

Supplementary essays/reviews
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“FLAWED THEOREMS:”
COURAGE WITHIN POSTCOLONIAL POETIC ODYSSEYS
in
Sudeep Sen’s *The HarperCollins Book of English Poetry (by Indians)*



‘One wants to break free of the past: rightly, because nothing at all can live in its shadow, and because there will be no end to the terror as long as guilt and violence are repaid with guilt and violence; wrongly, because the past that one would like to evade is still very much alive.’
— THEODOR W. ADORNO, ‘The Meaning of Working Through The Past’

Long, long ago, I read an essay in George Steiner’s *Language and Silence*, on the ‘baroque’ novels that were and are Durrell’s *Alexandria Quartet*. In it Steiner made an observation that has remained with me: he said that reading Durrell’s ‘brassy’ prose he felt he was reading an author who was just now discovering each word and the language; something like that anyway. And the impression has proved right in my own case: having the ‘music’ of another tongue envelope me from my childhood, I find my relationship to my (native) English that much more precious: in the sense of gems, jewels, *not* affectation of any sort (most of the time, at least). Perhaps this reflexive realization informs the way I read this endlessly minable anthology of postcolonial English poetry by Indians, a volume — as though in love with the language — that has stirred me.

Below, for reasons of economy, and just because it works well for my purposes, I begin with the poetry of the editor of the volume, distinguished poet, critic, translator, Sudeep Sen. He is widely recognized as a major new generation voice in world literature and one of ‘the finest younger English-language poets in the international literary scene. A distinct voice: carefully modulated and skilled, well measured and crafted’ (*BBC Radio*). ‘He is fascinated not just by language but the possibilities of language’ (*Scotland on Sunday*). His poem, ‘Desire’, is quoted in full:

Under the soft translucent linen,
the ridges around your nipples

harden at the thought of my tongue.
You — lying inverted like the letter ‘c’ —

arch yourself deliberately
wanting the warm press of my lips,

it’s wet to coat the skin
that is bristling, burning,

breaking into sweats of desire —
sweet juices of imagination.

But in fact, I haven't even touched
you. At least, not yet.

I make use of the idea of 'desire' as the opening conceptual gambit to unlock what's going on here, as elsewhere to a greater or lesser extent. But before I get to that, I ask myself: what does 'India' mean to me? Funnily enough, something (in the last analysis) much like the weird (and wonderful) modality of desire *in me*, my 'père-ver-sion' to use a phrase of Kristeva's. The first thing I think of when I put the idea of India before my mind is a charismatic anecdote of my father's.

In the late fifties my father was a student at the American University of Beirut. His prominent position among his peers made him one of the student hosts for the visiting Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister. And this is what he tells of that great man and leader. He and his peers were walking beside or behind him through the upper campus, when they stopped just above the vista that looks down onto the layered lower gardens and onto the sports fields below, through to the sea and its vertiginous horizon. Periodic square stones, sort of minor pedestals, pock the rim of this vista. Nehru stopped, and put one foot onto one such rock; with his chin leant against an opened palm, looked off into the distance of the lower campus and on through to the infinite sea. As my father has it, it was like Nehru was there one minute, gone the next. He 'flew' my father said, just drifted away into the halcyon empyrean. One could almost viscerally sense the great leader's mind being emptied, as it were, as he peered contemplatively into the distance; taking flight; slipping into the slim manner of one of the soaring birds.

