

Tap dancing with Bigmans (Grand Iota Press)



Ian Brinton

When Grand IOTA publishing was launched in May 2019 its outright intention was to present ‘exciting and innovative new work by a range of authors’ and its bold presentation echoed the comments made by Ken Edwards in an interview with Wolfgang Gortschacher which was published by *Poetry Salzburg* twenty-one years ago. Referring to the creation of Reality Street Editions Ken Edwards had been asked about whether small-press publications suffered from a fear of becoming mainstream and a part of Britain’s consumer-society. His answer was uncompromisingly clear and the clarity of the response could stand today as a clear endorsement of the immensely important work done by Grand IOTA:

I want this work to be mainstream. I am not interested in the idea of an alternative act simply as an alternative. I do not want to be the alternative. I want good exciting work to be mainstream. It ought to be.

Grand IOTA is an imprint of Reality Street and it is run by a close partnership of Ken Edwards and Brian Marley both of whom are important novelists. At the time of writing this article there have

been eleven books of novels, memoirs and short fiction by Barbara Guest, Fanny Howe, Askold Melnyzuk, Toby Olson, James Russell, Alan Singer, Philip Terry and, needless to add, by Edwards and Marley themselves. The Gortschacher interview was based upon the world of the magazine *Alembic* and the way it progressed into the poetry press Reality Street that Edwards initially ran alongside Wendy Mulford before taking the baton forward alone. In referring to the setting up of the magazine *Reality Studios* Edwards was to comment upon the importance of movement and how his focus on being a co-editor of *Alembic* had raced forward towards his becoming the editor of the new magazine. What excited him was the idea of speed, 'getting the idea for something and publishing it almost immediately'. The present initiative of Grand IOTA relies upon the closeness of the partnership between Edwards and Marley and the rigorous speed with which they work. It was Marley who came up with the name for the press and as Edwards now puts it to me in an email:

...we discussed it and we continue to discuss everything (often daily emails interspersed with actual meetings, virus permitting.) He does most of the close editing; I do most of the design and typesetting, accounting and publicity.

Perhaps what strikes home most importantly is that they do not publish anything to which they are not both totally committed.

In 2019 the show hit the road with the publication of Marley's extraordinary *Apropos Jimmy Inkling* which J.G. Ballard had allegedly described as 'a wild, lysergic riff on that hoary staple, the courtroom drama'. When Samuel Johnson cast scorn upon Mrs Montague's writing about Shakespeare he had suggested that his reluctance to read it all was based upon the idea that 'when I take up the end of a web, and find it packthread, I do not expect, by looking further, to find embroidery'. Nothing could be further from the truth when one looks at the opening of Marley's novel:

In the rotten heart of the criminal underworld, hidden from the prying eyes and ears of various law enforcement agencies, Jimmy Inkling is king. The man to go to if you want something done. The fixer's fixer.

Held as if by the piercing glance of an ancient mariner the reader is caught and as Muriel Spark allegedly put it 'I kept on reading because I couldn't believe the author would manage to keep up this farrago of myth and questionable facts to the very end.' He did! He does! And the compelling world of Grand IOTA fiction was launched.

The compelling narrative that must be read is the book that one cannot put down until finished, the fiction or memoir that draws one back to re-read, spellbound. This is most certainly true of Philip Terry's *Bone*, his reconstruction of the incarceration of the distinguished linguist Dr Edith Bone who was arrested in Hungary in 1949 accused of being a British agent. In the Afterword Terry wrote for his powerful narrative he tells us that though Dr Bone was imprisoned in the most terrible conditions she refused to sign a false confession 'and kept herself sane by inventing numerous techniques, from reciting and translating poetry, to making inventories of the languages she knew, to going on imaginary walks.' Although first drafting it in the 1990s Terry had abandoned the story 'as I felt I couldn't find the right form in which to tell it'. As a poet he had always wanted to find the appropriate linguistic form which matched the subject matter of the world he was writing about and we may almost hear an echo of Charles Olson's letter from June 1950 to the young Robert Creeley in which he had shouted 'FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT'. It was only when he was researching for his edition of *The Penguin Book of Oulipo* that Terry came across the method of constraint that could render an appropriate approximation to what may have been going on in the mind of Dr Bone:

I set about rewriting the book without descenders in a whirl of enthusiasm, which I hadn't known for years, in early 2019, and completed a first draft in just over 53 days. Weirdly, the final revisions to the book were completed under the UK Covid-19 lockdown, in spring 2020, a difficult and painful period for the whole country, but during which many people found the enforced solitude led to moments of personal creativity and breakthrough, an experience which is strangely echoed in the story adapted here.

