

## SOME SWEET HOPE

Rodney Pybus. *Darkness Inside Out*. Northern House, in association with Carcanet Press, Manchester, 2012.

*Eric Northey*

Rodney Pybus was born in 1938 in Newcastle-on-Tyne in the North East of England. It is a region which has its own distinctive linguistic, literary and cultural identity, often held quite firmly in conscious resistance to influences from metropolitan London. After reading Classics and English at Cambridge, Pybus returned to Newcastle to work as a journalist and scriptwriter in television, before moving to Australia to teach Mass Communication. On returning to the UK, he worked in arts promotion in the Lake District before finally settling in Constable country, at Sudbury, in Suffolk, where he still lives. He has also travelled widely in Europe and more recently in South Africa. His work has been translated and published in a variety of foreign languages. He is however, as one can see from this fine volume of poems, clearly still fed by his roots in the North East, despite the pleasures he gets from rural Suffolk, from cosmopolitan world cities, or from the non-European landscapes of southern Africa.

Pybus was for many years an associate editor of the literary magazine *Stand*, which was founded by Jon Silkin and published from Newcastle. It foregrounded the work of writers committed to a strong moral response to the world and was an important and distinctive voice in the range of literary magazines that flourished throughout the UK in the second half of the previous century. The strength of Pybus' early poems, particularly the dramatic 'persona' poems of, *In Memoriam Milena* (Chatto and Windus, 1973) and *The Loveless Letters* (Chatto and Windus, 1984), exemplified that moral response to history and politics and demonstrated the considerable literary craft and skill required from a poet to embody it. Horace's *Ars est celare artem* is Pybus's dictum too.

As a poet, his peregrinations have given several distinct facets to his work. There's a clear focus on the importance of the natural world, (he's a keen naturalist and gardener). He has a distinct feel for an urban landscape, both of the visited foreign cities and the various UK settlements, that at some point, he has called home. He is interested in narratives of history, particularly the personal narratives, which form the threads that link past actions to our present conditions. And he has a strong sense of the complexity of language and discourse, as the means by which we explore our many-

layered identities. On these foundations, he has built a poetic practice, which displays a considerable degree of scholarship, lightly held, a sharp visual acuity and an active, moral imagination. All this is employed to help us, as readers, share the creative and committed response to the world that *Stand* encouraged.

*Darkness Inside Out* is his eighth book of poems and it is particularly welcome since it seems long overdue. It is a substantial volume, with over forty poems, representing nearly twenty years of creative work. There is a wide range of styles here, from the conversationally demotic, to quite formal, measured verse. There's also an interesting variety of forms of address, both to the reader and, internally as it were, to the poet himself. In John Stuart Mill's sense, Pybus' work is a poetry that often seems 'overheard', where we are listening to a complex inner debate, that, again in Mill's fine phrases, "cuts fresh channels for thought, [and] traces more deeply, broadly, and distinctly, those into which the current has spontaneously flowed." (*Thoughts on Poetry and its Varieties*).

*Darkness Inside Out* is arranged in four distinct sections, as if at some-time, these have been thought of as possibly separate volumes. The sections are *Leaves from Each Tree*, which displays the variety of Pybus' recurrent concerns; *Down on the Cape* which draws inspiration from a trip to South Africa; *Back to the Future* which explores the interweaving of personal and public histories, and *Still a Way from Good Hope*, which pulls together many of the issues raised and fits them into a moral and creative response to the world we find ourselves in.

*Leaves from Each Tree* is the longest section of the four. There are 22 poems in all, ranging widely in style and subject matter. Nine of them however, are memorial poems which give an overall sense of elegiac reflection to the grouping. Some of these elegies are quite personal, for family members like Pybus' architect brother Richard and their First World War officer father. Others are to close friends like Françoise Trichet, who translated *In Memoriam Milena* into French (éditions de L'Envol, 1995) and the serial composer Jacques Michon who then set it to music. There's a moving quartet of poems dedicated to Leos Janáček, from which the line '*Leaves from Each Tree*' is taken. They capture the cultured energy of the "raw song / and a human hand scrubbing away, impassioned, / at a string". Janáček was a difficult man, who lost his daughter Olga, in 1903. It unhinged him even more and he spent time obsessing over younger women. Pybus's elegy to *Olga and the others* shows that through creativity, something still renews itself, despite the loss.