The purport of all this? Well, in short: the provenance or prescience, *or not (!)*, of a 'meta-language.' Which is to say a language that *transcends* ordinary or empirical language-use, and that thus is — as what Lacan calls 'the big Other' — the *ultimate* guarantor of (totalized) meaning or meaningfulness: the Meaning of meaning. In seeing my father (or 'imago') like this I implicitly betray my view of him as, in effect, a God-figure, some One who, precisely, doesn't lack, doesn't desire. In this 'family romance,' his function is thereby to make me (contra the aim of this kind of psychology) *essentially dependent*: if only by having the (borrowed) armor (I nearly said *amor!*) of a fallen angel's sense of absolute independence. In contrast, what I've sensed in the various (*and they are very much various*) 'attitudes' of the English-speaking Indian and Indian-diasporic poets — the all-stars as well as the as yet lesser known — who deck this superb volume is the ability, beyond me, to face the fact that the world, actually, doesn't make complete sense. And that poetry is one way of realizing this radical ambivalence. The major tenor or timbre of this volume is a doggedness, a courage through the mess (as mess) of history. Whether formally or substantively, or as the 'content of the form,' these poets are brave; braver than me.

With a volume this compendious, one can't discuss all the poets. I will try and pick out what were for me highlights, keystones and nodal points — whether as mirrors or lamps to the anthology as a whole. And so: to this spun and wounded iron out of South Asia, India and the Indian diaspora...

Towards and through the end of his poem 'Kargil' (a Himalayan outpost town where India and Pakistan fought their last war), Sudeep Sen marvels at the Chameleon-like birds; calculates their flight and finds it a 'flawed theorem'. Here is the concluding section of this stunning poem:

Even the flight of birds
 that wing over their crests
don't know which feathers to down.
 Chameleon-like
they fly, tracing perfect parabolas.

I look up
 and calculate their exact arc
and find instead, a flawed theorem.

'Chameleon' suggests Keats (on Shakespeare). Birds suggest song, thus poetry. But 'a flawed theorem'? By ending on a liminal note: which is to say a statement about the radical ambiguity of what's being observed — whether the winging birds up there, or the song being emitted from within — he typifies one of the functions of poetry; namely, to question the order of things, *not to ratify* the order of things. He is suggesting his own lack and that of the world. And by doing so his poetry, like nearly all the poetry in this volume, both reflects that something has happened, and, in response, makes something happen (contra Auden.) So in 'Desire' he opens, tellingly, with: 'Under the soft translucent linen, / the ridges around your nipples / harden at the thought of my tongue.' This is, in effect, him being her being him (and, intimated thus, *ad infinitum*). Which is to say, the otherness of the other is given its due. In a way he is recognizing himself as a stranger to himself. It is an eminently mature (and intriguing and rousing) gesture.

Similar, but different, to this (above) voice filled with *a questioning* of the resonance and harmony of the surrounding world, witness acclaimed UK-based poet, Daljit Nagra. Though still, as above, indeed far more overtly, political, there is something uncanny at work via his poetic persona. To my mind he comes across as both funny and very angry (neither being bad things: both having their place.) This angry humor as I feel it soar (sorely) off the page is there to register a wound. Which is to say, by being to a certain extent loud, Nagra is adverting to the nightmare of history. And he is intimating that that nightmare is still extant, still effective and affecting. The veneer, at times, of boyish swagger is like a palimpsest for something undergone in the depth grammar and echoes of a violent imperial history. His is an intentional marionette (and a *via negativa* of sorts) of victim becoming bully — aiming, as I read him, to highlight the bulliness to the bully.

David Dabydeen, the poet who follows Nagra in the collection, is also subverting imperial legacies. In 'Slave Song' for instance the voice of the singing slave is, unlike with some of Nagra's work, seemingly at ease and well-housed in the world. This is in a way the polar opposite of angry. And yet it is just as rebellious. While Nagra seems to intimate a fighting spirit, Dabydeen fights with a quiet, implicit joy in the day-to-day workaday. One shouts, the other hums: both register a complex and agonistic history — awry sediment, however lightly tilled, within *still-fraught* identities.