The resulting volume from Grand IOTA which appeared earlier this year is unforgettable as it opens with a vivid reminder of the nightmare world which Kafka had made so distinct over a hundred years before in his writing of *The Trial*. Kafka's novel had opened with someone telling lies about Joseph K., 'for without having done anything wrong he was arrested one fine morning.' Terry's *Bone* catches us immediately with the vivid nature of a present tense which cannot be ignored:

I don't know what I'm here for, nor how I arrived. In a vehicle of some sort, I think, a van no doubt.

In this terrifyingly convincing account of imprisonment Philip Terry's early nod in that direction of Kafka becomes itself merged with echoes of both Paul Auster and Samuel Beckett as the imprisoned Dr Bone refers to the confusion of language that had resulted from the chaotic destruction of the Tower of Babel:

Ever since Babel we have had access to no more than inexact information. And even before that it can't have been much different. If the architect had understood the fall-out, he wouldn't have continued with the tower. But he didn't know what the result would be. Therefore his information must have been limited. Forever no more than limited.

The telling of a tale is central to survival and towards the novel's end Dr Bone admits to herself and to us that 'it's difficult to make a distinction between what's true and what isn't in here. In the dark. The silence.' I am tempted to recall what John Ruskin wrote about the autobiographies of great nations being written in three manuscripts, a book of deeds, of words and of art:

Not one of these books can be understood unless we read the two others, but of the three the only trustworthy one is the last.

In the darkness and silence of her seven years of solitary isolation Dr Bone tells us that after a while 'one starts to tell oneself a tale, so as to maintain one's feet on terra firma, so as to make sure the

mind's active' and then 'one starts to embellish matters a little' and 'before one knows it the whole business is out of hand.' The Ancient Mariner's tale must be told and the listener cannot choose but hear. Once one has read the opening sentence of *Bone* one has no choice but to read on.

The novel is based upon Anthony Storr's *Solitude* (1988) and it occupies an interesting position in relation to Philip Terry's interpretative translation of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* which was published by Carcanet in 2018 under the title *Dictator*. The comments Terry made about his reconstruction of the epic poem from ancient Mesopotamia make an intriguing background to the language of *Bone* which uses a modified version of the Oulipian "prisoner's constraint" in which letters with descenders (g.j.p.q.y.) may not be used.

Firstly, it is quite possible to see the fragmentary nature of Gilgamesh as an integral and fascinating part of its material (and arguably symbolic) existence – one which, as the easily damaged clay tablets continue to be damaged in regional conflicts today, links the history of this ancient text to the history of the present, the dislocations of the text finding their counterpart in our own dislocated times. This was brought home to me in 2017 when I was involved with 'Stories in Transit' working with refugees in Palermo on an adaptation of *Gilgamesh*, combining acting and puppets and animation, where many of the scenes, in particular the crossing of the sea of death, found resonance with the young participants' own experiences.

Terry wonders what the register of Gilgamesh might have been/be. '...there is, given the nature of its content (often violent, mocking and sexually explicit), no reason to assume that it should be translated into the elevated language that is appropriate, say, for Virgilian epic, and nothing to say that it shouldn't be translated into an idiomatic language closer to that of, say, François Villon. We can get some inkling of what this line of thinking might begin to look like when applied to Gilgamesh, from the little-known fragments completed by Charles Olson [early 1950], which he calls 'Bigmans', which are both idiomatic and pay homage to the fragmentary nature

of the epic by maintaining gaps...’ Frances Boldereff had written to Olson about ‘Bigmans’ in May 1950:

Bigmans is the real thing – Have you ever heard one of the tap dancers when the orchestra stops playing and the rhythm is so hot and so sure that every human being who hears feels he is tap dancing – that is *Bigmans*.

As one arrives at the last pages of *Bone* the tapping goes on:

One must hand oneself over to the silence. To the dark. I do the best to make it the same as that with which I started. But I can’t be sure. A lot has kicked off since then and remembrances aren’t what I’d call reliable. If I’d have written it all down from the start, I could have flicked back over the book to check. But I haven’t. Can’t. Here then.

Or, as the Ancient Mariner might have said, ‘Hear then.’

