

Calvalcanti by Peter Hughes (Carcenet Press): Medieval on a scooter



Ian Brinton

In a letter from late 1831 to Julius Charles Hare of the Philological Museum William Wordsworth made a comment concerning his experiments in translation:

Having been displeased, in modern translations, with the additions of incongruous matter, I began to translate with a resolve to keep clear of that fault, by adding nothing; but I became convinced that a spirited translation can scarcely be accomplished in the English language without admitting a principle of compensation.

The translation work that Wordsworth was engaged with was from Virgil's *Aeneid* and one poet laureate was commenting upon another when C. Day Lewis referred to this passage in his 1969 Jackson Knight Memorial Lecture on 'Translating Poetry':

By this principle we presumably mean putting things in which are not there, to compensate for leaving things out which cannot be adequately rendered.

Day Lewis went on to suggest that much greater liberties can justifiably be taken with lyric verse than with narrative or didactic and that very word *liberties* possesses a hint of danger, revolution, of turning a world upside down: taking a liberty! In translating Cavalcanti's 'Canzone' (*Donna mi priegha*) Ezra Pound had suggested that the poem, "may have appeared about as soothing to the Florentine of A.D. 1290 as conversation about Tom Paine, Marx, Lenin and Bucharin would to-day in a Methodist bankers' board meeting in Memphis, Tenn." Pound showed his translation of 'Canzone' to Ford Madox Ford and twenty-six years later, in the Preface to his own collected poems, Ford suggested that aureate diction was a civic menace because the "business of poetry is not sentimentalism so much as the putting of certain realities in certain aspects." He went on to say that poetry like everything else, in order to be valid and valuable, must reflect the circumstances and psychology of its own day: "Otherwise it can be nothing but a pastiche."

Cavalcanty by Peter Hughes arrives with no sentimentalism and its up-to-date lack of compromise is announced on the cover of the Carcanet publication as we are confronted by a late-Medieval figure on a scooter with bubble-gum bursting from his mouth. This Cavalcanti is presented to us as a lover who recognises the age in which he lives and we see the sonnet '*Un amaroso sguardo spiritale*' as a love poem placed firmly in an estuary suburban twilight:

I'm buoyed by her enthusiastic glance
 in my direction that was actually
 aimed at something random far behind me
 so I'm surging towards nothing once again
 tail wagging lips whistling throwing caution
 & perspective to the customary
 winds of change which flick grit & hopelessness
 into my own impercipient eyes
 while carrying any local music
 away from zones of habitation
 far out over these seductive marshes
 where the lights of doggers & illusions
 mingle with the mist & strange reflections
 will guide me down the tracks to closing time

The perky response to thinking that he is being given the eye by a girl is caught with the pun on “buoyed” but the moment of inflated ego is punctured by the realisation that she is actually looking at something/someone far behind him. The image of a dog, eagerly wanting its master, tail wagging and attendant upon the whistle, moves bleakly to the hopeless isolation of furtive sexual encounters, or illusions of them, mingling with the marsh mists. The poet’s steps take the tracks back to the pub for last orders and the “closing time” rings an echo of Eliot’s *The Waste Land* where the landlord calls out “HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME”.

These translations would I think stop that Methodist Banker’s Board Meeting in its tracks but they would most certainly get Ford’s immediate approval.

Jonathan Williams, “our Johnny Appleseed”

re. *The Lord of Orchards*, edited by Jeffery Beam and Richard Owens, Prospecta Press, Sept. 2017



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On Friday 14th March 2008 Michael Rumaker, former Black Mountain College student, wrote to Jonathan Williams. Referring to him as a “fellow Piscean”, poet, dreamer and visionary, Rumaker put on record his respect for the “old fellow Black Mountaineer – old Black Mountain ear –” who had spent a lifetime “keeping the word alive and sprightly in all its authentic nooks and crannies, in all the equally authentic overlooked spirits hidden in plain sight throughout the piedmont and hills of North Carolina, throughout the Southland and wherever your feet and that old station wagon took you roaming and looking.”