These few opening examples are examples of poets writing poetry that *is not* conceited, but that is eminently and deeply *intelligent* — the poetry, like the dominant historical experiences implicitly represented, has a plethora of layers or layered-ness to it, oftentimes making use of the working illusion of facility and simplicity. I've a feeling, after reading this collection and of course more generally, that ethnic foreigners to the language just have more to offer in and through and by that language. It's another way of saying that it takes a certain displacement from any purported Adamic, say, or seemingly fully housed relationship to English to allow that English to work marvels. (Poetry after all, unlike prose, is language 'about' (meant figuratively and topographically) language to a certain extent.) Only the most

profane leaf, we might say, in a history of ruddy violence, torsion and (inner or outer) displacement, speaks best to and of the mythic tree. Let me give some poignant examples.

To start with — and this inter-textual aspect is cognate with the essentially complex(ed) and agonistic historical *and personal* postcolonial experience — I want to show how within the first fifty pages *alone*, there is much redolence to the literary qua literary. And such reflexivity is part of recognizing a wound, what the late Sir Frank Kermode called ‘a middest.’ Just as these are ethnically Indian writers writing in English — from a certain kind of distance then — so at times their work evokes and provocatively echoes, to my mind, history’s exempla and, yes, history’s ‘echoes’ – the other(s) of and in time; or the read before, condensed and displaced within the written — another effect or arti-fact of thrown-ness, to use Heidegger’s term. If the postcolonial experience is one of the historical girders for the postmodern, then it is no accident that this kind of uncanny reflexivity is a basic orientation to the bulk of the verse in this volume. This specific redolence is actually a way of incorporating within the poetry the learning experiences that have gone to constitute the (oftentimes) poetic mastery. The contingency of a rife history is laid bare as a now-won necessity. A way, thus — to invoke the basic Freudian model — of making that ‘(hi)story’ ‘one’s own.’

So. In line with my observations so far, the first poem of the anthology, Aditi Machado’s ‘Learning A Foreign Language’ is a tellingly ironic take, perhaps, of some soi-disant commencing ‘Word.’ In this gently ironic opening, what is suggested, overtly, is — in contrast to some objective ratio, some safe meta-narrative or ‘Logos’ — what (again) George Steiner in his *Real Presences*, calls the ‘epi-logue.’ In other words poetry *coming into its own, as poetry*, where language is no longer pointed to transcend language, into some referential and adequate truth ‘out there,’ but actually speaks more to other/more language itself, and in the process linguistically founds a new reality. Indeed, the second poem of the collection, again Machado’s is titled, ‘Self-Portrait’ — as if to rub in the idea of self-reflection or reflexivity. The poem ends with the persona being a ‘salt-pillar’, which is Lot’s wife’s fate, and that of anyone in the early twenty-first century who (to use Hegel’s term) ‘looks on’ to a stranded historical experience within and by the previous century.

In ‘Orange Popsicle’, the second poet in the anthology, Aimee Nezhukmatahil, offers again a force-field between the everyday, the casual (as in the title) and the seriousness within the poem of something like a Proustian *memoire involontaire*, her popsicle providing the objective correlative of ‘madeleine.’ Again, her second poem, cannily titled ‘How To Be A Poet’ is an experimental poem, with five descending words, mere words, such as ‘Breath’ or below ‘Spider’, which to my mind invoke the Kinbote of Nabokov’s/Shade’s *Pale Fire*. I say this because the poetic effect is rendered by the footnotes to each of the five-islanded words in the main text. It’s as if the poet wants to show the process of becoming a poet, or of a poem becoming a poem, more than show a (finished) ‘poem.’ Singular words adrift in the main text become meaningful only *post festum*, via the reconstructing or re-cognising other (of oneself?) in the footnotes. Her third poem, again expressive of much of the intents of the collection as a whole, is also self-referential — but as I say, not in a silly or conceited way. ‘Bibliomancy’ ironises what, after Bernard Williams, we might call the ‘moral luck’ of using books to determine whom a girl will marry. Immediately suggested to my mind, though not necessarily biographically intended by the poet, were George Eliot’s puritan heroines — with their Judaic habit of opening the Bible at random, and turning such haphazard contingency, such mere happening, into fate or felt, lived meaning. And as in Eliot, the poet offers realization as the end product, overcoming, but not necessarily resolving, the draconian chanciness of an illicit patriarchy perhaps.

