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## Cosmic Dances

Ed. by Maurice Riordan and Jon Turney, *A Quark for Mister Mark: 101 Poems about Science*, Faber & Faber, 2000, stg£6.99

George Szirtes, *The Budapest File*, Bloodaxe, 2000, stg£9.95

Derek Walcott, *Tiepolo's Hound*, Faber & Faber, 2000, stg£20

By and large, there are two kinds of anthologies. There are the programmatic ones that set out to offer a selection of poems having a degree of cultural overlap, and are in some way representative of a larger body of work sharing the circumstances which affected their production. For instance, national anthologies (Irish, Welsh, Australian, American poetry) are of this type, as are anthologies of poetry of a particular period, or of poems written by poets under forty, or by women poets, or by war poets. Such selections can set out to make a case about the body of work they sample. They might introduce, identify, or redefine a literary movement (Al Alvarez's *The New Poetry*, Michael Roberts' *Faber Book of Modern Verse*). Even at their most modest, they can aspire to be good text books for teaching purposes. But anthologies of poems defined by their subject matter (a book of love poems, of landscape poetry, of poems about animals) are always going to be rather factitious; one might just as reasonably compile a book of poems beginning with the letter K. But not to worry: all the editor has to do is offer us some good poems rubbing shoulders with each other between the covers, and all we have to do is bear in mind that it is the individual poems that matter. Indeed, some of the best recent anthologies are just of this factitious kind: Paul Muldoon's *Faber Book of Beasts*, Heaney and Hughes' *The Rattle Bag*.

Like many anthologies, *A Quark for Mister Mark: 101 Poems about Science* is representative of nothing beyond itself, and the editors of this one are more or less ready to admit as much in their introduction. We should not expect to find much real science in these poems. Most of them come from the twentieth century, but there is an attempt to reach back. I was delighted to see just the right extract from John Davies' sixteenth-century poem *Orchestra*, his great and wonderful description of the energy of the universe and the natural world imagined as a vast cosmic dance; quite properly, this is given more space than anything else in the anthology.

Items missed? I had expected to find something from Erasmus Darwin (grandfather of Charles) whose *The Botanic Garden* offers a scientific description of the natural world in heroic couplets. On the principle that conjunctions are catalytic, alongside Charles Simic's 'Dear Isaac Newton', the editors could have put in Pope's comment on Newton. And while there is one poem by Emily Dickinson, they should have included her quatrain that is arguably the clincher on science (and on faith):

"Faith" is a fine invention  
When Gentlemen can see –  
But *Microscopes* are prudent  
In an Emergency.

On the other hand, among new (to me) poems I was pleased to be introduced to were Edwin Morgan's 'Pleasures of a Technological University' and Rita Dove's 'The Fish in the Stone'. Other poems seem to be in there at rather a stretch: Seamus Heaney's 'Westering' is, I suspect, there simply because they wanted to have him included rather than for any compelling quality in the subject matter of the poem. Once embarked on that course, it can be argued that practically any poem has a scientific basis: Wordsworth's 'The Daffodils' could be included as showing the interaction of field botany and psychology of recall.

George Szirtes and Derek Walcott are both painters as well as poets; and both *Tiepolo's Hound* and *The Budapest File* are about revisiting, as an adult, the concerns of early life. *The Budapest File* gathers together those poems Szirtes has written over a twenty-five-year career which touch on his native city in Hungary. As he outlines in a preface that is itself a compelling piece of writing on exile and creativity (little in common with the problems of Heaney or Harrison), he left Hungary in 1956 at the age of eight and settled in England. He has been returning to Hungary since the mid-1980s. In effect, like the anthology, this is another selection of poems defined by their subject. The field from which they are selected is the totality of Szirtes' poetry, and as such the book is representative of his career in response to this formative factor. But it is much more than that.

Although he had written about impressions of Hungary in earlier collections, it was with the 1986 collection, *The Photographer in Winter*, that the idea of return emerged as a predominant concern. It becomes

apparent that his subsequent books *Metro* and *Bridge Passages* are the central collections, and many of the pieces from those books reappear here. The powerful sequence of thirteen-line sonnets from which *Metro* takes its title is included in full. *Bridge Passages* was organised as a mix of poems about Hungary, English versions of poems by Hungarian poets, and poems whose material derived from Szirtes' life outside Hungary. The interplay there offered its own suggestive richness. Incorporated into *The Budapest File*, the poems about Hungary become retrospectively part of a project that is at once more concentrated and more sustained. The translations are not included. The long sonnet-type sequence emerges as the favoured form.

Running to 200 pages, this is a big book. This assembly and reordering of poems which have mostly been published before gives significant weight to Szirtes' work. But the aspect that gives this volume its strength is not primarily its size, nor the implicit invitation to reconsider the work of a serious poet from a new angle, nor the pleasures of reading a sort of verse-autobiography. In *The Budapest File* we are allowed to enter imaginatively into the experience of Europe in the mid-twentieth century. This is poetry of memory made actual, and the issues that emerge through Szirtes' familial explorations are those of a difficult history.

*Tiepolo's Hound* is a curious mix of ambition and self-indulgence. A long narrative poem, it explores Derek Walcott's engagement with European art through a memory of a detail in a painting by Tiepolo – or was it by Veronese? – seen as a young man. Interwoven with this is an account of Pissarro's move from the Caribbean to Paris. And underlying it all is Walcott's own (a)vocation as a painter. Twenty-six of his own canvases are reproduced in full colour in the book; he is obviously a more than competent painter. However, I would have liked some reproductions from Pissarro and the other Impressionists mentioned in the poem.

*Tiepolo's Hound* is his first long narrative poem since *Omeros*. *Omeros* had an epic sweep, and Walcott found a form appropriate to it in imitating the terza rima of Dante. There have been various notable attempts to reproduce the features of terza rima in modern English poetry, although the need for three words on each rhyme sound has stretched the ingenuity. Walcott managed it successfully in *Omeros*. For *Tiepolo's Hound*, another long narrative poem in canto-like sections, he has essayed a differ-

ent form. The poem is written in two-line units. These couplets do not rhyme within themselves; instead they rhyme ab/ab. This brings a number of problems. The fourline groupings completing each set of rhymes are certainly not quatrains, as the space between the pairs of lines refuses the construction of such a stanza unit. Nevertheless, the completion of the rhyme after every four lines suggests repeated (and inappropriate) closure after every four lines. The form generates pauses and hesitations, while the narrative aims for extension.

The Europe Walcott explores is very different to that of *The Budapest File*. It is a western Europe shaped by and seen through art:

Over every Dutch interior there hovers  
the hallucination of a narrative, so his background believes

in the intimacies of landscape, in light that covers  
a kitchen wall, a milk jug with its crusted loaves.

The difference between *Tiepolo's Hound* and *The Budapest File* is that between coffee-table poetry and archive poetry – by which characterisation I do not intend to be dismissive of the former, for we should welcome good poetry to the coffee-table. Respectively, these books by Walcott and Szirtes offer us aesthetic sumptuousness and historical witness.