The Lord of Orchards is a new collection of essays and reminiscences, a reflective glance over some four-hundred and fifty pages, examining the enormous legacy left by Jonathan Williams’s work. Edited with sensitive care and an accurate eye by Jeffery Beam and Richard Owens *The Lord of Orchards* is a work of fidelity and loyalty to the poet’s life-work as a writer, a photographer and the founder of Jargon Press. It points us in the direction of the unique value of the man whose Stuttgart edition of the first *Maximus* poems was published as Jargon 7 in 1953 and whose conversations with Basil Bunting (*Descant on Rawthey’s Madrigal*) appeared from

Gnomon Press fifteen years later. It reveals to us what Thomas Meyer wrote for *Jacket 38* in 2009 about Williams's "panoply of detail and experience":

His attention when it focuses centers. There is no background, foreground, or middleground. There is only what is there – a kind of "in your face" phenomenology.

Meyer had edited a *Selected Essays* of Jonathan Williams for North Point Press in 1982 and that contained the 1980 / 1981 piece written between Highlands in North Carolina and Dentdale in Cumbria, illustrating the trans-Atlantic sense of the writer being at home in two very different environments, 'The Camera Non-Obscura':

Poets and photographers do not necessarily believe in public audiences or constituencies. They believe in *persons*, with affection for what they see and hear. They believe in that despised, un-contemporary emotion: *tenderness*.

The focussed attention of Williams's eye is caught, still, for the moment:

From this desk in the library at Corn Close I regularly look out across the valley of the river Dee to a cluster of Scotch pines in a field of grass. The light in Dentdale, Cumbria, is unusually dim and the pines are inconspicuous and unremarkable. But, let the late sun shine its rays up the dale – particularly in a month like October – and the trees become transfigured, with the forms of the foliage and the trunks and those of the elongated shadows endlessly fascinating to the eye. The air is as cool and palpable as amber. Everything is seen 'in a new light'.

In *The Lord of Orchards* Anne Midgette's recollection is titled 'On With It' and she refers to the manner in which Williams collected things in the way that he also collected words:

He approached the world with the attitude that there were many great things in it that not enough people knew about,

and set about finding them with a tenacity that earned him the epithet, from Hugh Kenner, “the truffle hound of poetry.”

She suggests that some of his poems have the quality of “a beach found pebble, smooth and solid and reassuring in the palm of one’s hand” and goes on to illustrate this by quoting ‘At Brigflatts Burial Ground’ written by Williams after Basil Bunting’s death and then published in *Dementations on Shank’s Mare*, Truck Press 1988:

Dear Basil,
 Eighteen months after you left us,
 poetry (that abused & discredited substance;
 that refuge of untalented snobs, yobs, and bores)
 sinks nearer the bottom of the whirling world.

For the rest, you there in the earth
 hear the crunch of small bones
 as owl and mouse, priest and weasel,
 stone and cardoon, oceans and gentlemen
 get on with it...

The subtitle for the small Truck Press publication was *Being ‘Meta-Fours in Plus-Fours’ and a Few ‘Foundlings’ Collected From Rambles (And Drives) In Herefordshire, Gwent, Powys, Avon, Dorset, Gloucestershire, Cumbria and North Yorkshire By J. Williams, Gent.* It has the Eighteenth-century ring of a travel guide and contains, mostly (!), the poet’s fascination with his self-styled “dotty invention, the meta-four” the only guiding principle of which is that each line must contain four words. Williams’s humour is clear for all to see on the opening page, ‘A NOTE’:

The result (when it works) turns sense into nonsense and gets the mind so off-stride that you don’t know whether you’re coming or going. And you don’t distinguish ‘prose’ from ‘poetry’.

The quietly moving words about Bunting’s grave at Brigflatts is an exception to the four-word line and was written as if to challenge those “untalented snobs, yobs, and bores” who might be officers of

the Poetry Police.

