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LATITUDES: GERALDINE MONK'S SEQUENCES

Geraldine Monk, *Selected Poems*. Salt, 2003. ISBN 1-876857-69-2. £10.95. 235pp.

The selection in this new book is a considerable improvement on the last effort at a Monk selected, North and South's *The Sway of Precious Demons* (1992), which was far too brief and presented none of the original sequences intact. The Salt collection does not attempt to cover the full range of Monk's work: it is essentially a *Selected Longer Poems*, presenting fifteen sequences in full, the only exception being the shortened version here of *Herein Lie Tales of Two Inner Cities*.

Organized chronologically, the book falls into three parts. It begins with nine sequences from 1979 to 1990, most of them having first appeared as chapbooks from Bob Cobbing's Writers Forum or from Monk's own Siren Press. The central section is the booklength sequence *Interregnum* (1994), her main book of the 1990s. (Her only other book of the period, the charming and surprisingly little-known corona sequence *Walks in a Daisy Chain* (Magenta, 1992), is omitted here.) In the 2000s Monk published more frequently again, books appearing from her own Gargoyle Editions, or from Alan Halsey's West House imprint. The last third of the *Selected* contains three sequences from the full-length collection *Noctivagations* (2001), and two pamphlet publications from 2002, *Insubstantial Thoughts on the Transubstantiation of the Text* and *Absent Friends*.

The book begins with *Long Wake* (Writers Forum/Pirate Press, 1979). The last poem in the sequence makes use of the "Lyke Wake Dirge," the earliest surviving poem in Yorkshire dialect, and Monk's response to the North Yorkshire landscape – the moors, tumuli, standing stones and cairns – comes as stages in a slow, sombre ritual like the watching-over of the dead: "The Coming of the Night"; "The Long Wait"; "The Coming of the Dawn"; "The Coming of the Snow". Its patterns of brief, clustered phrases, mirrored across the page's axis like Rorschach blots, are interrupted at one point by a first-person reminiscence of the laying-out of the body of the speaker's grandmother: "I was six perhaps seven / She was bone china eggshell / lying amongst candles and flowers / she was wild cold bryonies / I smiled / She was only beautiful". But the typical mode of these poems is supplication, prayer or interrogation, addressed to the "Spirits" of "The Three Tremblers" (an oddly-named group of three tumuli) or to the "snow ghost" who can "Bury my heart", saving it from the fate of the sinner in the "Dirge": "The fire will burn thee to the bare bane".

Two series of dream-poems appear between the stages of the wake. The poems in "Dream One" begin as slashed-open descriptive prose, then become clouds of ellipses illuminated by flashes of words; the scenes have an apocalyptic feeling, from the opening image of spawning fish jumping like "precision polaris missiles" and stranded when the sea "vanishes", to the final inversion, as the sea rises like Noah's Flood and "hideous . . . haggablack . . . fatlipped . . . Leviathan" emerges. "Dream Two" is if anything more unnerving, the poems packed into narrow, remorseless columns ("Claustrophobic silos", they are called at one point, recalling the Polaris missiles of "Dream One"). The words are as jittery as REM flickers, or – as the repeated focus on the stark black-and-white tiled floor of a corridor suggests – the harsh strobe effects of Op-Art.

Rotations (Siren Press, 1979) is more straightforward than *Long Wake*: four poems, each responding with keen wit and playful eroticism to a season of the year. Monk links the turn of the seasons to the motions of the heavens; her handling of classical myth has a light touch: during spring "Sirius and Orion" look down like "voyeur[s]"; summer is the time of "the she-devil Cassiopeia"; in autumn fungi grow erect among leaves, "ris[ing] / towards Andromeda"; the lovers' encounter in winter occurs "Beneath the Pleiades". The poems pivot on virtually every word or image, and as a result they swing easily from social comedy to ludicrous fertility symbology to surprising metaphor, as here:

Brides Spring from oblivion
to provincial newspapers
only child of carried pos y unger sister
brothermother crepe and chiffon
best ma n erves fumb/rin
gand champagne comes now shooting
messages
suggestions
Its easy you see
these green and white fluids
ferreting through stems & hollows

This approach permits the poetry to broach areas of personification and myth casually and flexibly. In "Winter", there's a lightly animistic metaphor for the hanging icicles that moves without a break into the familiar wintertime shock of bare feet hitting cold floor: "Canine mouth dripping icicles / tongue licking cheeks neat / whiskey raw & / burning sweetmeats / white flash / feet fleshing / bedroom floor." Then the poem switches direction, fully animating the figure of speech, as Winter becomes a "black wolf" stalking over the hills.

