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The Redgrove Momentum: 1952—2003

IT WAS NOVEMBER 1952. AT DOWNING COLLEGE, Tony Davis, Neil Morris and I were dissatisfied with the quality of verse-speaking in the university. Too much ‘golden throat’ and ‘vocal massage’, we thought. So an advertisement was placed in *Varsity*, the undergraduate newspaper, for people interested in forming a group to counteract the prevailing tendency. Roy Hazell (Selwyn), Ben Driver and David Jones (Christ’s), Rodney Banister and Peter Redgrove (Queens’) came along. It was a beginning.

In those days, when he had hair, Redgrove bore a resemblance to Frankenstein’s monster; only better dressed. He said in comfortably middle-class tones, “Thank you, my foot is quite warm now”, signalling that I had inadvertently placed my brief-case on his toes. Neil Morris read first, Yeats’s ‘Prayer for my Daughter’. Somebody — not me — volunteered to read ‘The Exequy’ by Henry King. The putative reader, whoever he was, fumbled to find the place in Herbert Grierson’s anthology, *Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems*. Redgrove said, “You will find ‘The Exequy’ on page 203”; and so he did.

Who was this person, whose well-bred voice was at variance with his threatening appearance, and who appeared to know the page numbers of every poem in the English language? I read out Thom Gunn’s ‘Carnal Knowledge’ which had just appeared in the magazine *Granta* and had served as a talking-point for literati in cafés and common-rooms. This was less as a demonstration of verse-speaking on my part than an attempt to provide the focus for a discussion. It seemed to me then an execrable poem and, though much revised from that initial appearance, still seems to me a bad one:

Even in bed I pose: desire may grow
More circumstantial and less circumspect
Each night, but an acute girl would suspect
That my self is not like my body, bare.
I wonder if you know, or, knowing, care?
I know you know I know you know I know...

Slick, slick, slick! You have to remember that people were talking about Thom Gunn as though he were a reincarnation of Byron. To my surprise, the poem in particular and the works of Gunn in general were defended by Redgrove and Banister. It turned out that they were planning to

start a magazine featuring Gunn among other fashionable Cambridge poets of the era, and it was to be called *delta*. Well, we agreed to disagree.

The reading group met every week during term. More and more, people brought their own poems along — Redgrove prolifically so. He was a mighty drinker in those days, and much of our discussion took place in pubs. We often coincided at the English Club — President, Thom Gunn — and were depressed by the classy speakers that had been invited. For some reason, Dylan Thomas especially got us down. You have to realize that there were comparatively few pictures of poets circulating in those days. Dylan Thomas was familiar to us as a golden voice on the radio, but we had no idea what he looked like. So when a scruffy wee man with a dog-end hanging from his mouth came in with Gunn — who had not yet assumed his leather biking attire — Redgrove exclaimed in quite audible tones, “No, that cannot be Dylan Thomas”. But it was. He never seemed to take his fag out of his mouth as he made exquisite sounds with the incomprehensible ‘Fern Hill’ and ‘Poem in October’. He also read a poem — ‘Senex’ — by John Betjeman:

Oh would I could subdue the flesh
Which sadly troubles me!
And then perhaps could view the flesh
As though I never knew the flesh
And merry misery...

and included an obscene stanza of his own, inspired by the jaunty rhythm and sexual references of that poem. Unfortunately I am unable to reproduce this stanza, even if the editor were to allow it. My memory was impaired by what followed.

Redgrove said that he had a case of Beaujolais in his room at Queens’. When we got there, he proposed that we should drink as much Beaujolais as we could while he recorded our conversation on his Grundig tape recorder. This was to see whether we would get inspired as we got drunker and drunker and drunker. He had been reading Rimbaud and had misinterpreted that poet’s theory concerning deregulation of the senses.

Well, we got drunk, all right, but when I played back the conversation next morning, it proved far from inspired. On the contrary, there was gurgled bawdiness emanating from both our throats interspersed by huge pauses anticipating the dialogue of Harold Pinter which was to impinge upon the stage several years later. All this because we were depressed by Dylan Thomas!

Delta came out in modest red covers, costing sixpence, in spring 1953. It was a huge disappointment. All the O.K. Cambridge poets were on display: Thom Gunn, of course, but also John Mander, Frederick Stuart Grubb, L.E. Brathwaite (with his name spelled wrongly) and Claire Delavenay, who these days is better known as Claire Tomalin. She has become a fine biographer, but at that time was a truly dreadful poet:

His words against my driven white desire
Came in blue banners blown across the sheet,
Crushing my last leaves of despair to sweet
Smoke folding and effaced in slanted fire...

and on, through ten more lines, to form a sonnet. It had no title, nor needed one. Oh well, one has to start somewhere! I had given Banister some poems, but he lost them — and blamed me for not retaining copies.