Those pale notes now  
are like seeds from the grass brought down  
by the passing blade,

and seeding, year over year,  
their lovely selves.

There are memorial poems to fellow writers, Ken Smith, J.G. Farrell and W.G. Sebald. A particularly moving elegy, *October Flowers in Prague*, is offered to total strangers: Doris Weisslerova and Margit Koretzova. This is one of the finest poems in the collection, both in its artistry and its holding together of key underlying concerns that have run through Pybus' work since the late 1960s. It begins, like so many, as a poem induced by travel, this time to "the heartland of Europe". After the brief epigraph, giving the dates of the lives of the two dedicatees, the poem flows in alternately long and, importantly, short lines, to describe two children's pictures. They are scenes of the natural world, which attract Pybus because of his own interests in natural history, in butterflies and in gardening. The pictures display,

A few wild spring flowers standing with imaginary  
Leaves for all the things that wild  
Spring flowers stand for—these awkward pretty  
Marks of pink and yellow, and one red  
Bright rose. I want to steal them all, God knows,

There's a Keatsian element to these pictures, of things stilled in time and to be for ever still:

the butterflies above  
Not so much caught in flight as always flying still  
On patchy wings as delicate as what  
A child might think a soul to be,

And then a little geography focuses the vision more precisely, since these flowers and

The undecaying art of wings, [are] here under glass  
In the old Jewish quarter.

Thus, we are suddenly brought up short in our reading. It's a reveal, a tell, which suggests that we are to read this poem quite differently from the tourist narrative with which we might have started. The poet, like us, has arrived here

by the scenic route,  
 Down the mountain road from Dresden and Teplice  
 Through the quick scent of pines after rain;  
 I have driven myself through the streets they knew,  
 The leafy avenues of Terezin

Now, we know precisely where we are; we stand before the “banks and slopes / That were the platforms at the terminus.” It was that second jolt, at ‘Terezin’, that made this reader go back and look more closely at the names and dates of those dedicatees:

Doris Weisserova 17 May 1932 - 4 October 1944  
 Margit Koretzova 8 April 1935 - 4 October 1944

One girl was twelve, the other nine, both murdered on the same day. And it’s then that, as readers, we can nod in agreement with Pybus, that

it is only their  
 Art that can tell the brightness in the grass.

It is a very fine poem which rewards many re-readings. Even when writing this review, that word ‘terminus’ suddenly came into sharper focus and moved itself beyond the descriptive towards the symbolic. And when you read the poem aloud, there is a hesitancy about whether to stress, “it is only *their* Art that can tell the brightness in the grass”; or whether to give the push on, “it is only their *Art* that can tell the brightness of the grass.” One reading gives the right to the fullest truth only to victims; the other, says that it is the creative act itself which reveals the hidden veracities of experience, whatever the dreadful circumstances in which it is practised. Both readings can exist perfectly sensibly in one sentence and in one imagination. Pybus forces us to look attentively at such small details—like the co-terminus dates—for it is in the sharply observed detail that some underlying ambiguous implication is revealed. A Pybus poem often works by opening, yet containing, such an ambiguity in a sustained image. As reader, you appear to be going along one journey, then suddenly are brought up short and forced to re-read and re-think your response. You then find you have been moved into another, quite unexpected, space and both your reading, and your looking, is enhanced by the shift.

In the next section, *Down on the Cape*, Pybus writes of his experiences in the southern hemisphere, when visiting his son in South Africa. It’s a

cliché country of stark contrasts: wealth and squalor, blacks and whites, unspeakable beauty and unjustifiable ugliness. On the top of Table Mountain you can get “high-flown glimpses of Good Hope / where vision, dreams, memory are suddenly colliding on land”. He shares these with his granddaughter, and points out,

in all that charming waste of offshore blues lies  
the dark pebble of the not wholly invincible Robben Island  
we might take a closer look at some other fine midwinter day.

