The Writing Occurs as Song
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a Kelvin Corcoran Reader

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INTRODUCTION
This book offers a critical overview of the work of the British poet Kelvin Corcoran who, over nearly 30 years, has established a reputation as one of the most significant innovative British lyric poets; ‘a giant of the middle generation’ as Andrew Duncan has described him, placed between the radical poetics of the ’60s and ’70s and subsequent generations (Duncan Heresy 146). With the publication of 14 individual collections of poetry – including a New and Selected Poems in 2004 and a new and selected Greek Poems, For the Greek Spring, in 2013 – Corcoran has, according to Don Paterson in a review in The Observer ‘allied a strikingly individual intelligence to a genuinely musical sensibility.’ It is the widespread recognition of his critical intelligence and lyric precision that signals Corcoran as a leading inheritor of the British modernist tradition. It is also this critical appreciation from both mainstream and independent critics (Paterson and Duncan), alongside the selection of Helen Mania as the Poetry Book Society Choice in 2005, that perhaps marks Corcoran’s work as an exemplar of a trend in British lyric poetry over the past 20 years: what I have identified in two earlier books as the ‘Binary Myth’ and what other writers and commentators have been identifying for some time as ‘cusp’ poetry, on the border of varying traditions. If this, perhaps, helps to place Corcoran somewhere on the map of contemporary poetry, then paradoxically none of it matters greatly to him. What seems to solely matter is the writing, reading and lived experience of poetry.

The critical essays collected here examine Corcoran’s poetry from the publication of his first book, Robin Hood in the Dark Ages (1985), to Words Through A Hole… (2011). These essays were in preparation whilst For the Greek Spring (2013) was being published, and so mostly do not cover that book, although many of the poems in Greek Spring were published in earlier collections and are therefore referenced to those books. The contributors of these new essays represent a range of writing and academic backgrounds and demonstrate how varying critical approaches may illuminate a single oeuvre. The range of their approaches covers issues of place, identity and environment; the prose poem and ekphrasis; medicine; language and subjectivity; material conditions, postcolonialism and politics; Greece and England; myth and family myth; modernisms, and postmodern poetry and poetics, as well as the influences and traditions within which Corcoran’s work is placed.
The essays are arranged around three conversations I held with Kelvin in 2012 and 2013. Each conversation is accompanied by a number of critical essays and a more ‘personal reflection’ from someone familiar with both Kelvin Corcoran the poet and Kelvin the man. Conversation one opens up questions of the myths and traditions behind Kelvin’s poems, specifically those of (what he has sometimes called) ‘Eng-a-Land’ and his more recent focus on Greece. Themes from the conversation are developed in critical essays by David Herd on displacement and ‘going to town’; Ian Davidson on place in The Red and Yellow Book, and Jos Smith on the historical politics of the pastoral in relation to contemporary settings, Greece and the politics of place. The Greek poems are discussed extensively by Peter Riley and the personal reflection of Part One comes from Lee Harwood who charts some key developments, pleasures and themes across Corcoran’s oeuvre.

Conversation two moves on to examine poetic traditions, voice, song and the lyric, and is followed by critical essays from John Hall on song; Scott Thurston on the poetics and linguistic concerns of Lyric Lyric, and Simon Smith on the Late Modernist Lyric. The personal reflections from Kat Peddie in this section takes the form of a letter to Kelvin, focussing on the poet’s lyric voice. The third and final section of the book – ‘Approaches’ – opens up other aspects of Kelvin’s poetry. My own essay examines recurrent medical themes in Corcoran’s ‘autopathography’ – the medical poems of illness and recovery. Zoe Brigley Thompson writes on the ekphrastic sequences Your Thinking Tracts or Nations and Roger Hilton’s Sugar, while Martin Anderson’s essay extends some of the concerns raised there into a wider political discussion of empire and trade. Finally, Luke Kennard examines the techniques and approaches to a specific aspect of Corcoran’s work: the poems written in prose. The final conversation accordingly ranges through these varied aspects, alongside a final personal reflection from Alicia Stubbersfield, a poet who taught with Kelvin for several years. The book concludes with new poems from one of Kelvin’s current projects, Glenn Gould and Everything, and an up-to-date bibliography of his works.
Introduction

A study of Kelvin Corcoran’s poetry might usefully begin with his first significant encounters with poetry, at the University of Essex, where he studied English from 1975 to 1978, and where fellow poets Ian Davidson and John Muckle were also studying. He was tutored by Douglas Oliver for a year, reading books from other writers who had taught there: Ed Dorn, Ted Berrigan, Alice Notley, Tom Raworth and Robert Lowell. He also studied practical criticism under Ralph Hawkins, in whose classes he was introduced to the work of Louis Zukofsky, George Oppen, Charles Olson, Frank O’Hara, John Ashbery, Andrew Crozier, Peter Riley, J.H. Prynne and others. ‘Ralph Hawkins was generous,’ Corcoran has said. ‘My first copy of Olson’s Maximus Poems was a photocopy, like a tree’s worth! That was a discovery of considerable excitement, it was completely empowering. We were obliged to talk about the poems and I thought, I won’t be quiet (personal conversation). Around this time he also heard Basil Bunting reading, aged 75, an experience he describes as ‘overpowering’ and which ‘lit up the world for me’ (Allen & Duncan Talking 92). In a previous interview with Kelvin Corcoran, Andrew Duncan has raised the question about the existence of an ‘Essex School’ of poets, including Ralph Hawkins, Ian Davidson and Corcoran himself. Kelvin’s reply dismisses the school as non-existent. Yet it was clearly an environment which helped the young poet discover his craft, and several of this volume’s contributors raise it in their essays – Ian Davidson himself contributes an essay examining place in the early work of The Red and Yellow Book (1986).

