

Peter Reading
Vendange Tardive
Bloodaxe Books
56 pp.
£7.95

By Paul Batchelor

First published in the *Times Literary Supplement*, 17.6.11

Peter Reading once remarked in an interview that “One of the things I suppose I wanted to do was not be like anybody else” and his three-volume *Collected Poems* testifies to the extraordinary scale and ambition of his work. Between 1974 and 2005 Reading clocked up twenty-five publications, almost all full-length books, that confronted personal anguish, social breakdown, violence, mental disorder, terminal illness, homelessness, and climate change. This thematic range was matched by an insatiable appetite for formal and metrical challenges. The two most recent of his books confirm his peerless position by laying further claim to territory that usually proves inhospitable to contemporary poets: satire and environmentalism.

The title of – 273.15 refers to the “absolute zero” of the ice age that many predict will follow the rise in global temperatures. This bleak subject matter, coupled with H. sap's refusal to take it seriously, elicits raucous satire, and – 273.15 is presented as a comic dialogue with Noah (or “Cap'n Noye”), in which the poet implores him to find room on his ark for an ever-lengthening list of species:

Ahoy! Noye! *Oimoi!*
32% of world's amphibian species,
Brink of extinction.
And what of the fissipeds,
Having toes that are separated
From one another, as dogs, cats, bears,
And similar carnivores?
What of the fissirostrals?

The accommodating Cap'n Noye replies in the voice of a pantomime pirate: “F'c's'le, standing-room only. / Y'all look lively *Now!*” Such is the relentlessness of this learned, chastening, yet also very funny book that even the ship's cat has environmental degradation on its mind:

For first she frets over rainforest depletions.
For secondly she condemns our otiose CO² emissions
For these fuck up her atmosphericals.
For thirdly she bids a peremptory adieu to biodiversicals.

The tone darkens in Reading's latest collection. Any expression of environmental concern risks being dismissed as a jeremiad, and the epigraph to *Vendange Tardive* dares us to make exactly this accusation: “the harvest is passed, the summer is ended, and we are not saved...” (Jeremiah, VIII. 20). *Vendange Tardive* is a technical term for a late-harvested wine, and throughout the collection alcohol provides, as it has done in earlier volumes, one of the few respites from “the day's tabloid shite” and the thought that it is “Nearly combine time” for the poet. The book is littered with expressions of personal and environmental despair, often expressed in the form of aesthetic self-

harm, and whenever Reading catches himself about to write something unconscionably “poetic”, he reacts savagely. In “...and another thing, Johnston” Reading describes a whale-watching expedition with his wife and a friend. The poem ends with an image of a night heron, “Breakwater's bleak heap, / Black-crowned Night Heron, hunched, / anticipating our moorage”. The poem is bitten off here, on the brink of full-throated lyricism; but not soon enough for Reading's liking. Two pages later, “Nycticorax nycticorax” reads in full: “That Black-crowned Night Heron, / is it Osirian? // Mneh!, Just some dumb bird.”

The inclusion of such a deliberately ugly squib is of a piece with Reading's engagement with the “un-poetic” or even “anti-poetic” discourses of science, politics, and the mass media. “And Now, a Quick Look at the Morning Papers” brilliantly and cruelly exposes how completely we have internalised tabloid prefabrications, how readily we fill in the gaps:

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eenage pregnanc
fficial figures reinforce
ngland's position the Europ
eenage capital of prenanc About
40 in every 1,000 schoolgirls in Engl
is growing concern about Britain's
youth sex culture following cl
12-year-old boy fathered a
15-year-old girl given b
twins fathered by a cla

Nevertheless, confronted with a poem like “Exponential”, we may wonder whether the poet should keep more of a distance from tabloid prejudices. The poem reads in full:

Haven't been reading our Malthus *have* we?

(Population, unchecked,
increases exponentially, whereas
subsistence merely stays about the same.)

Beget brat – Council flat.

Malthus interpreted the rapid spread of inner-city slums as evidence of irresponsible procreation: in fact it was caused by economic migration, a result of the Enclosures Act. Reading has been accused of much the same kind of political myopia, and a defence of “Exponential” would need to demonstrate the presence – and, if it is present, the import – of irony in his Malthusian attitudinising. A sympathetic reader might note that Reading structures his collections meticulously, and that “Exponential” immediately follows a reference to “tabloids' and broadsheets' faecal / facts slapped daily / onto the cheap lino”. Nevertheless, while Reading's radically original art is undoubtedly a triumph of individualism, the question of whether this is shadowed by more contentious, politically conservative notions of that term remains open.

Such concerns tend to disappear in larger, polyphonic pieces such as “Maritime”, a seven-page poem in which a birdwatching trip is elided with an account of Sir George Somers's 1609 expedition to Virginia, and then Odysseus' fate at the hands of Poseidon. Reading frequently revisits Book V of the *Odyssey*, in which Odysseus is washed up exhausted and sleeps between olive trees beneath a blanket of leaves, and here, as in the earlier “Laertidean” (2002), the episode is mysteriously linked to a birdwatching expedition to Hilbre Island: “And the long-ruined sandstone

lifeboat station brine-lashed, / the slipway thrashing the saline assault into spume". Once again, the friend who accompanied him on the trip, Michael Donahue, is eulogised: "and the day was ornithologically unforgettable, / and the friend I was with then is fullfathomfive (as you might say)". Recapitulation and self-referencing are hallmarks of Reading's work, each slim volume resonating far beyond its apparent means when placed in the echo chamber of the whole *oeuvre*.

"Absolute zero" is the condition to which Reading's increasingly sparse poetry sometimes seems to aspire. The five-year silence between *-273.15* and *Vendange Tardive* is unprecedented and worrying; but Reading has been on a journey towards silence from the start – the wonder is that he accomplished so much along the way. The best of these late works make much of what is published in the name of poetry seem merely decorative, and irrelevant. Reading's ambition, his commitment to confronting the darkest contemporary realities, his erudition, wit and dry magniloquence, mean that his work presents unique challenges and offers unique rewards. If these same qualities make him indigestible to many readers of contemporary poetry, the loss is theirs.