Two more (quite brilliant) examples from these, the opening cadences of the collection. Amit Chaudhuri is metaphysical in ‘Insomniac’ and, say, ‘Death Of A Bust.’ The latter

‘written on hearing news of Chintamani Kar’s death’ is both a revivifying of a passed person, the agency of poetry itself, as well as an invocation of ‘clay’ returning to ‘clay’, with resigned and biblical resonance. And yet for all his ideational and provocative texture, such a distinguished writer is able to offer ‘a song’ titled ‘Moral Education,’ which, whether deeply simple in the best sense, or, more likely given the title, faux-naif, is indeed a learning experience, but one which sensitizes us against a facile didacticism. His second, much shorter ‘song’, ‘Trucker,’ is perhaps, to continue my the tenor of my impressions so far, a reference to the T.S. Eliot of ‘The Hollow Men,’ which latter itself, via its notorious Conradian epigraph, spoke to the horror of empire. ‘OK ta ta bye bye / This is how we live and die.’

Just after Chaudhuri, Amitava Kumar offers for me one of the highlights of the volume as a whole. Via four poetic parables (in prose), titled, ‘Good Morale,’ ‘Postmortem,’ ‘Milk Is Good For You,’ and ‘Forty Takes,’ Kumar evinces a scathing, searing portrayal of imperial experience. Her taut prose pieces, though not necessarily absurdist, surreal or dream narrative, are redolent, in a more realistic mode, of the plosive nature of Kafka parables. (Like true parables, their truth content is not dependent on only one singular context.) Or indeed the near-mathematical middle-period of Borges. Pain here is adverted to with controlled, masterful indirection, with a prose-poetry of tenterhook, imminent subversion and surprise. Maupassant would be hard-pressed to be as charged, poised and concise.

Or take Anjum Hasan, whose metaphysics precisely undermines the meta-physical, or a totalized sense of experienced and lived reality. In ‘No Sentence’ he writes: ‘The sun drops low then fades out, the lanterns sway. / No one can say — now, the world’s suffering adds up.’ And at the end we find him mourning for a passed time, because, to paraphrase, ‘it used to be his life.’ Which ending for a poem so titled is to say that one’s ‘sentence,’ by time’s jury, say, is that experience, past or present, is not discursively graspable, that one’s ‘sentence’ is to be unworthy in and by one’s sentences, to be sprawled or truncated, distended or dispersed. Life, after a manner, is too many for one. And then in ‘When I Grow Up’, there is a litany of what he, the poem’s persona ‘would like to be’, finishing, after this build up of rhetorical pressure, with what he ‘would not like to be.’ But the (*post*-colonial?) irony is that, given the way this sense of ending gives forceful point to the whole piece, what comes last on the page, latest, is actually logically or meaningfully the condition of the whole poem — a bit like Derrida’s ‘logic of the supplement.’ Like a detective story, say, the end comes first when one ‘looks on.’ And this reading is compounded or ratified by the title: he must’ve already ‘grown up’, lived, wounded with life, to be in a position to backtrack counterfactually. An uncanny temporal mooring. And then in ‘The World As My Illness’, we are confronted with a prolonged conceit — a poem more a metaphor as an executive whole, rather than making use of metaphors as bits within the piece — which speaks to how sight becomes in-sight, how outside becomes ‘one’s own’, on the inside: individuation in a word. A pained figure becomes thus the vehicle for overcoming (pain). Indeed, reflective or reflexive again, in his last entry, ‘The Biography’ we have the situation of the artist laid before us in its dying fall, a way of being according to Donald Winnicott, which is a *simultaneous* revealing and hiding of the self via the expressive act: ‘I kept searching out / the window, I tried to stay half hidden by the light.’

