

PAUL EVANS

*The Door of Taldir*

—Selected Poems—

Edited by Robert Sheppard

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## *The Door of Taldir*



## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Paul Evans was born in Cardiff in 1945, where his father was a vicar, although the family moved later to Surrey. After schooling at Llandovery College in South Wales, he went to Sussex University to study English between 1963–5. With Paul Matthews he edited the magazine *Eleventh Finger*, which published many of the leading British and American poets of the day. In 1965 Evans married Rhiannon Davies, and they moved to London, where their daughter Catrin was born in 1966. From 1967 Evans worked on his M.Phil on Robert Duncan, under the tutelage of Eric Mottram. Living in Brighton again, he worked at a number of part-time jobs. In 1970–1 he lectured for a year at Essex University, where he co-edited Voiceprint Editions. His second daughter, Lucy, was born in 1971. The same year, *February*, the first of his four full-length collections, containing work stretching back to the mid-1960s, was published by Fulcrum and it received the Alice Hunt Bartlett Prize from the Poetry Society the following year. During the 1970s and 1980s—during which he published more books, including *The Manual for the Perfect Organisation of Tourneys* and *Sweet Lucy*—he worked at many part-time academic, teaching and bibliographical jobs, but chiefly administered the American Studies Resource Centre at the Polytechnic of Central London, where he organised important poetry conferences until 1988. In 1979, Evans moved to Liverpool, where he lived with Sally Evans until 1987, and worked both there and in London, including part-time work for the University of Liverpool and the Windows Project. Windows published *The Mountain Suite*, with illustrations by frequent collaborator Peter Bailey, in Liverpool in 1982, which dealt with his love of mountain climbing (his other love was playing tennis). His last volume, *The Sofa Book*, with illustrations by another collaborator, Peter Wilson, appeared in 1987. Evans married Nathalie Blondel in 1989, and their daughter Cecily was born the same year. Paul Evans died in 1991 in a climbing accident on Snowdon. His manuscript *Romantic Relics* remained unpublished.

## ALIVE IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Answering a question I posed to him in 1982 about his earliest poetic influences, Paul Evans replied, in strictest telegraphese: ‘My exposure to unfamiliar poetry (which incs. Pound, for instance—already a half-century *old*, of course, by the time I came to it) went along with excited discovery in other fields—esp. music, painting (and sex).’<sup>1</sup> Confining ourselves to his purely literary discoveries—traces of the other fields may be found scattered throughout his work, whether Eric Dolphy, Casper David Friedrich, (or his lovers)—he was lucky to land in the right place at the right time, that is Brighton and the nearby University of Sussex at Falmer. ‘I knew of the work of the Beat writers—esp. Kerouac & Ginsberg—by early 60s. Was introduced by Amer. poet George Dowden in 63/4 to Amer. contemporary work (a) ‘Deep Image’ poets Rothenberg & Kelly (as they called themselves then) (b) roughly, poets in Don Allen’s *New American Poetry 45–60* anthology’. This anthology (I found questioning other writers too) was a common early and seminal discovery of the poets later called by Eric Mottram the ‘British Poetry Revival’. (‘I’ve always been amused by the religio-medical implications of that term,’ remarked Evans, with his characteristically sharp wit.) Evans had the advantage of an extra-curricular mentor in the guise of Dowden, who lived in Brighton, and of his own enterprise while still an undergraduate: ‘Early contacts with Brit. poets associated with “revival” . . . came via classic route of publishing magazine with Paul Matthews (*11<sup>th</sup> Finger*)’ (1965–68). This journal published Jerome Rothenberg and others, and also introduced Evans to the work and person of Lee Harwood, who, along with Matthews, was to be his closest poetry contact for many years.

In the earliest American poetry he read, he ‘was esp. interested in Creeley & Blackburn (i.e. in terms of technique I was and still am attracted to “tight” “lyric” / “song” forms—though admiring those few who can handle extended “open” forms with skill)’; the last must include Robert Duncan, on whom he conducted postgraduate research. But it is with the other American Black



Mountain Robert—Creeley—that he shares a lyrical tightness and concision, but without the breathy, nervous lineation. Evans favoured flow rather than abutment, restraint rather than tension, crispness rather than emotional excess, wit rather than earnestness.

I first met Evans in the 1970s and published his work on my cassette tape magazine *1983*.<sup>2</sup> Recorded in his flat in Hove during February 1976, the set includes a reading of the then incomplete sequence ‘Dark &’. I have always been impressed and moved by this meditative, lyrical sequence, and also by what Mottram called Evans’ ‘dry but intimate voice’ on the recordings we made.<sup>3</sup> When Evans self-deprecatingly remarked, ‘My own lack of stamina leads me to favour “tight” forms, possibly placed within a loose, ongoing structure,’ he underestimates the power of his sequences (such as ‘Dark &’ or ‘A Sequence’, omitted from this collection on grounds of its length and indivisibility, but included in *February* (1972)). This serial sensibility also points towards the more metrical and rhyming sequences of *The Mountain Suite* (1982) and *The Sofa Book* (1987), but one should not forget that *The Manual for the Perfect Organisation of Tourneys* (1979), in which ‘Dark &’ first appeared, was a stylistically various book: precisely a ‘manual’ of cut-ups, collages, odes, extemporised poems; there is even a single poem in strict metre, ‘Traditional: The Hidden Peak’, which looked at the time like an isolated experiment.

