

C. K. Williams

Wait

Bloodaxe

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By Paul Batchelor

“I was traversing the maze of my brain: corridors, corners, strange, narrow caverns, dead ends...” So begins “Brain” – though it would make an equally apt opening line for any number of C. K. Williams’s poems. Since his breakthrough 1977 collection *With Ignorance*, Williams has become uncomfortably skilful at pursuing the convolutions of the mind (or at least, the educated, liberal, Western mind) as it reaches out or recoils, projecting and then berating itself; and the way this self-correction immediately feeds back into the echo chamber.

The most fleeting encounter can trigger rhapsodic meditations. In “On the Métro” Williams takes a seat beside an attractive young woman. When she inadvertently brushes his leg, he immediately qualifies the contact: “I understand that in no way is she offering more than this, and in truth I have no desire for more”. Nevertheless, it recalls a similar encounter in the school library, when he sat next to a girl and their feet touched. After several minutes of trembling flirtation, the young Williams makes a horrible discovery: “it wasn’t her flesh my flesh for that gleaming time had pressed, but the table leg.” Although lightly told, the anecdote crystallises a genuine anxiety in his work that such essential human contact will prove to be an illusion.

Williams, then, is a poet with a subject: whether and how an individual can transcend “that invisible barrier between you and the world”. He explores his territory in exquisite detail; but when he strays beyond its parameters, for example into nature or politics, the world of his poetry becomes alarmingly thin. In “Fish” the poet finds the dismembered head of a fish on the sidewalk. The head is described complacently as “largish, pointy, perhaps a pike’s”; but Williams doesn’t need the fish to be anything specific: it simply provides him with the trite reflection that life hurts and comes to an end. Most of *Wait*’s many nature poems (“Wasps”, “Rats”, “Cows”, “Frogs” etc) fail to engage closely with their subjects, settling for flabby generalisation or anthropomorphic description. “Ponies” at least has Williams’s full attention: “With their shaggy, winter-coarse coats, they seem stubbier than ever, / more diminutive, toylike...” Vivid as this is, it seems small beer beside the dynamic investigations into consciousness that Williams provides elsewhere.

Wait is divided into four sections, and the fourth consists of a single four-page poem, “Jew on Bridge”. The poem is possibly Williams’s best, and towers over everything else in the collection. It begins with Raskolnikov crossing the Neva on his aimless, desperate wandering:

Then, on the bridge, hanging out of the plot like an arm from a car,
no more function than that in the plot, car, window, arm, even less,

there, on the bridge, purposeless, plotless, not even a couch of his own: Jew.

Since Dostoevsky did not bequeath the Jew so much as an adjective, Williams gets to work, his trademark long lines moving surely and inevitably from Dostoevsky's casual anti-Semitism to the Holocaust. The voice is pitch-perfect, at once intimate and expansive, allowing Williams to deal respectfully and convincingly with the fates of Paul Celan and Walter Benjamin as well as members of his own family (his father happened to be a Paul, his grandfather a Benjamin). The way Williams balances personal hurt against historical atrocity is masterful:

Celan on his bridge. Raskolnikov muttering Dostoevsky under his breath.
Jew on bridge. Raskolnikov-Dostoevsky still in my breath. Under my breath.
Black milk of daybreak. *Aschenes Haar*. Antschel-Celan. Ash. Breath.

Excitingly, "Jew on Bridge" suggests a future direction for Williams's poetry, as it drives deeper into his private concerns whilst moving confidently into the public realm.