Farther on, Arundhati Subramaniam thematizes in a similar manner the configurative act of *poesis* within her verse. Whether it is the taut, stately and periodic strophes and syntax of ‘The Way You Arrive’, or the Yeats-invoking ending of ‘Textile’: ‘And so you return / reluctantly... / deeper / into the world’s oldest fabric // into the / darkening, / widening / meritocracy / of the heart;’ or, the parodic poise of ‘Epigrams For Life After Forty’, which wittily echoes Eliot: ‘Between the doorbell / and the death knell;’ overall art qua art, qua artifice, is highlighted. And in this context it is perhaps worth considering, again, how this

(post)modernist sensibility — which, without being navel-gazing, is actually full of matter and stuff and wounds and scars and joy and love — relates to a postcolonial status. Perhaps, in line with my thoughts above, if the poet is inevitably an exile in this world, someone alien to the humdrum hearth — hence his or her desperate need to express — then this is why colonized peoples or those (originally/organically) foreign to the language, inhabit it with more (in)tension, their historical experience being itself like the birth-pangs of either poet or poem — and that incessant reach into the out-riding darkness for that next felicitous word.

Another highlight for me is the verse of British-based John Siddique. The romance form, the sonnet, is enacted in ‘Name’, where at the end the ontogenetic individual (poet) tallies at the last with the phylogenetic species (poetry?). There is perhaps less irony or subversion in Siddique’s verse; like most of the collection he is committed to make something ‘happen’ and to make poetry ‘matter,’ so to speak. And yet, he uses less irony, more frontal passion and soulfulness. For instance the objective correlates which go to make his wistful piece, ‘Via Negativa’, are both thoroughly concrete and empathetic images, as well as bearing the burden of something as universal as love, however retrospective or elegiac. For me, this in-tension is of the essence to successful verse, or the ‘real thing.’ Whether in an intimate register (‘We Will Wake At Dawn’) or a more public/political one, (‘Afghanistan 1970, Stopped’), Siddique is just as serious as the majority of these engaged and engaging poets; but serious without that nifty illusionism that may be seen to typify a poet not so rooted and/or based in the UK itself. This is my supposition anyway.

Later in the collection, and, again, typifying it as a whole, the verse moves from the highly formalist and experimental — to a certain extent a cerebral intelligence — to the more directly memorable, plain-speaking and overtly emotive. Take, to begin with, the highly engaged Sandeep Parmar. In her first entry, a prose poem as I read it, she is phenomenally incisive with her word-choice, each word we feel chosen against the laughter of the dark. This piece, ‘Invocation’ is vatic in a way, a form of embedded wisdom literature, and what really makes it work for me is the arcane parataxis of the buildup, leading to a final opening and coda in the last sentence, which seems to re-cognise this opening piece as a whole: ‘All that spills over from my able palm is you.’ In ‘Counsel’, she subverts the vatic, the authority of tradition, by including its balladry so to speak, within her poetic critique. And again, there is a weave of the paratactic and the consequential: the past as leading into this present and the past as object to be negated. In ‘The White Sister’ the breaks within and between the lines enact, perform the distance between daughter and daughter. But, as above, this discontinuity is a continuity of discontinuity. Opening ‘After Lee Miller’s *Exploding Hand*,’ ‘Baleful and proud, the vanity of all that is hers,’ she goes on to create a force field between the statement of the vanity of human wishes, and the meaningfulness, however aporetic and ambiguous, of this vice of poetry. And again, she shows her learning in the counterfactual and historical ventriloquism of ‘Dada At The Pompidou’.