Interestingly enough, Redgrove and Banister were not represented in this first issue of *delta*, but they certainly cropped up in the second, dated spring 1954. Banister, who was reading English, scored First after First in the Tripos, and produced fluent, rather precious poems about Odysseus, Satan, and the Paris Metro. Subsequently he had a career with Shell Oil.

Redgrove was already worth watching, with a remarkable poem, never reprinted, concerned with a character in *The Blue Angel*. He was a keen film-goer:

Dr Immanuel Rath

Stamped with authority, a scholar,
This man of integrity, slow in the flesh
But painstaking in mental application, required his life
Consolidated in small ceremonies. Time to make sure
Of a sufficient amount of sugar in his tea, the canary fed,
Of the small pocket book carrying his list of daily requirements.
Time in fact to provide for
Duties and the slow exactness of his bodily movements: all
In order that a portion of the day might be set aside for
Study without guilt, delight without distraction.

For he was slow from the flesh,
But fresh as a schoolboy clambering on a loom,
His bastions of rubbish were earthworks

Where heroes turned to fight and classify.
Sunk in small echoes, handfuls of advice,
He bred his applications in the warmth he made,
Caressed and planted them like velvet pile;
For he loved his words and tied them to his fingertips
To glance and dazzle at his weakening eyes,
Trail through the sand, smear honey on his lips,
And weigh his teaching in a golden scale.

We know he took his pinch of dust and let it fly
To be a mote in sunlight no pupil there could see;
And before this angel came to spoil
His breviary, and crack his seal,
He loved his words, no woman flowered for him,
Sheer multiplicity chuckled in his loins.

There seemed to me in that free verse something of the inflections of the speaking voice. But it was not then that I recognized Redgrove as a great poet.

He had left Cambridge the year before me, took a job as an advertising copy-writer, and steeped himself in C.G. Jung, Shakespeare and Rimbaud. He also bought a complete set of *The Oxford English Dictionary* and became a close friend of an erudite and much older poet, Martin Bell. Redgrove and I had kept in touch, and converged when I came to live and work in London. He put a lot of pressure on me to start a Group there, and it commenced in October 1955, initially in my grubby bedsitter off the Edgware Road, in Paddington. Numbers were small at first, with Ted Hughes an intermittent presence and, as a nucleus, various people I had encountered in London — Rosemary Joseph, Julian Cooper, Peter Porter, Martin Bell of course, and my future wife, Hannah Kelly.

Redgrove dominated the whole show effortlessly; a big man, with a big voice. Week after week he read these extraordinary poems, and one night I realized I was hearing verse of a quality I had hardly ever encountered. By then, Redgrove was married to the sculptress, Barbara Sherlock, with whom he had lived in his later days at Cambridge. They now had a house in Chiswick and very much wanted a child. Redgrove's poem was about being haunted by the child they anticipated. 'Bedtime Story for my Son' still gives me a thrill:

Where did the voice come from? I hunted through the rooms
For that small boy, that high, that head-voice,

The clatter as his heels caught on the door,
A shadow just caught moving through the door
Something like a school-satchel. My wife
Didn't seem afraid, even when it called for food
She smiled and turned her book and said:
'I couldn't go and love the empty air'.

We went to bed. Our dreams seemed full
Of boys in one or another guise, the paper-boy
Skidding along in grubby jeans, a music-lesson
She went out in the early afternoon to fetch a child from.
I pulled up from a pillow damp with heat
And saw her kissing hers, her legs were folded
Far away from mine. A pillow! It seemed
She couldn't love the empty air.

Perhaps, we thought, a child had come to grief
In some room in the old house we kept,
And listened if the noises came from some especial room,
And then we'd take the boards up and discover
A pile of dusty bones like charcoal twigs and give
The tiny-sounding ghost a proper resting-place
So that it need not wander in the empty air.

No blood-stained attic harboured the floating sounds,
We found they came in rooms that we'd warmed with our life.
We traced the voice and found where it mostly came
From just underneath both our skins, and not only
In the night-time either, but at the height of noon
And when we sat at meals alone. Plainly, this is how we found
That love pines loudly to go out to where
It need not spend itself on fancy and the empty air.

