

Jo Shapcott: *Of Mutability*

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The reader returning from Jo Shapcott's *Of Mutability* to her first book, *Electroplating the Baby* (1988), is likely to be struck by two things. First is the presence from the outset of a consistently recognizable voice – enquiring, conversational, level, amused, often comic, often strangely plain-spoken given the elusiveness of some of the material, and often understated in relation to the events it records. Second is Shapcott's imaginative obligation to see beyond the orthodoxy of style and method, the reflex reliance on anecdote, epiphany and emphatic closure, which governs the work of many contemporary poets. Elements of that repertoire can be found in various places in Shapcott's poems, but they are characteristically unsettled rather than providing a safe haven to which the poems navigate. Sympathetic yet discomfiting, Shapcott's work assents to Marianne Moore's proposal that writing is, among other things, “a species of intellectual self-preservation”.

In an interview in 2000 with John Stammers, Shapcott remarked: “There aren't enough models of women writing poetry, so when we encounter the tradition we have to find a way to completely engage with what's gone before, a way to possess it.” Here is a determination not to be disarmed or sidelined by “the tradition”: hence perhaps her poems' peculiar introductory resistance to her readers. Here, we know from the outset, is some not entirely familiar ground. This itself is less a question of subject matter than of that tone, courteous and companionable but at the same time showing little inclination to address us with the habitual diplomacy which places the familiar and proverbial in the room like chaperones. We have work to do. Shapcott's task is less to give the public what it wants from art than to suggest what it might actually get from life. To put it another way, she is a visionary poet but one who does not require the hieratic manner of some comparable male poets. Life is not elsewhere or otherwise; or rather: elsewhere and otherwise are already here, in the street, in the room, under the skin. Skin, in the words of ‘Def’ from *Of Mutability*, “permeable-for-some-things, membrane, separating-other-things”, is an important presence, one of the places where Shapcott reduces the distance between the particular and the symbolic. Elsewhere, with outrageous reasonableness, the woman bathing in ‘In the Bath’ from *Phrase Book* seeks to be “a good atlas”, a microcosm.

The title of Shapcott's most recent book is *Of Mutability*; it states what has always been her subject. Consider the horrific process in the title poem of *Electroplating the Baby*, with its Moore-like fascination with hard information and the rhetorical possibilities of technical vocabulary, or the bird breeder in ‘The Old Man and the Finches’ (a poem which seems to hark back to Plath's ‘Among the Narcissi’) where we may observe “the crepe under his eyes drop, / evolving in magic jumps towards bone”. Such a powerful apprehension of change and decay could render a weaker poet conventional, but Shapcott has managed a continual refreshment of her powers of scrutiny, so that mutability is not, as some writers would seem to suggest, a condition towards which we are perpetually heading but one by which we are already occupied. Accordingly her poems often convey a sense of exposure, of rootlessness, even groundlessness. In an interview for the Poetry Archive she explained:

...my work felt different from the work of the writers that I admired. And I couldn't see a way that I could ever put myself in their shoes for all kinds of reasons, not least the reason of gender [...] what I did was not like what other people did but that that was a

positive, that things that I might have perceived as weaknesses – for example not having a particular region of the country that I related to, that my work came out of – I mean a good example of someone who does have that is Seamus Heaney who connects language and landscape so strongly that he even talks of “vowel meadows”. Now I grew up in a new town where there were certainly no “vowel meadows” and no one way of speaking at all and no connection between language and landscape but what I came to discover was something I now feel is very contemporary – and that is a kind of aesthetic that demands travel, it demands, in a sense, rootlessness and even exile.

One could add to this a sense of classlessness which affords Shapcott a fresh angle on what she has termed “the complicated shame / of Englishness”. Looking for ancestry, she turns to the Welsh Borders and to the Forest of Dean, the latter a kind of enclave, a special case of England, while her education was pursued in Ireland and the United States. The degree of internal exile that comes with being a member of the intelligentsia in England is thus matched by geographical exile. And the appeal of Shapcott’s poetry is interestingly distributed: she is admired by both the mainstream (so-called) and the avant garde (so-called) while precisely suiting neither. She also publishes little compared with some of her prominent contemporaries, with a gap of almost a decade between *Tender Taxes*, her “versions” of Rilke and *Of Mutability* (2010). A leading figure among women poets, she is apparently inimitable: there is no Shapcott “style” to feed off. By default or design, she has managed to be a law unto herself.

In a larger sense, what she has “managed” is a necessary paradox: fascinated wonder that things should be as they are (or be there at all), at the same time as a recognition of implacable necessity in an unstable cosmos whose “answer”, in the human sphere, must always be the same. Her poems affirm freedom from fixed identity at the same time as acknowledging and investigating instability and decay. For this to work, she has had to generate a new decorum, unburdened by historical and rhetorical pieties.

