the pleated folds of his reasoning than any conclusions they amount to, keeping the latter in view but often suspended indefinitely, or swerving beautifully into bathos. Ashbery has called Crase's writing 'supply argumentative': the syntax sustains such philosophical ambling by the subtle alignment of

lineation and each discursive phrase. Crase is drawn to the word ‘deft’, an accurate word in the context of his work given the skill and rightness the glacially rhythmic syntax finds when these lovely poems are inhabited in the mind. Take, for example:

[...] Still,
To be in is to miss the way the day went
And this is so: the “as ifness” of the world is real,
Productive, wherever it comes from can’t be ignored
Though it may work against the solidest masonry
The oldest of fieldstone farmhouse walls. The manner
Of meaning is its drift from whatever it means with,
The same as a snowdrift elaborates wind
Out of obstacles of wind, being altered daily
To be annually kept true.

(‘Gunpowder Morning in a Gray Room’)

The result is an idiom in whose subtle, tentative drifts one comes to trust and love, the manner of meaning (those ‘ms’ again) a kind of attentive meandering as a means of memorialising the ever-transient qualities of language and place. These poems offer us an invitation to think not on but with and through the rhythms of civic life and of landscape. The result is expansive, rendering a sense of conviction that feels like a holding ambience, what Crase calls ‘a marginal joy / Proceeding as common sense’.

It is high time for *Night Philosophy*, a ‘reader’ of sorts of Fanny Howe’s thinking in prose (novels, teaching notes, diaries, a note on poetic composition) that I read as though it were a single volume of prose poetry and lyric essay. Like Lisa Robertson’s essay, *Thresholds: A Prosody of Citizenship*, used to launch the Dialecty series for Book Works (2018), *Night Philosophy* inaugurates a European publishing imprint with a text (or set of texts) available in the USA for some time already, in this case extracted from earlier publications with Sun & Moon Press, Semiotext(e) and others. (The book jacket is stylishly designed by Salu, whose work on the UK editions of Ben Lerner’s novels readers might recognise.)

Where Crase’s poems find themselves most commonly in New York

and Connecticut, Howe is a laureate of California, its 'lemon-water light', the 'wandering men and women depleted at bus stops' offset by the state's new global economic influence. Like Crase, Howe is also a poet of marginal joys and civic discourse, and the longstanding humanitarian strain in her thinking means she interprets the role of the 'poet' at the most essentially vocational level; indeed, she is a custodian of human life. This manifests especially in *Night Philosophy* as care towards the figure of the 'vulnerable child' and what she calls 'the transcendence of childhood', a state too often curtailed in our world by asylum and child trafficking or stifled by war and genocide. '[T]his book is made from torn parts', says her lyrical introduction, and the bringing together of this particular set of tentative ruminations a subtle suturing.

The feel across the book is a fragmented and unfussy lyric contemplation, discouraging the eye to read for pattern or artifice. Howe writes largely in an intermittently lineated prose line that nonetheless still breaks into an aphoristic cadence: 'The embrace between faraway, freeway, and very near is air, breath, oil, here.' These prose vignettes are used to recount religious experience, to tell stories, draw landscapes, offer proverbial phrases, philosophical or spiritual propositions. Howe's conversion to Catholicism is well-known and her identification with the work of Thomas Aquinas explicit in this work, but she also draws from Hindu, Muslim and Mystical traditions to render a reflective forum which is capacious, inviting, open to the world, open to bewilderment: 'it doesn't matter whether you are inside or outside the faith-field, because there is no inside or outside under any discriminating sky'. This passage reads as an expansive modulation of Blake's *Jerusalem* ('There is an Outside spread Without, & an Outside spread Within / Beyond the Outline of Identity both ways, which meet in One'). In its searching embrace of non-authoritative or ambivalent forms of knowledge, Howe's is perhaps the most impartial articulation of address I have encountered in post-Romantic lyric. As she writes in (and of) 'Bewilderment':

One definition of lyric might be that it is a method of searching for something that can't be found. It is an air that blows and buoys and settles. It says, 'Not this, not this,' instead of, 'I have it.'

We are reminded that the absence inherent to lyric is underpinned by faith.

Peter Riley has spoken of the essential difference between prose and poetry: when you encounter a line of prose you expect it will tell you something; a line of poetry might, but that need not be its first priority. There is something acutely transformative in Howe's reproduction of the 'Declaration of the Rights of the Child' (adopted by the UN in 1959), unchanged, it seems, except from the modification of the title by Howe: 'The Right of the Child (UN) Known Only by Adults'. In *Night Philosophy*, the act of telling a truth often taken for granted by adults and kept out of reach from children has a vital, life-saving quality, along with its counterpart, storytelling. The greater context of poetry, the more seductively oblique and erring qualities of this book, brings into relief the language that requires mere telling and retelling. Such a speech act is a powerful act of speaking for, in a book that wants to stand 'with' its marginalised, its poor. 'The Poor, by the way, means the earth and all the creatures that live upon it, the always-with-us.' Readers will be consoled to walk with Howe's transcendent prose line, a fitting counterpart for Crase's expansive rhythm.