It’s a land where politics is inescapable, which Pybus usually references obliquely, as sub-text, till we come to the poem *No End of a Lesson*. Here, the controlled but righteous anger at what the British did in that land, packs a fierce and justified punch. The title comes from a rueful but complacent poem by Kipling about the Boer War, and since such lessons are still unlearned, it makes Kipling hard to read today, with any sympathy. Pybus’ poem is a historical reflection on that war’s invention of the concentration camp, the specific British variety, specially devised for women and children,

Not forgetting, as we usually do, all the other camps  
For the servants and labourers

Who were not white.

An initial, italicised section, gives details with historical, human specifics, where prisoners, “come upon surprises in their rations: / Ground glass, fish-hooks, razor-blades.”

The second section reflects on the consequences of that invention, “forty years down the road”, whereby,

This ‘tea-time’ squabble  
...became a bath of blood for the new century  
To learn how to swim.

Section three brings us up to date, as Pybus goes to see his small grandson in the town of Irene, pronounced, following the Greek, with three syllables. The child, Alexander, lives in a gated community with security men at the entrance. Unless the politics improves, he may spend much of his life behind these high walls, where, like camps and prisons, “along their tops run / Electric fences or razor spikes. The windows are barred.” History always repeats itself with a sharpened sense of irony. With our own continuous wars on drugs and terror and Islam, for ‘gold or / Diamonds or reserves

of oil', we are indeed left with No *End of a Lesson*. Recent conflicts merely show "the competing gods, / Making us mad again and again." Clearly, human beings are slow learners. That's

True enough, but not in the sense Kipling meant, I guess.  
Irene, you may remember, is the old Greek word for *peace*.

*Back to the Future* forms section three, from which the volume title, *Darkness Inside Out*, is taken. It is rather lighter in tone, or at least, the serious concerns are dealt with more playfully, and with a lightness of touch that belies the learning underneath. In *Anything is Beautiful If You Say It Is*, the poet enjoys the "spirit lifting wheeze" of an American bookseller using journal scraps from *The Hartford's Mutual Funds* as packaging material for a purchased volume of Wallace Stevens' *Souvenirs and Prophecies*. On congratulating the bookseller for adding such a witty touch to this little 'feast of Stevens', Pybus gets the reply, 'we had no idea / Stevens had anything to do with the Hartford'. A lesson worthy of Stevens himself. We must take our beauteous delights wherever we find them, intentioned or not.

After some poems of childhood remembrance, with the richness of its Geordie dialect, we are introduced to a series of reflections on painting and the natural world, triggered by looking at the works of the painter Samuel Palmer, (1805-1881). Palmer was a friend of William Blake's and painted landscapes, both wild and cultivated, most notably around Shoreham in Kent. But he also ventured further afield to paint in Italy, Wales and the area around Tintern Abbey. In *A Fig of Consequence*, Pybus focuses not on Palmer's images of the gothic splendours of the ruined Abbey, but on a 'scrupulous little sketch' of a small cottage garden with

pink hollyhocks  
and a high green fig-tree,  
red tiles, grass and  
open windows.

He notes the 'little / glances of coloured water / that dry into sensations'. (And ah, what alchemy is there!)

Pybus then takes us round the painting, suggesting where to look for meaning and what kind of meaning might be rewarding. "It's the cottage face of history: he shows me here", not the "capital R for romantic". He notes that Palmer is a painter of omission as well as commission and the former too is important, because it is also through what is *not* there, that Palmer "turns his seeing / into a truth / with little absences of the pen."

Again, it is a Stevensesque thought ('Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is').

Pybus' verse form is sinuous and fluvial, with patterns of thought trickling into each other as they move down the page. It's rather like the stones of the foregrounded wall in the picture where

Palmer's pale gouache  
 Washed over them—that mortar which brings  
*'a mingling together*  
*in which the distinction*  
*of stones*  
*were almost lost'.*

Ideas seamlessly flow into each other and one needs pretty good breath control to read this poem aloud and keep the sense flowing through its shifting lines and meshing ideas as the sense meanders along

through  
 the deliciously unmanicured bunching  
 summer grass,  
 the weeds,  
 the shrubs  
 past the sapling and the hollyhocks to  
 the house at the back of the picture  
 with the green, almost roof-high fig,  
 a fig of consequence,  
 under which any of us could sit  
 without wanting or  
 waiting for any other kingdoms.