*

After the publication of Brian Marley’s *Apropos Jimmy Inkling* and Ken Edwards’s *Wild Metrics* things moved quickly forward. They solicited advance subscriptions, following the model Edwards had used for many years with Reality Studios and there was a good deal of interest in the whole project. Edwards contacted the American poet and novelist Fanny Howe who offered *Bronte Wilde*, her novel which had originally been published in 1976 and which had now been substantially revised. In 2020 Grand IOTA published the first edition of this new text and one can recognise immediately what it was that had so attracted Robert Creeley to Howe’s work:

I have not the least doubt that her work is parallel to Paul Auster’s...or any other writer thus whose books are not simply products for the market – albeit the work can reach a very large number of potential readers indeed. In Fanny’s case these will range from contemporary fellow writers questioning ways and means in their art and all who find their enterprise of interest, to those who feel themselves

confronted with deeply ingrained questions of religion, person, society, gender, politics, which almost anyone alive at this moment is trying to answer.

The opening paragraph of *Bronte Wilde* possesses an immediacy that almost reminds one of a novel by William Faulkner:

When I was two years old a nun named John brought me across the Atlantic Ocean to Boston. It was a time when children were casually transferred from one person to the next. So I arrived in America as a ward of Catholic charity, and was soon after adopted by the Casements. They were affluent, middle-aged, childless; and affectionate without making physical contact. Both were practicing psychiatrists. Alice worked with disturbed adolescents and Henry worked with disturbed adults.

Just as we are halted for a moment by the name of the Catholic nun (a surname not a man's fore-name) and by the use of the phrase 'casually transferred' in respect of vulnerable children, the narrator's voice soon makes us aware of ideas connected to the masking of truths:

It's odd, when I think of it, how from the age of ten, a person receives no physical love. Pre-adolescence is a dry area: a desert of sharp shadows, bright light, trees as old as Methuselah, parched streams.

Henry Casement's mother is called Baba and her advice to the adolescent Mary is centred around deceit as she tells the young girl 'you must not increase the expression of foreign intelligence, an absence of style, by letting your face reveal everything.' In her sixteenth summer Mary has been deposited with Alice's oldest friend Lotte Lett in Cape Cod while Alice and Henry go off to attend a conference. As it happens both Alice and Henry are killed in a train crash and we are presented with Lotte's reaction to the disaster that will leave Mary marooned in isolation:

she was, of course, stunned by the news, and hiding her grief under a mask of false resignation didn't help. We couldn't communicate our shock and sorrow to each other at all.

Mary is now informed that she had never been included in Alice and Henry's will and that she has not even been invited to the Memorial Service given for them:

I realized nobody on earth loved me. Therefore I did not exist.

The lost girl becomes 'A speck of dust afloat in a world without names' and I am reminded of the Archive of Recorded Poetry and Literature at the Library of Congress where one can hear Fanny Howe talking about how the poems of John Wieners offer a means by which the poet rescues himself:

The poems relieve his anguish as they offer rhythm in the ritual of writing that echoes a lyrical way of thinking. His lines carry contradictions and loops, which he lets stand. The poem is the answer to the question it asks, but has no resting place. The poem is homeless.

As Mary comes to terms with her isolation and prepares to run away from Cape Cod she turns her face to the wind, invents a new name for herself and with that self-annihilating act 'I birthed myself alone and again. With this act I joined my generation.'

As the Marley-Edwards partnership progresses with speed and determination it seems inevitable that they should seek out another American fiction from the 1970s, Barbara Guest's *Seeking Air*. In this new edition of the novel the opening statement possesses a similar effect of drawing the reader in:

I began to know you somewhat when you introduced me to your friends. That is, I began to see you outside myself.

When Rachel Blau DuPlessis wrote the Afterword to this new publication from the Grand IOTA team she noted that much of

the story had been told 'in mental interiors, exterior settings, acts of staging settings, exploring certain surrounds in imagination, moving far afield.' Yet again we are held spellbound by the storyteller just as we had been by each of the tales in Toby Olson's collection *Journeys on a Dime*, another of this year's magnetic publications. When I wrote the Preface to that collection of twenty-four stories I said that Olson was a man whose work became an imaginative symbolic act in which the telling of stories becomes the quintessential form in which reality can present itself to the human mind. Perhaps that reality can be seen and felt to an explosive end in Brian Marley's 'Running Through the City' from his 2020 collection *The Shenanigans*:

I had been chosen to run through the city with a flaming torch in the dead of night. A drab, post-industrial city. Winter solstice: the longest night. Beyond the confines of the town hall square a strict curfew had been imposed. Every light citywide had been doused: domestic lighting, shop window displays, street-lamps, billboards – absolutely everything. Even traffic lights and the emergency exit signs in public buildings.

