

## **Neil Corcoran's *Negotiations*: A Critic and His Contexts**

*Judith Woolf*

*Negotiations: Poems in their Contexts*

Neil Corcoran

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In this perceptive collection of essays on modern Irish, British and American poetry, Neil Corcoran demonstrates how the poets he discusses created contexts for themselves and each other, while illuminating the complex links between personal experience (including his own), re-imagined mythologies, and the variously catastrophic history of the twentieth century: ‘the First World War (in [David] Jones and Robert Graves), the Holocaust (in W. S. Graham and Sylvia Plath), the Northern Irish Troubles (in Seamus Heaney and Ciaran Carson), and the violence of colonial and post-colonial histories (in Elizabeth Bishop)’.<sup>1</sup> In addition, his concern with ‘poetic *ekphrasis* [...] the relationship between poems and paintings whose long history extends back to Homer’s description of the shield of Achilles in the *Odyssey*’ (p. x) adds a visual theme to the book which helps to link together the sometimes-eclectic enthusiasms of a critic with a good eye as well as a keen ear and a well-stocked memory. His opening chapters obliquely relate David Jones, Robert Graves and Seamus Heaney to each other, with T. S. Eliot, Ted Hughes and Philip Larkin as attendant voices, while the second section on ekphrastic poets includes Elizabeth Bishop, Sylvia Plath and W. S. Graham, and finds a fitting conclusion in Ciaran Carson’s ‘final book, which is also one of his finest’: *Still Life* (p. 250).

In his preface, Corcoran assures us that the way he negotiates with his subject matter will ‘involve forms of what has traditionally been known as “close reading”’ (p. ix), but ‘close reading’ for

Corcoran turns out to mean not just detailed attention to the text but also reading in the light of the body of literature to which he – along with the poets he discusses, and the poets whom they influenced – is inseparably close, making *Negotiations* a book of intertextual echoes. To take just one example, his detailed and persuasive reading of Robert Graves's 'The Straw' begins with references to metaphors of divination, and the use of rhetorical questions, in the work of Seamus Heaney, who himself described 'the way the straw works' in Graves's poem as 'like a bare wire conducting a live current',<sup>2</sup> and goes on to reference Auden's use of the art historian Erwin Panofsky's term *paysage moralisé*, the transformation of Tereus into a hoopoe in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Andrew Marvell's 'The Definition of Love', and the use of the word 'undone' by writers ranging from John Donne, Shakespeare and Milton to Bob Dylan, before finally showing us why all of this is relevant:

'The Straw' is indeed 'intensely charged', and what it is charged with is the energy of a long line of English poetry, and specifically of a poetry of love and sexuality which it steadily absorbs and then refracts. (p. 49)

Corcoran's reading of the poem nevertheless remains fully alive to the anguish of the 'emotional cataclysm' which the trembling of the straw portends (p. 45).

To love too strongly may be to terrify the loved one into negative reaction and rejection; but clearly, for this speaker, to love at all is to love too strongly. Loving is therefore inevitably itself its own undoing. (p. 49)

The two things one hopes for from a book by a distinguished critic of modern poetry is a new slant on poems one already knows well – of which this chapter on Graves is a fine example – and an introduction to poems one has not yet read. Readers may discover some of the latter in the unexpected comparisons which make *Negotiations* into a kind of anthology, although one which requires

some online searching for texts. Corcoran puts poems side by side in a way that can illuminate them – as does the suggestion that Michael Longley’s hauntingly and yet prosaically beautiful love poem ‘The Linen Industry’ is ‘the most Gravesian post-Graves poem in the English language’ (p. 37) – or turn them into electric wires stripped bare, as when the ‘wet red stone’ of ‘Sandstone Keepsake’, which Heaney himself compares to the heart that, in Dante’s *Inferno*, ‘damned Guy de Montfort to the boiling flood’,<sup>3</sup> is laid next to a more recent horror which would have been only too vividly real to David Jones and Robert Graves: the ‘red wet | Thing’ the speaker vainly struggles to cover up or forget, which is all that is left of the once ‘quick’ body of a young soldier in Ivor Gurney’s ‘To His Love’.<sup>4</sup>