New publications

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The Fly on the Page
Onsets: A Breviary (Synopticon?) of Poems 13
Lines or Under
Peter Larkin, three chapbooks

Catalogue

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Removed for Further Study: The Poetry of Tom Raworth (The Gig 13/14)
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Maggie O'Sullivan, *Palace of Reptiles*
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La Quinta del Sordo (Writers Forum, 1980) – “The House of the Deaf Man” – is named after Goya’s last residence, the interior of which he filled with what are now known as the *Black Paintings*. Monk’s note indicates that the poems were written in reponse to his late sequence of etchings, the *Disparates* (“Follies”). The sequence consists of an untitled preface and five numbered pieces. A postface in the original edition (omitted from *Selected Poems*) identifies the etchings associated with each poem: 1. “El Caballo Raptor”; 2. “Disparate Ridiculo”; 3. “Disparate Desordenado”; 4. “La Lealtad.”; 5. “Disparate De Miedo”. [1] Monk comments: “The titles are those given in the Dover edition of Goya’s ‘Disparates’. Goya left most of these etchings untitled, the titles being added after his death. I list them here for means of identification only.” It’s tempting to read the last lines of the prefatory poem as a comment on this posthumous tinkering: “How tight grew your creatures of myth / How tight grew the monkey wrench”. The poems reverse this process: the figures that appear in the poems are Frankenstein’s monsters, assembled piece by piece from limbs, heads and torsos. Flesh has become liquid or wax, so that distinctions between one, two or many figures are effaced. The woman and horse blur together in poem 1: “stretched and melted wax / frozen / partners in fatigue / seething / webbed and fossilized exhaustion”; poem 3 focusses on Goya’s ghastrly hermaphrodite/Siamese twin:

You will go where I go where I and you go twinning
 this siamese disease forming bunches of limbs
 fused in trepidation
 You remain me and I and you with these taunting
 ligatures of skin binding mutual
 assailants

But the grotesque figures in the background are equally jumbled together, more a single substance than distinct entities: “strata galvanized and quickened to animosity...And here more hooks more eyes and this / fleshless wet bandaging of loneliness with black marrow gape.”

On the cover of *Banquet* (Siren Press, 1980) is a photo apparently from the teens or twenties, featuring a woman in an off-the-shoulder dress; a man grasps her tightly from behind, hungrily kissing the back of her neck. The opening poem has a sun setting with “the red and seedy / EXTRAVAGANCE / of pomegranates”, and Monk seems to be touching on the myth of Persephone, signalling these poems’ nighttime blurring of different kinds of desire: sexual desire, hunger for food, the intoxication of wine, and other kinds of sensuality (scent, light, sound, the texture and colour of clothing, makeup). The nightscape slips into myth, fairytale and cosmology; the cover’s hints of vampirism reappear, as drops of wine and drops of blood become indistinguishable. *Tiger Lilies* (Rivelin Press, 1982) features a similarly creepy cover photo: a (woman’s?) thin figure with dark mascara’d eyes, in a fancily patterned faux-Eastern outfit, holding some kind of orb. A still from a *fin de siècle* play, or a shot of a spiritualist in full regalia? *Selected Poems* reprints just three (linked) poems from this book, “Angles”, “Diversions” and “Corners”. They get closer than anyone else ever has to the flickering verticality of Tom Raworth’s long poems of the 1970s – *Ace* and *Writing* – even though it’s not clear to me that that’s what Monk was aiming to do. In “Angles” the slippages of imagery and diction occur line by line: the poem seems to be tracking an atom, a slant of light, a word, a note played on the violin, a neural impulse as it rebounds back and forth; it splits and refracts, becoming paired dancers or a symbiotic pair of organisms; while “Corners” uses a similar skittering, chain-reaction style to suggest a more vulnerable subjectivity, touching on reflections on unexpected emotional damage and the difficulty and necessity of giving voice to it.

