

NOTES FOR BROADSHEET POETS

Trees against the sky: the poetry of **Felix Dennis** by **Alison Brackenbury**

Do all poetry readings need hushed quiet? Are all modern poems dogged by a sense of difficulty? No. This was brought home to me by a performance on a wet autumn evening, two years ago.

The (paying) audience was rumbustious. A writer whispered to me that she had never seen any of them before at any local poetry event. I had never seen a poetry reading attended by so many young men. This was a new audience, not unlike a noisy works dinner. Felix Dennis arrived in front of them to deliver his poems. The performance was immaculately choreographed. The strongly rhymed poems were, by turns, funny, rude, and moving. The audience loved them. So did I.

I first struggled to understand the nature of criticism as a confused undergraduate at Oxford. My subsequent First is, I am afraid, proof of youthful bluff rather than mature academic solidity. Academe and I parted company with mutual relief. For the next thirty years, I continued to observe the exercise of critical judgement, whether nervously reading reviews of my own poems, or, still more nervously, standing by flimsy ropes at horse shows, as Welsh cobs thudded past. During the last ten years I have become a writer of reviews: a role for which nobody is fully qualified. From all this, (and some interesting times on judging panels), I have concluded that once a type of poetry, (or cob), is defined and accepted, it is relatively easy to agree on the worst and best examples. The really ferocious fights are about which types should be valued. (Never ask a breeder of pedigree dogs about Labradoodles...)

Where would I place Felix Dennis' work? In a ring for particularly bright-eyed beasts, clumsily labelled 'popular poetry'. Breed characteristics: appears simple (which masks much skill); appeals to an audience who may not have read or studied poetry in depth (proved, in Dennis' case, by his own performances). May be funny. Often uses traditional forms, especially rhymed. I strongly approve of popular poetry, although I consider a couple of its most successful practitioners to be lightweight and unconvincing. These do not include Felix Dennis.

Dennis, who began to write poetry in his fifties, is a prolific producer of very varied poems. This creates an immediate critical problem (which I also labour under). The work of a prolific poet is almost always labelled

'uneven'. No doubt some poems are published too soon. But I think this can be a mistaken reaction to the range of the work within one collection. The critic's problem is the reader's gain. There is more likely to be a poem which will appeal to a particular reader than in a slimmer, more 'even' collection. Frequent writing can also strengthen technique, so that a poem's energy does not depend merely on a sense of the poet's self or subject, but on a firm understanding of patterning within a line or stanza.

Dennis' poems have strong bones. His best couplets are brisk, with the bite of epigram: 'More lame in the world than ride.' ('More') He is an accomplished writer of ballads, whether in the familiar abab stanza or in couplets (aabb), both forms known to John Clare. The last two lines of Clare's terrifying poem 'The Badger' hold echoes from – interestingly – a humorous ballad starring 'The Dragon of Ware'. With or without its dragons, the ballad is a testing form, as the second and last lines of each stanza are often shortened. Poets must, in the end, know where they are going. Dennis does:

More tears are shed for answered prayers
Than ever those refused.
(‘The Wishing Tree’)

Most of Dennis' poems are in such short, lively forms. But he can also tease meaning through longer stanzas, with some striking variants, such as the poem in five-line stanzas (abbba) which ends, unexpectedly, with an isolated line which repeats the poem's opening: 'I want to plant a walnut wood.' ('The Walnut Wood')

Dennis' range is shown clearly in poems of the natural world. He can evoke the exotic white cedar:

The leaves are leather discs; they scud and scrape
Along a shingled roof at night like claws.
(‘Ba-ma-ta’)

The poem's loving precision is reserved for a species which 'except for tree-lovers, is not perhaps, a thing of beauty'. Dennis owns the cedar, but his poetry shows an unusual awareness of the limits of possession. 'Arrival of the New Owner' describes an imagined meeting with two estate workers, gamekeepers (like my grandfather): 'The land was theirs. And remained theirs, still.' He can view farmland as a productive workplace, with its own exact language: 'Silage spilling from the clamp'. ('Autumn Harvest'). But Dennis also understands the world (as, I fear, some farmers no longer do) as

a living web, with many inhabitants. This is not a sentimental vision. Grass may be ‘To us a lawn – to hens, a killing ground.’ (‘All Nature’s Art’). Worse still, the monoculture of the lawn is, for insects, ‘A dreary harsh savanna’, the tiny reflection of a devastated world.

As the world outside poetry is in very bad shape, I think it should be mentioned that, thanks to Dennis, 100,000 native broadleaf trees are planted in Britain each year. Only 10% of British land is covered by forest. The average for the rest of Europe is 37%. I was born in the north of Lincolnshire, whose great fields were left treeless by modern agriculture. But landowners preserved small areas of woodland for their own pleasures. Through accidents of employment, both my father and I spent part of our childhoods finding owls, robins’ nests and the white stars of anemones, marooned upon the wooded islands of the rich. Dennis is trying to connect these islands.

But the tree-planter grew up in London. Dennis can summon up his city with a vicious verve – and knowing slang – as sharp as an eighteenth century ballad:

Downstairs, the foxes dance on chairs
While bouncers strip the marks.