Corcoran’s concern with the wider contexts from which poetry emerges means that, as well as poems themselves, he also discusses Derek Mahon’s literary criticism, Suze Rotolo’s autobiographical insights into the early songs of Bob Dylan, and ‘the extraordinary letters’ which belie W. S. Graham’s view of himself as ‘a poet determined to be proseless’ (Corcoran, p. 208), while his chapter on Elizabeth Bishop begins with a detailed description of her haunting collage construction *Anjinhos* [Angels], ‘inspired by the drowning of a young girl in Rio de Janeiro’ (p. 144), in which a ‘solitary sandal appears to be set on the shingle before an incoming or outgoing tide of angels on a blue background, a sort of shabby eternity of advertising-material cut-outs, a shallow heaven’ (p. 146), an image whose separate elements he then uses as a key in his analysis of her poems.

Bishop’s version of Octavio Paz’s celebration of the collage constructions of Joseph Cornell, ‘Objects & Apparitions’, includes the line ‘Memory weaves, unweaves the echoes’,<sup>5</sup> and Corcoran’s word picture of Bishop’s own construction stirred a memory which I had to find an image of *Anjinhos* to confirm: the ‘cut-out heads of young female angels’ (p. 144), which form its background are in fact that feature of all 1950s little girls’ childhoods, paper scraps. We used to trade these at school break and, even in Presbyterian Edinburgh, particularly desirable angels might be worth quite a number of kittens or baskets of roses. What I had not expected was to be able to trace the

actual scraps used in the collage, which turn out to be vintage lithographed die cut paper scraps made in the 1950s by the Paul B. Zoecke Company of Berlin, and still obtainable online. They were sold in large sheets to be cut up by the seller: you can see the white connecting strips in Bishop's collage. The drowned child might well have played with paper angels like these, and the likelihood adds its own pathos to her memory, since this 'tawdry' heavenly host was powerless to save her (p. 145).

Corcoran's wide-ranging exploration of how poetry grows out of, and reflects, its contexts begins in 1928, when David Jones started work on *In Parenthesis*, and ends in 2019 with Ciaran Carson's *Still Life*, published in the month of its author's death from cancer. (It is worth noting that out of all the poets who feature in *Negotiations*, only Bob Dylan, two of whose early ballads Corcoran dissects, is still a survivor.) Carson's seventeen poems, which all take their starting point from 'encounters with paintings', are 'acts of devoted engagement: meticulous, intense and vividly immediate' (p. 232), but they also tell the story of a successful marriage, and of the ultimately unsuccessful treatment of a fatal illness and look back on the troubled history of Carson's native Belfast, and further back to the bombing of Hiroshima. Carson's engagement with works by artists including Monet, Velázquez, Cezanne, Canaletto, and above all Poussin – as well as with paintings by contemporary Irish painters which he owns himself, such as Angela Hackett's *Lemons on a Moorish Plate* and Jeffrey Morgan's *Hare Bowl* – also necessarily involves an engagement with 'art-historical books and articles and other texts from which the poems quote, sometimes quite extensively' (p. 242). The most moving of these quotations occurs in the second of the three poems devoted to paintings by Poussin, where Carson incorporates a lengthy passage taken from the art critic Tom Lubbock's description of *Landscape with the Ashes of Phocion*, from his *Great Works: Fifty Paintings Explored*, quoting it verbatim but fitting it seamlessly into the metrical pattern of his own verse, before telling us that 'Musically enthused', he had read the piece aloud as if to take delighted possession of its 'cadences of assonance'<sup>6</sup> with their

lovely successions of vowel sounds. The unspoken and heart-breaking subtext is one which Corcoran goes on to reveal.

In his chapter on Graves, he had perceptively noted that ‘it is sometimes almost as though an element of ekphrasis inheres in Graves’s work without the presence of any pre-existent painting’ (Corcoran, p. 40), a thought which leads to the idea that ‘Conversation Piece’, the first of the Graves poems he discusses, may in fact be a ‘pattern’ or ‘figure’ poem because ‘the shapes made by the verses on the page [...] resemble upturned chairs’ (p. 41). Here, he picks up Carson’s own suggestion that on the printed page the poems of *Still Life* will resemble ‘a tree | Or a shrub with a dense central trunk – arboreal’,<sup>7</sup> and tells us ‘It is not impossible [...] that figuring his form as a tree, Carson was also responding to another book by Tom Lubbock which he must have known well and whose effort is continuous with his own’ (Corcoran, p. 246). While Carson, at the height of his poetic powers but ‘on the verge of the posthumous’, writes ‘urgently, but with remarkable creative calm’ the final poems which ‘will preserve his trace’ (p. 236), Lubbock’s *Until Further Notice, I Am Alive* is a journal describing the devastating loss of language, of which he is being progressively robbed by the brain tumour from which he will soon die. Its closing words, which need to be given the space they occupy on the last sparse page, are

The final thing. The illiterate. The dumb.  
Speech?  
Quiet but still something?  
Noises?  
Nothing?