The title of each poem in *Animal Crackers* (Writers Forum, 1984) is four widely-spaced words that pair doublebarrelled animal names: “Dragon Fly Howling Monkey”; “Glass Snake Electric Eel”; &c. The effect is less menagerie than grotesquerie: the incongruous pairings and the way adjectives like “electric” and “howling” are singled out suggest natural history via Goya. But the poems themselves aren’t Steinian “portraits” of the animals, reading instead like telescoped interior monologues, at once desperate and joyous. It is sometimes explicitly perverse writing: “a / wrong path the / only path”; “slide/easy on / / devastation”; violence and sexuality run together, especially in the last poem:

RAINBOW BOA BUTCHER BIRD

uneasy embrace grows
 getting
 constricted
 thrown on slab/back
 breaking
 spit
 gushing
 arch reds to indigo
 feathered and bled

Sky Scrapers (Gallop Dog Press, 1986) is structured as two intertwined sequences. The first is a series of poems named after meteorologists’ classifications of cloud-forms: “CI” (cirrus), “CU” (cumulus), “ST” (stratus), &c – though they divide their attention equally between clouds in the sky and smoke-puffs from cigarettes. The poems are haunted by memories and by a certain deadness of mood: as slow-moving and greyish as clouds. The poems’ quiet suspension is at once relief from the darker moods lurking around the corner – the “approaching depression / hours even / days days days away”, or the dark-night-of-the-soul appearing as a flashback in “NS” (“Nimbostratus”) – and also itself oppressively neutral and static. The second sequence in the

book is a series of untitled poems, each beginning with a report on the day's weather which doubles as a report on the speaker's mood – sometimes immobile and overcast, sometimes mercurial – “Today / sky vital frenetic” or “Today / sky provocative skittish”. The poems search for happiness, ruefully celebrating the inconstancy of love and desire:

it's a trick
love turning chapters
trailing love in power
beat not heart –
excessively

Herein Lie Tales of Two Inner Cities (Writers Forum, 1986), whether in the original form or the abbreviated version, remains one of Monk's more enigmatic sequences. In the original version it is two intertwined sequences, though they are run together in the revision. Perhaps surprisingly, given the book's title, the poems often gravitate towards plant-life, in the garden or the park, or just the weeds growing from cracks in pavement (there are frequent echoes of Hopkins, that lover of weeds). The original book's rust-coloured image of a brooding gargoyle is belied by the brightly coloured interior, the pages alternating between lemon yellow and light green, suggesting sunlight and plants. The lines between vegetable and human often become blurred – as in the pun in a line like “the bulbs are coming on” (from “Epilogue 1”, omitted from *Selected Poems*), or when someone (a person? a plant?) stands “stem to eye with Sun”. But there are also urban scenes, appearing in terse, broken-off phrases: “Cobbles mac'd over”; “highrising shudders iron / staircase”; “Ring road of outer / spiral / sodium obliterator / stars”; “Glass-shatter crept anti- / long shushnow dark waveries”. The book's instability of mood is captured well in the concluding lines, with the odd doubling of the word “seems” and the ambiguous valuation of “ecstasy”: “fatally // it seems / violent sorrow seems / a modern ecstasy / (Humour poised on Gatecrash)”.

“Latitudes” is the opening sequence of *Quaquaversals* (Writers Forum, 1990). It's worth quoting an email Monk sent me:

["Latitudes" is] totally anchored in Britain under Thatcher, her fight with the unions, banning of secondary picketing and the demise of the coal industry resulting in the crippling miners strike. It was an amazing time to be in South Yorkshire or as it was known then The People's Republic of South Yorkshire. It plays on the North/South divide without I hope reinforcing it in an obvious way. The whole sequence is both eulogy and elegy, both for and against this 'Green and pleasant Land' ending with the angry 'Jack' sequence and then modulating into the plaintive list of myth words with the final poignant word (well I think so) Cricket – with its evocation of the almost cartoon bound insect of pastoral England and also the summation of everything the game of Cricket holds in the national psyche. It ends smelling of hot summer days, cucumbers, privilege.

