

## COLLECTING JOHN SILKIN

Jon Silkin. *Complete Poems*, edited by Jon Glover and Kathryn Jenner. Manchester: Northern House and Carcanet Press, 2015.

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The poem most associated with Jon Silkin, the poem he read most often at his many public appearances, was “Death of a Son,” written at the very start of his career, when he was just twenty-two. “This was something else,” Silkin says of the death of his child Adam, “who died in a mental hospital aged one,”

this was  
Hearing and speaking though he was a house drawn  
Into silence, this was  
Something religious in his silence,

Something shining in his quiet,  
This was different this was altogether something else:  
Though he never spoke, this  
Was something to do with death.

Something, something...Silkin calls it “religious,” a word he never uses again. He didn’t like to be vulnerable to witless interpretation on account of a misguided directness. But as the hundreds of poems in this massive new *Complete Poems*, weighing in at 915 closely printed pages, show he *was* first and last a religious poet. Silkin’s own, chosen identification of himself as a “committed individual,” to pick up the horrible phrase with which he titled his anthology of work<sup>1</sup> from his remarkable magazine *Stand*, seems, surprisingly, less vital, and dated; like CND, the Fifties protest movement opposed to the Bomb, Silkin’s idea of commitment survives as a serious idea, in particular as an idea of great resonance in its time, but nonetheless as an idea *of* its time, locked away in history.

As it happens the very last entry in the *Complete Poems* is an unpublished prose poem written close to the end of Silkin’s life, “Emmanuel” (in Hebrew: “God is with us”), a dialogue in the tradition of Jewish biblical complaint between man and God. The baffled, enraged human speaker asks: “What language must I speak to you in?” and, “Is there nothing so

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1. *Poetry of the Committed Individual: A Stand Anthology of Poetry*. Edited with an introduction by Jon Silkin (London: Penguin and Victor Gollancz, 1973).

sensible, but it is subtle?" These questions, in all their nuance and complexity, reverberate through the whole body of Silkin's work, are already implicit in "Death of a Son," and have lost none of their force. The religious quality of the writing, then, does not—I guess I should say, obviously—have to do with orthodoxy or observance but rather with the kinds of questions or human troubles that persistently hound and pain Silkin.

It matters in this respect that Jon Silkin was born into one of England's most prominent Jewish families (his father's brother and law partner was the Labour peer, Baron Silkin of Dulwich), and came of age during and immediately after the Second World War. As a young man just beginning to write, he was inescapably immersed in the intense coming-to-terms—philosophical, aesthetic, of course religious, and not least political—of the first post-World War II decade. Theodor Adorno's dictum that it would be barbaric to write poetry after Auschwitz left a kind of stain on the paper Silkin, and his circle of Jewish and non-Jewish literary peers, especially Geoffrey Hill, used to compose their work, and spotlighted his generation's deep distrust of every form of utterance. How can one speak and not be complicit?

I am not sure Silkin ever worked out a satisfying answer to this nasty question. His approach to an answer was neither traditional nor orthodox, and reflected his unusual route to the poet's corner. Although he was sent to school at the elite Dulwich College, Silkin in fact never completed the course of study, in particular in Latin, which was necessary to enter university. Instead he joined the Army, and then worked as a manual laborer, including stints as a gravedigger and bricklayer; sometimes he slept on the streets. (There was something of the vagrant about him all his life.) His local London paper announced the publication of his first book of poems (1950) with the headline: "Poetry Volume By Silkin's Nephew." This identification must have rankled, since Silkin so emphatically rejected the proper path his family had laid out for him. And even after his second book, *The Peaceable Kingdom* (1954), published by Chatto & Windus, launched him into literary society—his editor at Chatto was Cecil Day-Lewis—Silkin remained an outsider, eventually settling *Stand* about as far away from London as you could get and still remain in England, in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, at the time, in the early Sixties, a place more Victorian than late twentieth century, dark, damp, smoky, sooty, a working-class northern city with a language—Geordie—and a drink—Newcastle Brown—distinctly its own.