However, by 1982, when he was answering my questions on the ‘British Poetry Revival’ and his part in it, Evans responded equivocally: ‘I suppose I would place my work in this context—but not as an “open form” poet: I’ve always admired as many “closed form” poets as “open”—and in some ways regard myself as a traditional English lyric poet, with traditional preoccupations.’ The repetition of the word ‘traditional’ here—we will pass over the word ‘English’ from this poet of deep Welsh inheritance—signals that he was already preparing to make the big stylistic leap of his career, to write in traditional forms. He seemed as bemused by this as were many of his keenest readers at the time. He told Eric Mottram on the phone: ‘I’m into rhyme and wonder why.’<sup>4</sup> At first an evenness of line underpinned his evolving lyricism, in

*Sweet Lucy* (1983) for example, but by the mid to late 1980s, when he was working on the poems of his unpublished collection, *Romantic Relics*—which he seems earlier to have considered calling *Half-Baked Juvenile*—the inherited rhetoric of earlier poetry abounds. It seems to bypass a modern prosodic master such as Auden and return to the poetic form and diction of the late eighteenth century, and he was able to engage with the full range of poetic artifice in formal elegies, but also to pull this artifice inside out for comic effect. In the late 1980s, an era that was consolidating an image of alternative British poetry—say, in the influential Paladin anthology *The New British Poetry* of 1988, in which Evans is represented by four examples of work from *The Manual...* and *Sweet Lucy*, though it also includes a selection of five poems from *The Sofa Book* with their subtle, hesitant, almost apologetic rhymes—such work would have looked particularly idiosyncratic. Neither was it likely to have appealed to the poetic mainstream, which was consumed by an interest in prosy metaphorisation and a belated loosening of metre at this time. Indeed, my own repeated praise for *The Manual...* derived from my feeling that its stylistic restlessness was a precursor to a coming decade of radical artifice.<sup>5</sup> But Evans took another route, and investigated the radicality of artifice in the original sense. Read alongside Veronica Forrest-Thomson's use of traditional poetic artifice or Douglas Oliver's contemporaneous use of the stanza of the *Pearl* poem, this late work does not look so lonely—but it is still as unique as it was untimely.

I have approached the body of work Paul Evans left us for this selection with a number of simple principles: I have attempted to combine the best poems I could find while leaving some space to demonstrate the full range of the work chronologically, from uncollected work at either end of his career, and to show the full range of his poetry stylistically, from the free to the formal, from the surreal to the most objectivist. I have excluded the prose of *O.I.N.C.: An adventure story written to accompany 13 drawings by Peter Bailey* (1975) on grounds of genre. From only one other publication, another indivisible sequence, the booklet *Current Affairs* (1970), have I found it impossible to select poetry,

although the ecstatic invocation of poem 11, 'it's exciting to be alive/in the twentieth century the sun/ beating on your head tells you so', deserves to be treated (and repeated) as a motto leading into his poetry and its poetics.<sup>6</sup>

Asked how one's beliefs enter poetry, Evans replied to my questionnaire interrogatively, 'As translucently as possible?' Well he might question this because his poetry reveals a number of recurring themes, particularly the relationship of the human to the cosmos, of how consciousness fits in with the reality it filters, and of the responsibility the individual owes to others and to the body politic (and to its horrors on the radio, TV or in newsprint, which spill over into a number of lyrics). In a letter to Eric Mottram from the early 1970s, he expresses his poetics' stance toward reality:

When I'm at my best, I don't draw or tear a hole in the world—there is an exchange between me and things outside me so much so that I begin to have distinct feelings of merging with the forms of earth, like the manshaped boulders, the cunts and breasts of the hills in Mid-Wales, the silver birches I know in the Mawddach valley ...<sup>7</sup>

He opposed this to 'the Neo-Platonic view of Kathleen Raine, who gives so much symbiotic meaning to everything that we are bound to come out as mind-stuck-in-matter ...'<sup>8</sup> There is—throughout his work—a general refusal of the guru-like posturing of authority-figures: personally, intellectually and politically, particularly in 'Lines Addressed to Ifor Davies', yet when, for example, he figures himself weeping at an atrocity committed on a child, he is self-consciously aware of the uselessness and even self-pitying nature of the gesture, even as he feels compelled to record it in one of his poems for '6 Watercolours by Peter Bailey'. Like Hannah Arendt, he recognises that 'compassion is one of the passions and pity is a sentiment'.<sup>9</sup>