With more and more fictions lined up for the Grand IOTA juggernaut I must end on another moment from another Olson:

learn of him, o my delta, who was willing to tell his story, who understood that to spell out is not at all to end, that to tell is only to begin to unravel what no man can complete, that one tale no matter how severely it is told depends on tales once told and tales to be told when his is added to the changeful narrative...

(‘Bigmans II’)

Play Book by Maurice Scully

Coracle, 2019



Ian Brinton

The details of thirty-five poems, the titles of which all begin with the letter P, 'land on the open / surface of your / dark one leaf' and the two short pieces of poetry which seem to imitate the visual qualities of prose form the bookends of the 'Play Book Pieces' and are both 'Path' and 'Pith': journey and substance. From the moment that a reader enters the 'Pool' he/she is haunted by voices which range from William Wordsworth to Wallace Stevens, 'a solitary reaper' to 'a guy with a guitar', whilst not far away is the 'rooky / wood' which was the destination of the murderers in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. There is a trickle of details which weaves its way through this intriguing sequence of literary constructs and becomes

That steady flow of letters &
packages through your letterbox
from all over the world to
wherever in the world you were
just then, stamps, handwriting...
handwriting? – how past tense is that! –
& carried far in long, slow-motion
conversations across a (then) much
much larger world.

Reading this playful haunting of sequences I am reminded of the *Journals* written by the English poet R.F. Langley, admirer of the work of both Olson and Prynne. In an entry for October 2002 Langley brought his focus to bear on a nameless insect which appeared to have the general shape of an aphid:

It catches my attention because it moves. When it arrives at a moss tuft it struggles over it, or goes round. But it keeps on going in the same direction along the wall.

Langley wondered about the creature's destination and how much there may or may not have been to understand:

Is this taking place in a sort of sub-zone, where there is nothing to know about function, purpose, the end of journeying, the getting of food, warmth, the arrival at a crevice to have a home in?

(Journals, Shearsman Books, 2006)

Is it indeed a journey with no intention, he wonders. As Maurice Scully's 'Pulse' tells us 'this is a moment this is / another moment' and in the 'Pool' the Here and the Now 'sit still'. The energy which threads its way through these pieces is a part of Scully's vision and the peeling off of the outer skin of experience moves from storage to access; the intensity of a picture in 'Chink' (*Golden Handcuffs Review*, Number 30) can become 'translatable' as poetry. 'Pith' is the last poem indexed as 'Pieces' and it presents the reader with the picture of a dog occupied in nosing a ball towards the edge of a pier and retrieving it before it tumbles over into the water. The dog seems to enjoy the game of pushing the ball and just rescuing it at the last moment before then deliberately allowing it to go over the edge and jumping in afterwards to retrieve it:

There are laws & there are accidents,
one more powerful than the other, & there may be general laws of accident-prediction (what in this context does *accident* mean?), so that each drop falling over the history of life laughs as it lands to break on water, dog, ball, stone, interpretation...For whom then is the record made?

Well, the concluding piece, 'Poetry', offers us quotations from a letter written by Wordsworth in 1811 in which he declined to agree to versify the fairy-tale of *Beauty & the Beast* on account of there being something 'disgusting in the notion of a human Being consenting to Mate with a Beast, however amiable his qualities of heart'. Scully follows this quotation with a direct statement about Wordsworth's 1805 poem 'The Solitary Weeper':

The reaper is female, and alone, and singing in a language foreign to the listener.

He then follows that by saying 'Frankenstein appears in 1818' and 'At the symbolic intersection of Art, all art, crashes & flashes, a *busy* place, two arrows point in opposite directions in a cold blue light:

to
The Canon
 to
Oblivion.

Now: plant your acorn *there*.

This is a comment about the substantial importance of event in the creation of poetry and it might well appeal to the J.H. Prynne who had also written about Wordsworth's solitary Highland lass:

Within this poem the singing maid has herself no word of her own to utter directly, and her own tale is then further submerged in bland conjectures about 'battles long ago' and the like, all appendages to the traveller-narrator's appetite for self-feeling; but her song comprises a potent alternative reality, her world and its buried story, and in the format-contest between narrative and lyric this music projects in conclusion both the incompleteness of momentary lyric and also the implied presence through absence of the story that would declare what this incompleteness means.

(*Field Notes*, Cambridge, 2007)

Experience and language are the central resources of Maurice Scully's poetic web. I loved it!