‘In a Soho Garden’, the ‘foxes’ are prostitutes, the ‘marks’, their gullible victims, lured into den-like clubs. In ‘Armoured in Innocence’, the past shouts from the page, in the staccato chants of anti-war demos: ‘Hey! Hey! LBJ! How many kids did you bomb today?’ More lightly, ‘Snakeskin Boots’ restores London in 1964, a girl and ‘my snakeskin boots with their Cuban heel’.

One of cold-hearted art’s warmest gifts is to enlarge experience. One of the fascinations of Guy Garvey’s award-winning songs for his group, Elbow, is his account of male friendship, drinking, and his street memories as a boy. Reading Dennis’ poems – and his excellent notes – I am equally fascinated to see that, as well as the sex, he remembers his clothes: ‘a full length military cloak and chiffon scarf’... ‘Build a rocket, boys’, Garvey sings hopefully. Dennis’ companions too have ‘rocket-ships’, but, more brutally, boyhood is the time when ties become ‘garrotting cords’. (‘When’)

The shocking twist – the flick of poetry’s wrist – is a particular gift of Dennis. It can flash out in a phrase: ‘the bailiff, Love’. (‘Grief seeks Loss’). A mellow account of England’s past suddenly suggests

And foxes sought out Squire’s pack
To race them for the thrill.
(‘An Older England’)

Reliable, but unattributable sources tell me that the darker woods of the Cotswolds still offer this exciting chance, every autumn, to fox cubs. They don't seem to get very far. Perhaps some forthcoming prosecutions will slip past the encircling hounds.

Robert Frost, by all accounts a terrible farmer, wisely probed the farming proverb: 'Good fences make good neighbours'. Dennis' poem on boundaries turns to searing honesty: 'Our lives are warped by property [...] A wall brings out the worst in men'. ('Of Walls and Fences') Even the boundaries of life are dissolved by a doctor's account of near-death: 'You wandered through an open door'. ('Life Support')

As energetic performance demonstrates, sound is the open door into Dennis' poetry. He recollects being 'hooked' into poetry by his teacher reading – aloud – 'The Charge of the Light Brigade'. ('The Ballad of "Abdul" Rowe'). But what are the barriers to critical acceptance of his own work?

I think there are two problematic qualities in Dennis' style. One – which I share – is the distortion of normal syntax to fit metre and rhyme. Poetry is unforgiving of shortcuts. Poets must be, too. The second is his occasional use of archaic, consciously 'poetic' language. In 'April 15' Dennis' adored cherry tree is called a 'white-lipped maiden'. 'White-lipped' is, I think, excellent, but 'maiden' reads as a lazy nod to the past. The tree is lost. Housman – just – successfully introduces 'maiden' into one of his most beautiful lyrics: 'With rue my heart is laden'. But the poem ends with 'rose-lipped girls'. No one can tone and shade a poem more finely than Housman. Listen to the master. If the 'white-lipped maiden' became a girl, the cherry tree would spring back into the poem.

Cherries figure in one of my three favourite poems by Dennis. But the first of his poems which I read celebrates a different tree: the hornbeam. It was in a free pamphlet from the excellent charity, Poems in the Waiting Room, that I found 'The Hornbeams'. A London policeman is puzzled to find Dennis gazing up, then, in turn, is struck by admiration:

A man entranced beneath a tree
His head bent back, yet strangely bare,
His helmet doffed –

Why does this strangely bare narrative work? I think it draws on the power of exact naming, and of knowledge. How many poets could recognise the pattern of hornbeam twigs against the sky? I certainly could not.

I can recognise, approvingly, the four-line stanza of the bluntly titled 'Going Bald', with a multi-syllable rhyme followed by a single rhyming syllable; an eleven-syllable line followed by one of ten. This is the stanza

of 'If', by Kipling. I have written admiringly elsewhere about Kipling. His poems are a savage reproach to our own politicians' lack of understanding of Afghanistan, whose invaders die 'Shot like a rabbit in a ride'. Dennis inherits Kipling's plain-speaking, to different ends. In 'Going Bald', he is a lyric poet, whose grasp of strict form brings out a mordant elegance: 'And winter finds us out, and death persuades us'.

I am completely persuaded by the third, and last, of my favourite poems by Dennis: 'I Plucked all the Cherries'. It is untouched by archaic diction or twisted syntax. Its simplicity is charged by a lifetime's experience: 'Done with the getting of / What I could get'. Driven by rhythm, ringing with rhyme, its lines offer many gifts: 'Take them and welcome – / I'm done with them now'. I hope Dennis will write more of these bare, urgent poems.

Although his poetry is highly entertaining, on and off the page, Dennis' own notes to his work do not claim that poems exist to amuse or console. 'Poetry' he writes, 'cauterises the wound of life'. It is a good metaphor. Its truth – for I must believe that poetry deals with truth – is vivid in the work of Felix Dennis. For the emerging writer, Dennis' poems stand as a heartening reminder that British poetry today is a wood with many paths.