In ‘Less Is More,’ Shanta Acharya offers a statement which ends tartly with ‘We do not need experts to tell us.../ that if we consumed less / the earth might be a better place.’ And we realize from the context of the poem that the conceit, as above, creates a plosive force-field between the scarcity that poetry makes use of to amplify meaning, and the scarcity of the world’s resources. In a way, she echoes the Elizabeth Bishop of ‘One Art’, which ends ‘(Write it!) like disaster.’ In ‘Imagine’, like, but also unlike Parmar (they’ve completely different registers), Acharya’s final cadence and couplet offer the postponed sense to the whole poem, in what (again) Maupassant called a ‘coup de canon.’ In ‘Graffiti’ the ‘de-face-ment’ as it were of a loved one’s life is registered nude and rude and heart-wrenchingly bare: it ends, ‘I sat here holding his hand as he lay dying.’

Throughout the anthology, as I say, there is eminently memorable verse, to compound the layered intelligence. Which is to say, one gets vermilion millions from even a first reading;

and, if it so pleases you, on farther or further digging, you will, inevitably see much more going on and to be going on with. In ‘Epithalamium’, Siddhartha Bose writes:

In this land of cloud, they met with
Stems of colour in their eyes,
Shafted in the wood of an alehouse.

He drank the ribs of the sea from her
Eye, she sank in the fog of his cheer,
Pressed like bookpages, embered.

And then ends this melee of deep lyricism and engaging narrative with:

May you both dream in forms.
This world moves too fast. Take your time...

Let the corners of love
Shade you.

Like (these) pressed or pressing ‘bookpages’ one feels that the shading of corners is the painterly limning of the artist; that the love is the kenosis and caritas of poet to reader.

As Sudeep Sen, editor of the anthology, writes in his introduction, the poetry in this volume is immensely varied in form and substance: there is science, art; there is cutting a figure and ironic Titanism and there is creaturely *ekphrasis*; there is humour and there is weighted tragedy and elegy; there is death and there is birth; there is the acerbic as well as the wound-able, vulnerable and open-hearted. Even if, in my slight discussion here, I have tried to find and tease out commonality and unity, Sen is right to stress the sheer babbling ‘variety’, which is ‘centrifugal’ in this ‘bouquet’ of wonderful poetry, poetry which veers from free verse to sonnet and ghazal, from the experimental and gnomic, to the bold and direct. Along with young writers, perhaps less known — though usually extremely distinguished for their tender years — there are the stellar: one example towards the end being Vikram Seth. As I commenced anecdotally, let me end on the same personal note.

Another association for me in relation to India (never having been there), is Seth’s epic *A Suitable Boy* — though in *this* volume there are extracts from his earlier masterly verse novel set in silicon valley, and set in iambic tetrameter: *The Golden Gate*. I read Seth’s magnum opus about ten years ago, during a month when I was doing my first, post-degree, internship. It harrowed me with desire. I couldn’t wait each day for the tube journey home, or getting home, to return to what, for just under a month, was like a best friend. And, though prose, what I’m intimating is of the essence to poetry. Words, by themselves, are dead counters — as any structuralist will tell you. It is the sense of felt life, of in-spiration, expressed, conveyed, *performed* from off the page into the reader, which makes poetry what it is. Like all art, successful poetry must make something *happen* to the reader, at an almost visceral level. It is this shuttling of the poet’s experience to the reader’s that makes the endless signifying chain of words, words, words, something *beyond* that *perpetuum mobile* and *deus ex machina*. Though not all poetry, here as elsewhere, necessarily tells a ‘story’ directly, ultimately, it of course does: even if it is an internal rhyme, or, alternatively, a bold frontal rhyme; or, say, some intentionally anachronistic syntax; whatever formal devices used, *or the device of their absence*, one is haunted beyond the last line of any successful poem. The spirit out of the letter is an organism like any mammal or plant. It is its own prodigal spur and it is ours.

The anthology starts with a young poet ironising the Logos. The final poem of the volume, 'A Horse Stumbled in the Waves' by another young poet Vivek Narayanan, though not ironising, ends on a similarly exilic or untenanted or disenchanting note. The poet 'look[s] towards the hand... / that showed its palm / to turn his face / away....' This is dismissal ('away') and another kind of dismissal ('a-way', as in *aporia*) and as a third and minor alternative, though not quite ratified, 'a Way' — as in John's Gospel.