Poetics of Still Life: a Collage, Robert Vas Dias (Permanent Press, London, 2020)



Ian Brinton

In the Preface to his recent collection of writings about still life pictures Robert Vas Dias wonders what it is that makes still life so strikingly important and why an artist should have painted particular objects in such a designed relation to one another. Still-life composition is an arrangement of things in a carefully designed pattern and of course, as Vas Dias knows so well, the same is true of poetry:

Still life is a picture of things: the poetry of things are words of still life.

Not only does this echo the opening of Carlos Williams's *Paterson* '—Say it, no ideas but in things—' but it also brings to mind the reason behind the title of Francis Ponge's *Le Parti Pris des Choses* which had been published four years earlier in 1942 in which the French poet referred to the weight of what can be seen, 'du poids des choses visibles'. Vas Dias opens his beautifully produced book of 53 paintings, accompanied by his own poems, prose-poems and descriptive accounts, with a reference to Picasso in the Parisian Café des Deux Magots. The artist is moving objects around on the table,

coffee cup and saucer, pack of cigarettes, a piece of silver or two, a napkin, as if to discover a new relation between familiar objects, 'an arrangement that was infinitely variable but always essentially the same.' Quoting from Robert Motherwell's experience of watching Picasso in that Paris café just before the war broke out in 1939 Vas Dias conveys the intriguing artistic power of collage and refers to Motherwell held for a moment in stillness before the variations of movement 'as if he was watching, rapt, the composition at the piano of an impromptu by Schubert, a masterpiece lost, one never committed to notation.'

Vas Dias wonders if the creation of collage, a still life, represents a 'timeless seeking after some sort of mystical imaging' or a 'striving for something that goes beyond the objects on the table or cupboard'. In doing so he seems to open up a conversation with the world and when we turn to the painting by Magritte it is to be reminded of the Belgian artist's comment that 'Une image peut prendre la place d'un mot dans une proposition' (An image can take the place of a word in a proposition). The painting chosen by Vas Dias is 1952 'Memory of a Journey III' in which Magritte presents a dystopian world of memories and continued presence, a petrified scene of domestic familiarity. Within the intelligent range of pictures selected by Vas Dias for this book one is permitted here to turn back some centuries in order to compare that Magritte with the 'Kitchen Scene with Christ in the House of Martha and Mary' by Velazquez, 1618. Vas Dias's own poem in response to the painting emphasises the importance of how stillness and movement can work mysteriously at the same moment as we look at a kitchen interior, 'fish and eggs arranged / on plates on a table'. In the foreground a cross-looking Martha grinds garlic in a pestle and mortar whilst in the background in a picture or a mirror, or even through a doorway into a further room, Christ sits talking with Mary. Next to Martha there stands an older woman whose gesture of touching her arm seems almost like a reminder to awake from a daydream and in the background the gesture of Christ seems also to offer a note of awakening in such a way that one might be forgiven for thinking that the vision of the Redeemer is acutely there in the mind of the maid whose hand is both red and muscular with hard work:

We're kitchen people half our lives, our lives
 depend upon the work we do making
 mundane arrangements of the commonplace
 to nourish soul and body; the things
 of vita silente immutable, immortal, the art of
 artefacts telling others of how we lived.

It is also perhaps no accident that I am reminded here of one of Robert Vas Dias's earlier poems, 'Half Life', which was written as a response to Study for 'Stairs' by John Wright, a mixed media and collage work from 2003:

And half is spent listening
 to the strangely reassuring beat
 of trains pounding the track
 under our sound box of a house
 built over a web of tunnels
 (the circulation of the city!)
 pulsing in the nether world
 which mimics my own, where
 the escalator winds me down.

In 1962 the Swiss poet Philippe Jaccottet wrote a review of some of Ponge's work emphasising the weight the French poet gave to words which made one feel as though one was in the presence of an object itself. In the review Jaccottet itemised the solid nature of Ponge's world: 'galets, murs, vignes, rocs, montagnes; ces boeufs ou ses porcs; ces tables, ces outils: cela saut aux yeux.' He admired the almost palpable depth and solidity of the writing and this quality of presence is something that is felt throughout Vas Dias's *Poetics of Still Life: A Collage*. Landscape for both Ponge and Jaccottet was never just a series of discrete or static objects but instead expressed a dynamic pluralism of relationships in movement, threading its way through time. Vas Dias takes us on a journey from the Old Kingdom of 4th Dynasty Egypt to Anthony Eyton's 2019 oil painting of 'Fruit Comes First' and bears in mind throughout those words from Guy Davenport's 1998 'Objects on a Table: Harmonious Disarray in Art and Literature':

Collage is by genre and strategy the art of still life.