The sequence is structured as a kind of mirror-image, the opening “North” half finding a response in the “South” half (presented in reverse order, so that the entire sequence begins and ends with a paired “Elegy”/“Eulogy”); and the poems themselves are full of clashing reversals and negations. The stanzas of each “Elegy” and “Eulogy” also mirror each other, tapering identically to a series of thematically linked keywords: in “An Elegy Written in an Unmarked Northern City Graveyard”, for instance, the words are “Oak Tree”, “Evergreen”, “Yew tree”, and “Cherry Tree”. Monk's allusion to Gray's *Elegy* recalls Tony Harrison's use of that poem in *V.*, his long poem concerning the Miners' Strike, but (despite the background outlined in the letter quoted above) Monk's sequence is far obliquier. The poems seem to seek a longer perspective on the immediate political situation, folding it with extreme ambivalence into a centuries-long English tradition whose main features are mysteriousness and resistance to change: “It is still night. it is moving. Changing. / Still. Holly. Holly. Holly. / Evergreen.”; “It is night. Or. It is Day. It is timeless. / Sporadic fighting breaks. Is quickly quelled.” From this perspective, Thatcherism may be a local “breakdown”, but its counter may be a Britishness which is itself a “drug”:

Not just one wounded. Drug for circulation
requiring time to intercept the breakdown with
needle point precision.
(We do not reward the lioness in action.
We do not decorate the cunning den. Or.
Applaud stalking. Or. Guerrilla tactics.)

The appeal to “our” sense of decency and fair play in the parentheses seems to be a satirical portrait of self-deception, without quite forgoing a “straight” reading of the lines – perhaps a hope that political ruthlessness will not be indefinitely condoned by the populace?

Interregnum (Creation Books, 1994), Monk's longest book, is broken into three markedly different parts. Part I, “Nerve Centre”, bears a resemblance to *Walks in a Daisy Chain* or to *Quaquaversals*' “Molecular Power Progressives” in its satirical portraiture of different groups of people in the environment of Pendle Hill (in East Lancashire): hikers, bikers, born-again Christians, Jesuits (a Hopkins parody), neopagans, hanggliders and foxhunters. The cartoony mockery of the phallic arrogance of the male visitors to the landscape is entertaining, but there are also fearful flashes of violence, in images of roadkill that blur into sexual violation: “warm runny things / cold unmoving tarmac / (lascivious sprawl conscious and livid)”. Themes of blood, sex and violence come to the fore in Part II, “Palimpsestus”, which like *Herein Lie Tales of Two Inner Cities* comprises two distinct sequences running across alternate pages, though the compressed presentation of the *Selected* reduces the contrast between them. A boldface tickertape runs across the versos, fearful messages flashing out like electric shocks; on the right are longer but equally

The most stable feature of this palimpsest is a mysterious, constantly-changing trio of figures, who hover over the text and over the landscape like the Fates. (These are presumably the Three Tremblers, the group of tumuli also present in *Long Wake*.) Both these sequences serve as comparatively brief preludes to the much longer Part III, itself called "Interregnum" in the 1994 text (an overtone dropped in the Salt book). This part of the book is a séance of sorts, conjuring up the Pendle Witches (ten victims of a 1612 witch hunt in the Pendle area of East Lancashire) to speak in a succession of monologues – a counter-testimonial to the confessions elicited from them by the 17th-century authorities' "language-magic". [2] As a whole *Interregnum* is one of Monk's most impressive sequences; most readers are likely to be drawn to the final section because of the highly charged historical material and greater stylistic tractability, but I'm actually most drawn to the intense central section "Palimpsestus".

Selected Poems picks up the story again with three diverse pieces from *Noctivagations* (West House, 2001). *Trilogy* contains three brisk, often very funny travel pieces reflecting Monk's travels in Spain, Prague and Venice in the company of her husband, the poet Alan Halsey (who surely enjoyed the nods to Goethe and Byron). The standout piece is "Prague Spring", whose eerie catechism concerning the creation and destruction of the Golem of Prague is bookended by scenes from contemporary Prague that are more satirical in tone. *Manufactured Moon* is an epistolary sequence in the form of emails by Monk's alter-ego "Getha", whose topics range from the human/feral nightlife of the city, to a suspiciously epicene apostle on her cheesy Last Supper calendar, to a mysterious man eternally haunting the streetlamp outside. *The Transparent Ones* reflects the author's time as poet in residence at a hospice; the poems memorialize several of those she became close to who passed on. Its compassionate response is coloured by the poet's own troubled response to both love and mortality, whose entwinement is caught well in the title of "The Unspeakable Softness of Flesh" (the poem offers a haunting evocation of the approach of death, disturbingly interrupted by the observation "Betrayal is sexual ~ / illusory beauty exquisite."). One resident startles Monk with her insight and blunt advice: "Marry him", and in the *Noctivagations* arrangement of texts this is immediately followed by "La Tormenta" from *Trilogy*, which quotes more of her advice as Monk and Halsey take off from England for Spain.