But from the cultural periphery Silkin deployed his genius as an editor and literary promoter. The list of writers for whom *Stand* was the main outlet, or the first place their work appeared in print, is pretty amazing, and includes Geoffrey Hill, Tony Harrison, Terry Eagleton (who for some years

was *Stand's* poetry reviewer), Ken Smith, Michael Hamburger, Roy Fisher, and an equally remarkable list of writers from across the globe, including Miroslav Holub, Hans Magnus Enzensberger, Nathan Zach, Giuseppe Ungaretti, Zbigniew Herbert, and Nazim Hikmet. When each new number of *Stand* appeared, Silkin would lug copies up and down the country, flogging the magazine on the streets of the university towns, or in the city pubs. He was more or less single-handedly responsible for the revival of interest in the poetry of the First War, especially of Isaac Rosenberg and Siegfried Sassoon.

What Isaiah Berlin says of the great nineteenth-century Russian radical Vissarion Belinsky applies perfectly to Silkin: "Literature was for him not a *métier*, nor a profession, but the artistic expression of an all-embracing outlook, an ethical and metaphysical doctrine, a view of history and of man's place in the cosmos, a vision that embraced all facts and all values." For Silkin, more than for any of his contemporaries, each of whom wrote while also gainfully employed in a university or office, literature was life. He never spent too long in any one place, or in any one house, or with any one lover or wife or child; he belonged only to his art.

All the more staggering then to weigh the possibility that in the very act of creation he might be complicit with the destructive forces or values or habits of mind he wanted to stand against; and even more, that his own words might betray him. These were, it is true, as I have said, the anxieties of Silkin's entire generation worldwide, evident as much in the radically restrained work of, say, Tadeusz Rozewicz or Zbigniew Herbert as of Geoffrey Hill, and for which the antidote or liberating manifesto, in English, was Hill's brilliant "Redeeming the Time," a more or less explicit response to Adorno. Since everything human, says Hill, from relations between owner and worker to the paving of roads to forms of reminiscence is there in our words, the poet can be "the rock of the defence of human nature"—at once political and metaphysical—by virtue of his unique capacities for making something newly expressive out of the language of his time, can *redeem the time*, as he says Wordsworth does in "Intimations of Immortality." Hill focuses especially on how section 9 of the poem breaks out of the "force field" (Hill's term) of section 8:

Oh joy! That in our embers  
Is something that doth live,  
That nature yet remembers  
What was so fugitive.

This moment, a vocal leap or ecstasy, a healing, redeeming exuberance, is what Silkin and Hill want to release as well; but joy is extremely rare in

Silkin's work. There is a great deal of struggle, but precious few instances of breakthrough.

In the beautiful "The Two Freedoms," two pet birds, perhaps yellow parakeets, escape from their cage.

The sunlight  
Smoked on them, gold were their wings, gold feet; gold sounds

Fled from their throats quickened by  
The winged sun that, for a moment, urged their flesh  
To the transubstantial freedom  
Ghosts are.

Uncaged the birds are stunning in the sun. So stunning they have a "transubstantial freedom": they have achieved the condition of...ghosts. Ghosts? It may be that Silkin intends a pun here on "Holy Ghost," but he rarely resorted to Christian symbolism, never mind in any positive way. Moreover, immediately in the next line, the birds "in the sun became the one gold/ With him in dignity." So the word "ghost" seems an instance of a tick in Silkin's work when an unbounded jubilation might be possible, an inability not to qualify, not to attend to the other condition: if there is life, there is death; if there is pleasure, there is pain. The birds, like the speaker of "The Two Freedoms," are caged. It must so be noted in his "careful words."