The title poem, *Darkness Inside Out*, continues the visual exploration with an imagined conversation between Palmer and Blake, where Palmer pleads for help "to understand the peepshow of the star-pricked heavens you write of". Blake asks, "Do you work with fear and trembling?" and when the painter answers "Yes", Blake replies, "You'll do!"

To gain that visionary understanding requires work from us, the viewer / reader / artist, work that requires an intense noticing, a learning of how "to read everything, not just books and words". This becomes the work of the transforming imagination which enables us to see "darkness inside out". And when properly accomplished, it brings a clear-sightedness which has a moral capacity to change our situation. Such intense looking therefore becomes a duty, imposed on the artist and viewer alike, to make that conscious

imaginative effort, to know “better how to make the fields laugh / and sing. The stones at the bottom of the stream even”.

The final section, *Still Away from Good Hope*, has some of the most lyrical, reflective poems of the book. Occasionally the allusions are hard to place, or personal, but a little Wikipediaing will comfortably get most of them. Set mainly in the Republic of South Africa, it draws together many of the themes explored—memory, visual intensity, the importance of held ambiguity—to form almost a closing statement, a manifesto of what we should be doing, as writers, naturalists and artists. Again, it seems like a morally urgent form of work, since ‘the lyf so short, the craft / so long to lerne.’

There’s a substantial series of poems, *Mountainwood*, set in an idyllic retreat near Stellenbosch in South Africa’s wine region. It’s high enough up in the mountains that the poet can look down and see the “buzzard, quartering its patch, rapt, hungry, single-minded”. The trip is a present, he reminds himself, but it still induces a twinge of Galilean “pleasurable guilt / when faced by the instruments of excruciating hedonism”. The luxuriousness and fine dining are rightly appreciated, but the guilt and the politics are never too far away. The black seeds covering the egg-yellow muffins fall onto his plate.

They looked like dead minutes  
lying there, the past all white,  
wiped clean of joy  
and misdemeanour.

Unaccustomed luxury stills time. He pauses with the “golden sugar” on his spoon, because, “He did not want time, this time, to move / any more quickly”. That too, surprisingly, is the work of memory. In the poet’s war-rationed childhood, that spoonful of golden sugar would have been, “a week’s delight gone / in five minutes”. Pybus has learned a lot from Stevens about how to appreciate the passing moment. It is time, and death of course, that is the mother of all beauty.

Even the jacaranda’s explosions of violet smoke  
avoid banality only by the daily  
as if dutiful  
petal-fall.

The greatest stories, the peaks of narrative art,  
are made in melting wax

This is an enjoyable sequence of poems, full of sharp observations and thoughtful reflections which are quirky, but revealing and important.

For any traveller, it is the enormity, the imagination-defying size and variety of Africa, which overturns our reason and defies all our descriptive and cognitive powers. It is our true home but we have been exiled too long to recognise and feel anything but outsiders in it. Pybus strives to hold together many of these tugging contrasts and synthesise them into a single image. In *View from the Saloon*, whilst motoring along the N2, he notices ahead

a man and a boy  
driving a dozen cows and a goat or two—now as he passes  
beneath them they are overhead, crossing  
a glassed-in walkway over the traffic tide...  
as he brakes, changes down  
and pulls in behind a black family in their white Mercedes.

In an earlier poem from *Mountainwood*, he acknowledges

Nowhere, nowhere so many  
surprises, Africa.  
And Africa in all of us.

*Still A Way from Good Hope* ends musically enough, with a *Coda* reflecting back on the passions displayed throughout the book. Words, images, memory, all combine to bring us to what Ben Jonson called a ‘gathered self’, where the multifarious experiences of our past coalesce in the present and, if we are lucky, give some hope of being sustained into a future. Whilst musing over the name of Good Hope, another image floats into consciousness,

of a lough in Northumberland called Sweethope.

Memory, generous for once, lets him see it again  
for the first time,  
the early sun behind him on a June morning,  
glimpsing it from a distance, water-colour through trees –  
  
some blue eye and hope’s lovely lashes.  
Some sweet hope.

It is a universal aspiration, which, through a life in literature, may yet be achieved.