My body. My tree.

After that it becomes simply the world.<sup>8</sup>

Julian Bell, in his review of Lubbock’s book, aptly describes this ending as ‘exiting on a keel of high poetry’.<sup>9</sup> If Corcoran is right, the arboreal shape of Carson’s poems, as well as being a ‘quasi-

organic response to the actual trees of Belfast' (Corcoran, p. 246), adds a silent tribute to his already eloquent acknowledgement of the poetic power of Lubbock's brilliant prose, illustrating yet another of the many ways in which poems can negotiate with 'other poems and poetic forms' (p. ix).

Critics such as Corcoran, who demonstrate by example that clarity is a form of wit, are badly needed these days, especially when they make us look more closely at poets whose work we thought we already knew. In my case, his insightful account of how new poems are 'negotiated into being' (p. ix) has proved to be the starting point for poems of my own, leading me to write both 'A Hatful of Larks: Reimagining Robert Graves's 'Love Without Hope', published in the 2023 issue of *The Robert Graves Review*,<sup>10</sup> and my own response to Carson's *Still Life*:

**A Lemon from a Moorish Plate**  
*for Ciaran Carson*

a tinge of green in a still life of lemons

makes you set out a real one on a saucer  
to await the living verdigris of mould

taken under your notice everything moves forward  
change and decay defy the stock-still moment  
as the hares run round the painted bowl – yet when

like that stub of lead from your onyx propelling pencil  
your genial expansive voice falls silent  
it leaves us with an aftertaste of horror

in your final poem the *Fatsia japonica*  
reminds us of the victims of Hiroshima  
the peeling ceiling rose the dead of Belfast

our mind's eye still suffused with Yves Klein blue  
we close the book to mourn you and remember  
you never told us what happened to the lemon

**Judith Woolf's** main academic research areas are twentieth century Italian-Jewish writers, especially Primo Levi and Natalia Ginzburg; life-writing, especially in relation to the Holocaust; and narrative patterns in European literature. She is a translator from both Italian and Old Icelandic, and her work as a creative writer includes fiction, poetry and libretti. Her latest novel, *The Case of the Campus Cat* (Cranthorpe Millner, 30 July 2024) is being sold in aid of the charity Doctors Without Borders.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Neil Corcoran, *Negotiations: Poems in their Contexts* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2023), p. x.

<sup>2</sup>Seamus Heaney, *Poetry Review*, 84. 3 (1994), 19–20. Qtd by Corcoran, p. 46.

<sup>3</sup>Seamus Heaney, 'Sandstone Keepsake', from *Station Island*, in *Opened Ground: Poems 1966–1996* (London: Faber, 2002), p. 217.

<sup>4</sup>Ivor Gurney, 'To His Love', in *Poetry of the First World War: An Anthology*, ed. by Tim Kendall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 121.

<sup>5</sup>Elizabeth Bishop, 'Objects & Apparitions', in *The Complete Poems 1927–1979* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1984), p. 275.

<sup>6</sup>Ciaran Carson, *Still Life* (Winston-Salem, NC: Wake Forest University Press, 2020), p. 50.

<sup>7</sup>Carson, p. 34.

<sup>8</sup>Tom Lubbock, *Until Further Notice, I Am Alive* (London: Granta Books, 2012), p. 145.

<sup>9</sup>Julian Bell, review of 'Until Further Notice, I am Alive by Tom Lubbock', *Guardian* (Friday 23 March 2012)

<<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/mar/23/until-further-notice-lubbock-review>> [accessed 14 April 2024]

<sup>10</sup> Judith Woolf, 'A Hatful of Larks: Reimagining Robert Graves's 'Love Without Hope'', *Robert Graves Review*, 1.3 (2023), 435451.

<<https://robertgravesreview.org/essay.php?essay=443&tab=>>> [accessed 7 May 2023]