Silkin's method is dramatic, in the sense that the motive for so many of his poems is conflict (as in "The Two Freedoms") but more that the poems are performances, finally, or most importantly, about, and for, love. Silkin uses this word in its colloquial sense, as a form of address to a lover, but also as Dante uses it, to convey the broad range of associations of "love," from sexual relations to tenderness to compassion to something akin to "grace." Creation is observed and experienced in Silkin's writing as pointedly including a various and universal "preying upon" (his words); he is especially attentive to our wanton human ways with the most vulnerable beings ("Flypaper"). What he wants to set against cruelty, emptiness, and existential absurdity is love. Often the poems are addressed to someone identified only as "Love," or "you"; sometimes this unidentified person, "Love," abruptly appears in the middle or even at the close of a poem (as in the fifth stanza of "Lens-breakers," which, out of the blue, begins "My love..."). It is as if the poems are for but also with "love." The human dilemma, Silkin insists, requires precisely the achievement of "love"—and he insists too on the word "love," rejecting its alternatives and cognates, whether simpler, grander, or subtler. The drama is performed before—sometimes designed for, some-

times, as in a Brecht play, thrown angrily at—God. These poems want to be heard by “love” as a way of finding Love.

“I cut winter flowers for a stone jar,” Silkin writes in the opening of “Flowering in winter,” “hoping to hear from you.” There has been some quarrel or hurt, as often in the poems of love; a quarrel or hurt and an absence that wants to be filled by nature and words. But:

Where are your words? your face  
unpetulant as dew. You hope for the best,  
and bud as constantly as the moon. I put my hands  
up to your cheeks, the flower  
of our hurt, for fear to touch  
you elsewhere.

The hesitant enjambment is characteristic of Silkin, suggesting at once care and aggression, a subtlety of sex he is especially alert to. If, against the cruelty of life, the cruelty of man to man and man to woman (and vice versa), of humans to animals and indeed to the whole of nature, the cruelty of animals to other animals, and of God to His creation, if, against all this, what we have to deploy is love then, Silkin seems to say, it has to be love complete, in all its uncomfortable mingling of mystery and violence, tenderness and aggression, pleasure and pain, body and spirit.

But love, its dignity! The moon, her mature  
belly, is a Jew wandering the night sky;  
his gold is beaten to her silver. Her light's a forceps  
she gives birth to ships with, tridents that crawl  
over her livid heaving face  
of sea. Is it sorrow?  
The extreme of love. Go on. The tides whamming  
against the vessels they raise:  
it is love, it is.

There isn't the space here to discuss whole categories of poems that anyone coming upon Silkin's verse for the first time ought to check out, such as his “ecological” poems (the wonderful “Flower Poems,” as well as, for starters, “Nature With Man,” “A Kind of Nature,” and “Urban Grasses”) or his many poems about Jews, a subject at the core of Silkin's entire body of work (I like in particular “A Word About Freedom and Identity in Tel-Aviv,” “Juniper and Forgiveness,” “Two Poems Concerning Jews in England,” and “My Father's Mother.”). All of which points to a need for a different kind of collection of Silkin's poems than this voluminous one. The meticulous and

indefatigable editors of these *Complete Poems*, Jon Glover and Kathryn Jenner, have troubled not only to collect in this volume all of Silkin's published poems but also those he did not publish, helpfully placed immediately after the published poems for any particular stretch of years; they have listed where each of the published poems appeared; provided a full chronology of Silkin's life; offered a selected bibliography of Silkin's publications, including edited works, interviews, and criticism; as well as a listing of writing about Silkin, including obituaries and reviews of his books. And Jon Glover has written a long, thorough introduction intended to orient the reader both to the cultural moment in which Silkin did his work, and to the work itself.

All of this will be terrific for the scholars: but maybe not so much for new readers. For new readers something more manageable, focused, and elegant is urgently needed. So let me here launch the petition to the editors of Carcanet Press and Northern House to bring out a new, and one hopes suitably handsome, *Selected Poems of Jon Silkin*.