Kelvin Corcoran went on to become an English teacher himself, at the same time beginning an MA at Warwick University. Alicia Stubbersfield’s personal reflection towards the end of this book reflects on that period of Corcoran’s working life and how it might have informed his poetry. Discussing the MA, Corcoran has said, ‘I don’t know how I thought I would do it. I started an MA, but I didn’t finish it. I was going to write about Peter Riley, but stopped, because of various family crises, which had to come first; having to deal with my mother’s death and my father’s alcoholism at the same time, which kept my hands quite full’ (personal conversation) – subjects that crop up again and again throughout his books. After leaving academia he carried on teaching and building a career, writing poetry, and having a family. Around this time (1985), Robert Vas Dias published Corcoran’s first book, Robin Hood in the Dark Ages, and thereafter writing poetry became his main focus. Corcoran has described this first publication as
'not a book, it's a collection of poems arranged in sections' (Talking 93). Such ‘arrangements’ have remained important throughout his work, resisting the contemporary predilection for the short, stand-alone lyric poem – Corcoran’s ambitions, whilst respecting the individual poem, have always seemed bigger, ‘linking the last poem in one book to the first in the next’ as if ‘I had the idea I was writing one long poem’ (96).

Existing critical essays on Corcoran’s poetry are few. Andrew Duncan has included commentaries on Corcoran in his books, and David Kennedy has recently published on the ekphrastic poems, alongside varied reviews and articles that have appeared in magazines and websites. Andrew Duncan argues that Corcoran’s poetic technique is based on ‘dialectical switches’ (Heresy 147), identifying a process in which ‘a poem starts out with shared stories, ‘myths’ about England, and then jumps to similar myths about South Korea. The juxtaposition reveals a superordinate category – allowing thoughts about the nature of culture’ (147). Whilst it is true that Corcoran’s work is certainly dialectical – something he alludes to more than once in the conversations here – it is also true that many other forms of poetry (even ones that Duncan might identify as far more mainstream) similarly allow for ‘thoughts about the nature of culture’. So what is it about Corcoran’s work that is different?

Corcoran clearly uses temporal, spatial and contextual ‘jump cuts’ to bring different time frames, locations and subjects, into close proximity. Duncan describes this as obviously similar to ‘a director cutting between different cameras’ (Heresy 150), although Corcoran’s work is far less visually representational than film. In his essay here, Luke Kennard extends the ‘director’ analogy in a discussion of Corcoran’s prose poems, examining how these works are more like films of the interior world of the mind and language; films that are free to move with the rapid parallelism of myth. And it is to this word ‘myth’ that we will often find ourselves returning: from personal, local and family myths, to those of nations and whole cultures; an encompassing classicism made possible by Modernism, but reinvented by Corcoran with the cooler possibilities of the postmodern.

Alongside the innovations offered by post/modernist technique, Corcoran’s other major contribution to the resources of the late modernist lyric resides in what he finds in the politics of the personal. Duncan has noted that despite the avant-garde surface, ‘much of Corcoran’s poetry is extremely emotional, and the accumulation of evidence of
the outside world just involves us more firmly in his emotions about politics, love, and family tragedy’ (Failure 276). Such arguments clearly place Corcoran in the ‘innovative tradition’ of British poetry, but with those words ‘extremely emotional’ and ‘love and family tragedy’ also highlight a tendency of the lyric poem towards personal expression, domestic realism and post 1950s ‘confession’. With this traditional lyric subject matter underlying much of the work, is Corcoran really a lyric innovator? Even Duncan says that ‘It is hard to point to any feature of Corcoran’s style which was not developed in the Sixties’ (277).

In his essay, Ian Davidson argues that a poet who only asks the reader to share in feelings of loss, or only to understand the maternal role in the poems, for example, is hardly adding to the resources of the lyric; a point that Corcoran himself makes in our first conversation. But Davidson detects greater complexities in Corcoran’s technique that complicate and deepen the lyric. Furthermore, Corcoran’s poems clearly follow on from the work of poets such as Tom Raworth and Lee Harwood, who also developed techniques from post-war American poets. Given what Corcoran has said about his education in these poets’ work at Essex University, the influences of style and technique are not surprising. Yet the apparent dispassion of paratactic collage, with all its possibilities of postmodern irony is, perhaps, paradoxical when read alongside the clearly personal and overtly emotional. Corcoran is unafraid to let the paradox stand.