The book ends with two recent chapbook publications. *Insubstantial Thoughts on the Transubstantiation of the Text* was a limited-edition bonus for subscribers to *The Paper 3/4 (Additional Apparitions)*, an essay collection on poetry in performance. (Monk's title alludes to the collection's working title, *Transubstantiating Texts*.) Each section begins (rather like a sermon) with an identical passage from *Interregnum*: "More than meat or drink. Better than stars and water. / Words birthed. Made flesh. Took wing. Horrids / and enormities. Chantcasters. Daubing lunarscapes." (It's perhaps significant that these lines include a fragment of the "Lyke Wake Dirge" which previously appeared in *Long Wake*.) Each poem illustrates in serio-comic fashion one of five ways of performing the passage: "Unvocalised (private)", "Vocalised (private)", "Vocalised (public)", "Voca-visu (orientation)", "Fused Sonics (interaction)". Scott Thurston has suggested (in *Stride Magazine*) [3] that the sequence privileges vocalized performance over private, unvocalized reading. There is certainly evidence for this reading in the poem "Unvocalised (private)", yet Monk's evocation of private unvoiced reading is actually full of the dark, occult "language-magic" and Cheshire-cat sexuality central to her work: "Ob+ scene intimacy. / Spectral static. / Mellifluous streamings. / Conceiving concurrent." The idea of the reading body as so still it is nearly dead – "Corpus in repose. *Corpus in almost repose-us.*" – is at once a mock-critique (reader-as-zombie) and also of a piece with Monk's interest in the amorphous borders between the living and the dead.

Absent Friends is a delicate prose-and-verse sequence prompted by a visit to Coleridge's cottage at Nether Stowey, its meditations branching out from the sight of a glass case containing "three spikes of hair" and a card explaining that Coleridge's will specified that six mourning rings containing his hair be given to his friends (the rings themselves are of course absent from the case). Monk weighs whether she might make a similar act of "flaw" or "severance" (both of cutting off hair and of specifying "six friends" to do the work of mourning), and in the final stanza lets go of such an idea in the face of one's unbounded attachment to things and people on this earth, instead settling on a quiet stoicism:

*There were no words to describe.
No 'six'. No 'friends'.
Death a test. An earthly.
Brooch bemocked. Ring a swound.
Never a breeze up-blew.*

A final word on *Selected Poems* itself. Given that most of her earlier books are scarce, it's an essential volume for those who want to follow Monk's development across the span of her career. The texts are more or less straight reprints, though Monk has sometimes rejigged the layout and made the odd substantive change. But the shift from the inventive, spacious designs of the original editions to Salt's instabook format makes an enormous difference for the texts' visual prosody. The sequence most affected by the salinization process is *Herein Lie Tales of Two Inner Cities*: its binary structure (signalled by yellow and green paper) and its play with the Elizabethan typesetter's practice of placing catchwords in the page's corner are both lost. Other losses are subtler. The internal mirrorings and patternings of "Latitudes", immediately evident when the poems were *en face* in *Quaquaversals*, are much harder to follow in the *Selected*. There are many small changes in vertical and horizontal alignment, which often seem due to careless typesetting and copyediting rather than revision, and they sometimes make a big difference. In the Writers Forum/Pirate Press edition of *Long Wake*, for instance, a prayer is discernable in the last page's lower right corner: "snow ghost / caress this mute / albino". This potential reading has

this book, but I found that many of these sequences failed to open up until I went back to the original editions. Though many of those editions are now out of print, readers should supplement the *Selected Poems* with a copy of the easily available *Noctivagations*, which gives some indication of how Monk's work responds to careful and visually pleasing book-design.[4]

Nate Dorward

Published in a different version
in *The Paper 8* (Sep. 2004)

1. Small but serviceable reproductions may be found on the web [here](#).
2. The transcripts of the witches' confessions are available at the [Pendle Witches website](#).
3. "Substantial Thoughts", *Stride Magazine*, August 2002, available online [here](#).
4. Alan Halsey's West House imprint is contactable at 40 Crescent Road, Nether Edge, Sheffield, S7 1HN (email: alan **AT** nethedge.demon.co.uk). He also runs a catalogue bookselling business, and usually has other new and old Monk titles on hand.

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