Oh what a poem! The reader who can't see that isn't listening. You have it all there — the specificity, the precision of imagery, the clear-cut plot, the form with that marvellous refrain — and, above all, the language. From that time on, it was clear to me — and to Hughes, and to Porter — that Redgrove was the great master of language in our time. Other poets perform on the instruments they have inherited, and Seamus Heaney, Derek Mahon and Anthony Hecht — for example — perform remarkably well. But Redgrove

creates his own instruments. He is the great master of form because he develops form for his purpose.

What is his purpose? At first, at any rate, I would describe it as the relaying of sense-impressions as an attempt to drive into the reader the experiences undergone by the poet. For example:

Small elephant on wings with dabbling trunk...
‘Flies’, *The Collector*, 1960

Rising above the fringe of silvering leaves
A finger, tanned and scaly, gorgeous, decayed...
‘Basilisk’, *The Nature of Cold Weather*, 1961

He shuffled and skipped as the beam of heat hit his back,
And skipped out of the way of the puff and crackle underfoot,
As he told how wet slag sparked the power, and his hair puffed
out in a flash,
Past a coxcomb of flames...
‘At the White Monument’, *At the White Monument*, 1963

There is a one star
That like crystal rides a haze of crystal,
A draught that darts between
Rapping gates and turns up embanked pathways
Up like a key winding, up
To a flapping shape taller than the house...
‘Only Resting’, *The Force*, 1966

These first four books of Redgrove form a kind of bastion, at once guarding and introducing his work. What they have in common is supercharged language and an almost schizoid vision of the world. Crossing a field with Redgrove can be an alarming experience, since every natural phenomenon seems to come at him at a rate of knots and with terrific force. This tendency is recorded in his early work, which Philip Larkin described (*The Guardian*, 5 February 1960) as exhibiting “a style at once eager, extravagant, obsessively detailed, and a little mad”. One fine poet commenting upon another!

In 1969, after residence in the U.S.A., a prolonged spell as Gregory Fellow at the University of Leeds and the break-up of his marriage to Barbara — who had given him three children — Redgrove met the poet and novelist Penelope Shuttle. She was to become his second wife and mother of his

daughter, Zoë.

The alteration in his work was galvanic. He always had seemed to be, for all his brilliance, an unstable personality. With his second wife, he appears to have experienced an intensity unknown to him in earlier relationships. This is embodied in his middle-period poetry. There can be no doubt that Penelope, who is a good deal younger than he is, was the prototype of the naiads, dryads, nereids, and other slim young women who populate the books after *Dr Faust's Sea-Spiral Spirit* (1972) — which is pivotal. Further, they went on together to produce two prose books which have had a currency greater than the poems produced by either of them. They are *The Wise Wound: Menstruation and Everywoman* (1978) and *The Black Goddess and the Sixth Sense* (1987). These are at once highly original and vivaciously written, and have attracted an audience of feminists and psychologists. Each of them also produced, both in collaboration and separately, novels of a bizarre and fantastic tendency.

Redgrove remains, however, essentially a poet. Peter Porter said of him in a memoir written for *The Poetry Review* (September 1981): “From the very beginning I knew that I could never be so absolute myself in pursuing poetic reality, and that I would never be able to believe that in language and its sacred ritualisation as art man had a tool which could make him a god, a fundamental part of Redgrove’s canon”. And I once said to him, “All you seem to want is a desk in a vast library with a bottle of wine perched in proximity to your papers, and what would you write about then?” He replied, “I should write about how I had got myself into so agreeable a situation”.

The later work is obsessed in a negative way with his father, with whom he had a stormy relationship, and, in a positive way, with water. This obsession with water reaches its peak in *The Man Named East* (1985). Even when writing of the death of his mother, that most disabling of all bereavements, Redgrove employs the metaphor of water — “and she bent/And washed her tired face away with dew and became a spirit” (‘The Funeral’). There are all of a hundred images of water in this book of eighty-eight poems. Some of these are not so much moments of vision as literary masterpieces, and one could instance ‘The Quiet Woman of Chancery Lane’ (“The blind girl points to the stars.../a special breath from space/Tells her they are out in their moist fullness”). Or ‘The Work of Water’ (“Fill the church with water!/Let those old stones be our Works”), or ‘The College in the Reservoir’:

Thus the whole town drinks the College of ghosts
Drowned in the reservoir and dissolved in shivering mirrors,
Torn mirrors of the web, whole mirror of the ocean.