This, finally, suggests that the self that appears in the poetry—an appearance several of his best poems agonise over—is very

close to the historical Paul Evans that even the spare objectivism of the early free verse or the ornate formal distance of the late poems cannot obscure, although, as in 'Romantic Relics', the last poem of my selection, he never misses an opportunity for self-deprecation. But as Ian Robinson, the publisher of *A Manual...* suggests, in a comprehensively perceptive description of Evans, this too is a facet of the gentle and sharp man who wrote these poems:

Paul . . . talked very knowledgeably about poets and poetry and people. Unlike a lot of poets, he didn't seem very concerned to push himself forward, and this, maybe, has something to do with why his poetry is not better known. My main impression was of a man who knew who he was and where he was in the world, but not with any sense of rigidity or portentousness or superiority. He was as he was, simply himself, whether one liked it or not; certain of some of his opinions, uncertain of others, flexible but informed and, I think, totally open to experience—all this allied to a nice ironic sense of humour, and a slightly sceptical attitude to people and the world.<sup>10</sup>

Robert Sheppard

- <sup>1</sup> This and the unattributed quotations that follow come from this source, a letter to myself, dated April 19 (1982), part of my doctoral work on contemporary British poetry.
- <sup>2</sup> The master tapes are deposited with the National Sound Archive, as are possibly the masters of Evans' unreleased Stream Record of the 1960s.
- <sup>3</sup> Mottram, Eric, 'Paul Evans: A Personal Memoir' in eds. Bailey, Peter, and Harwood, Lee, *The Empty Hill: Memoirs and Praises of Paul Evans*. Brighton: Skylark Press, 1992: 66.
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid: 68.
- <sup>5</sup> My review of *A Manual...* appears in Bailey and Harwood, op. cit, but earlier versions were published in *Iron* 34, 1982, and *Ninth Decade* 1, 1983.

- <sup>6</sup> Evans, Paul, *Current Affairs*. Gillingham: Arc, 1970: np.
- <sup>7</sup> Mottram, op.cit.: 66-7.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid: 67. I cannot help feeling that the word 'symbiotic' might be a misreading of 'symbolic' in the transcription of Evans' letter.
- <sup>9</sup> Arendt, Hannah, *On Revolution*. New York: Viking, 1963: 84.
- <sup>10</sup> Robinson, Ian, 'Paul Evans: A Book, Two Meetings and a Dream', in Bailey and Harwood, op.cit.: 85.



## THE VALLEY

When she crosses her legs  
two pale moons of flesh appear  
above the green stockings.

When she rises from the chair  
they dissolve into dark water.  
I follow her through the door,

Up the valley of white stone,  
the moonlight upon it,  
the fish in the silver stream.

Now she ties my eyes with thread  
to the tips of her very round breasts.  
She surrounds herself with the beasts of lovers.

Black mares graze with unicorns  
in the moonlight, among white stones.

I close with her  
in the bed of the stream  
which enters my head at the ears.

I am water.  
I have lived here before  
with small stones in my hair.

## A PRAISE FOR RHIANNON

When my woman moves  
she does not  
break into a thousand pieces,  
into air.

Her body is of earth,  
upright  
on beautiful animal legs

like a creature of forests will stand  
among trees  
quite silent,  
one of them.



*from* **TALDIR POEMS**

*for Dewi-Prys Thomas*

*. . . epiphanies of the spirit there  
and a chronicle of that time also . . .*

3

Keeping still  
means stopping in the courtyard  
with my back to the wall .

A tree screams  
inwardly, as an owl shifts  
in the branches .

All night I heard him  
breathing on my pillow .

Now he listens to my heart  
beating in the yard .

4

A black cow, carrying  
the hill on its horns, breaks  
the green ferns down.

Distant confusion  
of insects  
breeds in the ear.

All sounds concur.

The curved horn  
tears the earth,  
loose rock follows.

Scared birds  
leave the area, rising  
on her cry.

She is calling  
for two companions  
left behind,

black beast  
weeping  
on a green hillside.

## 6 *For Rhys*

Dead, left in  
the dark after battle,  
return to stone,

leaving no trace  
of blood, breath  
or bone.

Only the rain  
seeps  
through the heaped-up stones.

This night  
a certain light  
dropped down,

releasing that  
withheld by them  
so long, making

these warriors' bodies  
gleam again  
from stone.

7

A pair of boots,  
a jacket.

Cracked  
at the root they found him,

bright ice  
curled round him,

frost  
in his pocket.

No creature  
crept near to disturb him,

scared by fire  
when the moon was upon him.

*The lifting of clouds  
is the work of gods,  
the raising of clouds  
produces gold.*

No longer white, the fields dazzle.  
The lower slopes vibrate  
as golden sheep  
cross and recross them.

Blades of light start up  
from openings in the field  
where the full light moves  
beyond the pine-enclosure.

This is the vision we have waited  
Children watch  
in pure amazement  
from the windows of Ty'n Llidiart.

We see that gold  
the Masters told us  
was a symbol for the soul  
and its light plays over us.

*The lifting of clouds  
is the work of gods,  
the raising of clouds  
produces gold.*