Like Ulysses, the (postcolonial) poet just wants to go home. But his or her home, unfortunately, is vertigo. At the final border of the anthology we realize that exile or displacement *just is* the poet's home, his or her refuge (just is) of homelessness. His or her fort is on the sea. If life for the poet is a 'flawed theorem,' perhaps it's because we can only enjoy the sirens' song if we are strapped to a mast, somehow made to feel and live (historic as well as personal) privation.



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Tim Liardet

Beyond the Lyric: A Map of Contemporary British Poetry, Fiona Sampson, Chatto and Windus, 2012, ISBN 978-0-701-18646-3, pp310

Anyone even loosely connected with British poetry knows what kind of wilderness it is. Not only is it territory cast out by popular culture which assumes (without much real consideration) that nothing of importance grows there; it also has a way of exaggerating its stereotypes to the extent of increasing its sense of estrangement. In so many ways, the result is a terrible ideological mess: the cross-currents, feuds, squabbles and snide, score-settling reviews seem to point up to any psychologist of worth the extent to which it is the lot of all poets—however highlighted or obscured by history—to feel to some extent s/he lives on a diet of deprivation. As the number of poets vying for their share of the epistemological custard grows so the audience to be shared by them disproportionately shrinks. To call what survives this process a territory is itself a misnomer; it is more like an island. But that island is itself subdivided into atolls and archipelagos each one of which arguably imagines it is located at the centre, and proclaims as such. With the growth of poetry cooperatives, online magazines and workshops and writing departments which fuel young poets with a thrilled confidence, the atolls proliferate further. In her introduction, Fiona Sampson writes: “British poetry today is flowering and expanding, rather as our non-fiction did during the boundary-breaking Eighties: a period in which novels became non-fictional, travel writing explored the familiar, and essays turned lyrical and unscholarly...And yet—this extraordinary cultural blossoming is a well-kept secret”.

Quite so. And surely there is no one better equipped to say it. Anyone attempting an overview of British poetry in its current state of evolution would have to be, I feel, an exceptional poet—someone with a finger on the pulse of process as much as any real or imagined ‘community’. Sampson is exactly that. Not only does her writing have finesse, it is also without fear. This is rare. Sampson is first and foremost a remarkable poet. Her last two books *Common Prayer* and *Rough Music* have rightly showed up where they belong: on the lists. Her new collection—*Coleshill*—published earlier this year, is a richer, more ambitious and even more extraordinary achievement.

Since 2005, when she first took over the editorship of *Poetry Review*, Sampson has become a major force in UK poetry. Her legacy is a lesson to all editors: great editing transcends choice as much as it must transcend the racket in the town-square. Her twenty-six volumes of *Poetry Review* are exemplary. Side by side, they are a thing of beauty, exquisite

to the eye and the touch. Anyone wanting to know anything about the state of British poetry would do well to leaf through those pages.

It's one thing to have the skill, the qualifications, knowledge and the talent to attempt a map of contemporary British poetry, it's quite another to have the courage. Sampson, having sat in one of the most powerful and most exposed seats in British poetry, shows she has that in abundance. In this book she puts it to immaculate artistic and critical, rather than *political* effect. In the last fifty years, there have been several attempts to begin the process of mapping what she now tackles head on. Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion edited *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry* in 1982; Michael Hulse, David Kennedy and David Kennedy made inroads into the wilderness with *The New Poetry* in 1982; James Byrne and Clare Pollard gave us *Voice Recognition*, and so forth. Each of these anthologies in their very distinctive ways attempted some sort of mapping-exercise and proved—either accidentally or intentionally, big scale or small scale—canon-forming. *Beyond the Lyric*, however, is not an anthology, but instead explains its arguments and choices. It is more far-reaching, more ambitious, more comprehensive. It attempts what none of these books was wholly successful in achieving: Sampson gives the amorphous wilderness *shape*. She gives it order.