David Annwn's contribution to this glorious festschrift, an essay titled 'Mustard & Evening Primrose – The Astringent Extravagance of Jonathan Williams' Metafours', points us to Gustaf Sobin's work and his comments upon 'Luminous Debris'. Williams's metafours remind Annwn of Sobin's reference to Olson:

Or Olson's interpretation of the poem as a 'high energy construct'...These indeed are archaic canons...Within that vision, the world...erupts continuously out of an irrepressible point of origin. An iridescent chaos, as Cézanne once put it...

In the 1971 Cape Goliard Press selection of Williams's poems he writes a final funerary ode to Olson which opens with the clarity of recall:

Charles Olson made a vigorous effort long ago to teach me two things. One, that *poetry is a process, not a memoir*. Two, that there are many other uses for words than to bring the private soul to the public wailing wall.

The Lord of Orchards is divided into four different sections, 'Remembering', 'Responding', 'Reviewing' and 'Recollecting' echoing the way in which *Paideuma* was divided into 'Dove Sta Memora', 'The Periplus', 'The Gallery', 'The Explicator'. There is something appropriate about this since not only was Hugh Kenner a Senior Editor of the *American Journal* which was devoted to Ezra Pound Scholarship but also in that individual issues were devoted to major literary figures such as George Oppen and Louis Zukofsky. In the 1980 issue, (Volume 9, Number 1) which celebrated Basil Bunting's eightieth birthday Jonathan Williams provided a set of photographs of the river at Brigflatts, the Rawthey, and wrote an uncompromising opening paragraph to introduce his contribution of eighty short questions he wanted to put to the poet:

When a man reaches fourscore, it is assumed that he has outlived Wisdom; or is given to the curse of Old-Fartism; or has forgotten most of what he remembers. Since Basil

Bunting does not set up as a sage and since he has made himself very clear on the subject of Literary Criticism (i.e., there is no bloody excuse for the stuff), what is one to do with him on the page, with the subject here at Corn Close for a visit and more or less obliged to follow my literary whims?

With typical humour he titled this contribution 'Eighty of the Best'! Despite quoting Bunting's view of literary criticism I think that Williams would have been very pleased with the seventeen contributions to the 'Responding' section of this new book.

The republication of Guy Davenport's essay, which had been originally used as an introduction to *An Ear in Bartram's Tree*, is a delight which takes us close to the central issues in Williams's poetry:

Jonathan Williams learned learned how to write a poem as trim and economical as a tree. And like a tree his poems have roots, exist against a background, and convert light into energy. And take their shape not only from inner design but also from the weather and their circumjacent.

Having been taught by Charles Olson at Black Mountain Williams would have appreciated the accuracy of that thought. After all it was Olson who wrote 'These Days' in January 1950:

whatever you have to say, leave
the roots on, let them
dangle

And the dirt

Just to make clear
where they come from

Ross Hair's contribution to the 'Responding' section of the book looks closely at Williams in relation to both Black Mountain and Olson, highlighting Williams's recognition of the energetic and infectious nature of the man:

The most persuasive teacher I ever had was Olson...I really didn't have knowledge of or interest in the Carlos Williams / Pound line of descent. Olson opened that up for me. I found him an extremely enkindling sort of man, marvellously quick and responsive. You got a lot from him at all times.

Hair's article is no simple rewriting of literary history and he is scrupulous in his attention to the details of the way in which Jonathan Williams moved forward to discover his own voice. He quotes from Martin Duberman's *Black Mountain, An Exploration in Community*, in which in 1968 Williams points to the need to move away from Olson's influence:

The only problem was, Olson is almost enough to wipe you out...It took me a long time to get out from under Leviathan J. Olson. Of course some poets said that I would be stuck there. They didn't like him. Zukofsky thought I was being victimized. Rexroth thought so. Dahlberg still thinks so. He asks baleful questions like "Why do you imitate Olson? and Pound?" [Dahlberg has elsewhere referred to Olson as the Stuffed Cyclops of Gloucester.] / don't think I do, but I would say it took me ten years to achieve whatever the thing is they call "my own voice".