Corcoran’s second publication, for example, The Red and Yellow Book (1986), was written, according to the author, when he was ‘overwhelmed by my grief when my mother died’ (Allen & Duncan 93). Corcoran describes his own technique in these early works as one in which ‘I collage away quite happily with the domestic, the intense personal grief, Heidegger’ (94). There is a distanced, collaged coolness tempering the work, but also an emotional directness, bringing the two together ‘quite happily’. It is this even-handed approach that leads to Corcoran agreeing with Peter Riley’s assertion that ‘in poetry, the most intimate, the utterly personal is the most common, the most shared experience. I agree’ (97), a theme to which he returns in the conversations of this book.

It is, perhaps, this interesting paradox in his work that accounts for Corcoran’s real innovation, and which has elicited comments such as this from Ken Edwards: ‘He collages domestic English and found language in these lyric poems, and he does it with tenderness, wit, sharp political
awareness and quick-burning energy’ (in *City Limits*, and used as a blurb on *The Red and Yellow Book*). If we are used to equating descriptors such as ‘sharp’, ‘politically aware’ and ‘energetic’ with ‘innovative’ lyric poetry, then perhaps we are not so much so with ‘tender’; an adjective more often than not associated with traditional lyricism. Lee Harwood himself picks up on the ‘tenderness’ in Corcoran’s work, noting again this fascinating personal/political question:

His poems – dense, intense, filled with sharp fast thought – expose the horror, the ‘swinish morality’ of this world, its fraud and pretence, and the cruel greed of its rulers. The outrage is only lightened by the small acts and visions of tenderness in our lives. (Lee Harwood, cover blurb on *TCL*, Pig Press 1989)

In his personal reflection here, Lee Harwood revisits this dust-jacket blurb and finds it still pertinent: there is of course no reason why the coolness of postmodern technique, and the emotion of personal expression should not coexist in a poem. Lee Harwood himself, and now Kelvin Corcoran, are perhaps two of the best-known exponents of this in the contemporary British lyric poem.

A key to understanding how these tensions might coexist in Corcoran’s work may lie in his use and understanding of myth. In discussing his extensive use of myths, Corcoran identifies the broader relevance of ancient myth to contemporary situations and problems:

Imagine that the classical edifice of mythology is no such thing but an overlaying and retelling of competing localised myths and songs, arising out of a sort of civic pride, giving back meaning to the specific group. The ancient landscape overlays the modern and I see the mythology as local and useful and not detached from the everyday. (Allen & Duncan 95)

He goes on to say that ‘I think [myth] is also a sort of code which tells us exactly what is happening in the present Oil Wars for instance’ (95). For Corcoran ‘Troy was a trade war for shipping routes and wheat, a newly self-styled western power against the east with Helen’s abduction as a tabloid excuse for action’ (96). There is much to unpick here, from mythic and socio-political structures, to critiques of empire, and the role of the quotidian in both poetry and politics. These themes are afforded appropriate discussion at length in several of the essays here, notably in
Martin Anderson’s piece on empire and trade and Peter Riley’s reading of the Greek poems. For Corcoran, these things are all of a piece: the ancient is modern; the personal and local is political; story and language are the ways in which we understand and communicate ourselves, from the individual to the civic to the national, crossing borders and times; the mythic, historic and political worlds are what we think with.

§

On a personal note, I first came to Kelvin’s work through the Paladin anthology *the new british poetry* (1988) and, around the same time, a reading he gave at the Subvoicive poetry reading series run by Gilbert Adair in the upstairs room of a London pub. Walking home with another poet that night, I remember waxing lyrical about Corcoran as some kind of postmodern troubadour: politically astute but lyrically tender, engaged in alternative writing processes I was just getting to grips with. Above all, he struck me as songful. Since then I have followed everything he has written: there are few poets who possess not only a consummate lyric technique, but a pertinent and persuasive outlook in which politics, history, poetry, music and the personal give the fullest picture of a life lived through poetry as though it was meant; as if it really mattered; a profound fusion of technical facility with a committed world view.

Over a decade later, when I was directing the Arvon Foundation centre at Totleigh Barton, I invited Kelvin to tutor a writing course for a week with Lee Harwood and a dedicated group of student writers from Tonbridge. Despite the drama of the whole team coming down with the afflictions of an unidentified water-borne bug (washed into the water supply via a careless farmer’s effluvia), I remember this as the beginnings of a friendship that has further cemented my fascination with the poems. On the course, Kelvin avoided all the usual creative writing advice of ‘Show-Don’t-Tell’ and ‘Writing from the Senses’, and went straight for the lyric jugular: he played the students a recording of Basil Bunting reading *Briggflatts* and asked them to listen intently and then to sketch out a diagram of the musical dynamics of the poetry. It was an embodiment of Kelvin’s own technique – the lived and working proof that *The Writing Occurs As Song*. This book is borne out of these contexts: a friendship, a long standing admiration of this poet’s
extraordinary oeuvre, and a conviction that Kelvin Corcoran’s poetry is amongst the most significant, innovative lyric poetry of our time.

Andy Brown

Works Cited