The critical case for the poets—as absent as she says from other canon-forming books—is exactly what she supplies, in abundance. She does this by offering us the groupings (the categories, the sub-groups, the micro-movements) which in the very process of marking out their distinctive characteristics come together to form some bewildering (if not miraculous) sort of homogeneity. Many poets, perhaps, may not have realised they belong to these micro-movements; most, I suspect, will be pleased to find themselves where they find themselves.

Sampson's overview is one of profound seriousness. The sole criterion for her editorial attention is literary merit. In the space of these three-hundred pages we are given 'The Plain Dealers' (Abse, Brownjohn, Fainlight, Feinstein, Lomas, Thwaite); 'The Dandies' (Williams, Raine, Reid, Maxwell, Shapcott); 'The Oxford Elegists' (Fuller, Imlah, Jenkins, Motion); 'The Touchstone Lyricists' (Clarke, Heaney, Horovitz, Maguire, O'Donoghue, Riordan, Longley); 'Free and Easy' (Alvi, Herbert, Nichols, D'Aguiar, Padel, Armitage) to name but a few of the highly inventive and richly appealing sub-groups.

All Sampson's characteristic powers of critical finessing are brought to bear when she treats individual poets with respect, with time, with space. It is unusual in a book of this nature to find such consistency in the quality of the analysis and commentary. Most poets would be more than happy, I suspect, to extract a line about their work and use it as an encomium for his/her next collection. David Harsent's "...professional musicianship," writes Sampson, "can be heard in the way rhyme assumes a role as the secret instigator of form..." Sean O'Brien's rhythmic tone is "Like some Northern lad rolling his sleeves up in mid-winter, [signalling] a tough, man's world." "Rather than being repeated touchstones then," she argues, "Ruth Padel's images generate a kind of metaphorical evocation, which allows her to range over wide imaginative common ground." Moniza Alvi "...shows the reader that to be engaged in cultural transition is to deal with Keatsian 'uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts.'" And so forth. One feature of this book is its *energy*, and there is no doubting that a project of this nature would require that. Miraculously again, it is this energy which enables her to write about almost every poet she mentions with the same degree of intensity.

The analysis never sags, or finds itself puffed; it jogs at a good pace and is always capable of acceleration, even uphill, and of course any attempt to give shape to such shapelessness is obliged to tackle the inclines. *Beyond the Lyric* strikes a balance between humility and enthusiasm. There are omissions in the list of poets who are given space in this book but one is left with the feeling every possible inclusion would have been well

considered. Sampson knows that her first responsibility is to poetry, and it is the love of the art form which above all else shines through these pages, irrespective of poetry politics and shifting alliances. This book, like the light bulb inside the glass of milk Cary Grant carried upstairs in Hitchcock's *Suspicion*, is what it seems—brilliantly bright. It is only the mistrusting and suspicious who will suspect there is anything in the glass but milk, high in protein. It is only the querulous and peevish who will suspect it is anything other than for the good. So, yes, this book will have its detractors. But that is always the way with trailblazing, literary texts. Which takes us back to the courage.

Beyond the Lyric closes with an Afterword in the course of which Fiona Sampson attempts the seemingly impossible task of offering a coda to all that has gone before:

‘Poetry is no more composed independently of context than are volumes of philosophy, or recipes. That undramatic observation underlies this book, in which I’ve tried to outline the networks of alliance and influence, both on and off the page, that produce the poetry we enjoy in Britain today.’

This statement encapsulates the fair-minded, provocative tone which pervades whole book. It is a must-read for anyone who cares about poetry. The book will fulfil a major function: by saying British poetry has form, it will acquire more. This measured overview might just help some in preventing it from spiralling into deeper chaos.