Part of that discovery can perhaps be traced back to the summer of 1961 when Williams and Ronald Johnson hiked the Appalachian Trail from Springer Mountain, Georgia, to the Hudson River in New York, some 1447 miles. Williams described the trek as the "perfect training for poets: learning to attend the names of birds and plants and stars and trees and stones." This is perhaps one of the connections between Williams and Bunting who wrote to Peter Makin in 1984 that "Suckling poets should be fed on Darwin till they are filled with the elegance of things seen or heard or touched." In an unpublished letter from Bunting the poet suggests that the reader of a poem should "let the words do whatever they can with you":

Poems are written because men are interested in putting words together, or rather in putting the sounds of words together, in such a way as to make a pattern of sound that

pleases him and might please other people.

Guy Davenport suggests that the total involvement Jonathan Williams had with the world of poetry made him “an ambassador for an enterprise that has neither center nor hierarchy but whose credentials are ancient and respected.” His poetry has the “weightlessness” of “thistledown and like the thistle it bites”:

Its coherence is that of clockwork, at once obvious and admirable. Its beauty is that of the times: harsh, elegant, loud, sweet, abrupt all together. The poet in our time does what poets have always done, given a tongue to dumbness, celebrated wonderments, complained of the government, told tales, found sense where none was to be perceived, found nonsense where we thought there was sense; in short, made a world for the mind (and occasionally the body too) to inhabit.

Thomas Meyer’s elegy in forty-eight threnodic pulses, ‘KINTSUGI’, takes its title from the Japanese practice of repairing ceramics with gold-laced lacquer to illuminate the breakage. In his brief introduction to this moving response to the dying of Jonathan Williams, Robert Kelly writes about sorrow being the true ground of language. As Geoffrey Ward put it in an article for *Archeus* (a London based magazine edited by D.S. Marriott in 1989):

Language is doomed to unpunctuality, words chasing, describing, shadowing a reality they can do anything but actually be.

As Kelly puts it:

It is the reference that language, in its essence and by its presumed first purpose, *makes to what is not here*. Every object or relationship or feeling, ill-roused from its sleep by words, soon slips back into lostness, pastness, leaving the same sort of aftertaste that music does.

The words that give presence to the “lostness”, the “pastness” are placed on the page by Meyer as the hardest and last things to do:

To pick up your glasses and know
you will never look through them again.

The co-editor of *The Lord of Orchards* is Richard Owens and in a telephone interview he had with Williams on a Friday afternoon, June 1st 2007, he asked the poet about his current writing. The reply gives us a picture of a man whose poetry is not connected to any world of literary formality but whose eye is upon the *trouvailles*, those moments perceived throughout the journey:

I do what I always do. Sit down and put words on pages and scratch around a little...I never have any agenda. That allows me space to do this and do that and not do *this*. I'm not very inclined to worry very much about theory and all that. But something goes on in some sense.

In that ‘FINAL FUNERARY ODE FOR CHARLES OLSON’ the humour and disdain with which Jonathan Williams treated the memoirist’s world of poetry, the pompous accumulation of literary artefacts, is sheer delight:

One knows ladies, librarians, and Hierophants of the Ego-Trip who still have pieces of the piano bench destroyed by Thomas Wolfe; the carpet be-vomited by Dylan Thomas; the glass dropped by Ferlighetti and now preserved as a mobile of slivers and silver rods; the famous Vaseline jar of A. Ginsberg; and, last but not least, the last faeces of Walt Whitman preserved in a case in the Camden Museum. At best they want the poet blind drunk, institutionalized, or suicided. *Time* has a fine list of such players.

The glasses referred to by the grieving long-term partner Thomas Meyer are not such objects and instead they are a moving reference to the windows through which the poet could see.

Michael Rumaker believed that Jonathan Williams did not read that last letter of 14th March but Tom Meyer had carried it to

the hospital and had read it to the dying Williams. In an email sent to me by Rumaker on 27th March 2008 he said “I didn’t realize that it would turn out to be a farewell letter – Jonathan always had such a tenacity and resilience, a toughness, really, it was impossible to believe that he wouldn’t pull through this time. But nothing is guaranteed.”