John Kinsella notes of another early poem, ‘With the Big Tray’, that “Shapcott casually deconstructs the traditional male ‘artist’s gaze’. The nude descending the staircase motif is inverted, and the play with gender expectation is deft, comic and unrelenting.” The poem, in which a woman, Hilary, carries an awkward tray of tea-things upstairs and into a bedroom, exercises an interest for which its apparent means don’t seem to account. A banal domestic activity (one that might seem traditionally female) is subjected to intense comic scrutiny, maintaining a striking elegance of line which is mimetic at some points and at others operates as a commentary on mimesis: “the long march / up the staircase (those places / by the newel posts where the hips / had to angle and re-angle at the new levels). Then / there was an impasse / at the bedroom door / where really another person was needed / to get a grip on the ebony handle.” Free indirect narration makes Hilary both the subject and the object of the proceedings, so that we are privy to her memories and sensations. In one sense the poem reads like a travesty of Virginia Woolf; in another it asks what might be made of such intense consciousness. Nothing is happening, yet there is too much going on; and surely this tiny event is value-free, merely phenomenal, yet clearly it isn’t. At the same time, Hilary is not a victim consumed by her surroundings like the female figure in John Fuller’s early sonnet, the opulent, painterly ‘Girl with Coffee Tray’, who falls over and at the end lies “drowning in the blues and greens”. Shapcott’s work to date has often returned to the question of what might be made of experiences of such intense consciousness (comic or otherwise) and, interestingly, has done so without much recourse to narrative. Here as in other respects Shapcott’s originality is easier to see in negative than in itself: her *via negativa* involves the removal of various rhetorical encumbrances: as the speaker in ‘Pavlova’s Physics’ explains, “I need

/ more dimensions than geography allows”. The measured, reflective tone, and the deceptively modest approach, seem like ways of mediating a power of apprehension which in the case of a lesser talent might produce only chaos and tedium.

By the time we reach *Phrase Book*, a third important quality makes its presence clear – the poems’ combination of diversity and unity. This is suggested by a series of love poems of vivid sympathetic originality, including ‘Leonardo and the Vortex’, ‘Her Lover’s Ear’, ‘Matter’ and ‘Muse’. These are all poems of female agency, by which the body of the lover is imaginatively re-constituted as though at an order of perception which is at once minute and immense. Whereas Donne’s hyperbolic play with space and time works to impose a sense of order with a distinct masculine centre, Shapcott seems more interested in process and extension than in exerting a centralizing authority. The painfully witty ‘On Tour: the Alps’ finds the speaker following in the footsteps of Wordsworth and the coach-tracks of Byron while seeking to accommodate the lover’s restless, ill-humoured temperament in mountain-top accommodation where the very bed induces vertigo: “it’s hard to tune my ear [...] / against so many men’s voices shouting / all the names they know, at the dark”. The dramatic fluidity of Shapcott’s poems also makes them more able than most to inhabit scientific vocabulary with conviction: “charms, stranges, tops and gravitons” read as something more natural than the cosmetic apologies of the guilty non-scientist; they become part of Shapcott’s idiolect.

The poet of quanta is also the poet of the MacNeiceian here and now, walking the streets and reading the papers, being one of “the wandering mortals of London”. The exploded view to which Shapcott is often drawn also enables her to undo the illusory but stubborn gulf between political material and ‘the rest’ that is often so problematic for English poets. ‘Phrase Book’ is the most famous example, but ‘War and Peace’ from the succeeding collection *My Life Asleep* (1998) brilliantly conveys what Marvell in ‘An Horatian Ode’ refers to as “penetration”, the simultaneous presence of apparently conflicting realities, a phenomenon insistently and continuously realized in the era of twenty-four hour news, perhaps especially when we are allegedly “all in it together”:

The problem is not living together, pulling together,
The problem is dying. A little boat
leaves the bridge at Mostar and shudders
towards the white mists of Niagara,
whose plunge and roar is thrilling all the tourists.
Peace. The engines grind against the undertow
as the captain takes us as far into the mist
and thunder as he thinks we dare to go.

How much more interesting than bald satire this approach proves to be: mediatized illusion, like anything else, has to be lived through and investigated; eventually, as here, its very solemnity begins to satirize itself.

At the same time, in an odd way, the last couple of lines seem to bespeak Shapcott’s engagement with a poet whose sense of the world is very different, namely Rilke. Rilke, we might say, is the “captain” whose navigation of “mist and thunder” secures the continuity of the Romantic-Symbolist imagination into the modern period. For Shapcott, though, Rilke’s imperious resignation before the universe seems to impose limitations she feels obliged to resist, and the ground of her resistance is gender. In the dialogue she opens up with Rilke by requisitioning his late sequence ‘Les Roses’, a major theme is the futility of an idealism which makes its objects’ minds up for them: “You’re inclined to confuse / me with yourself / as if you’d

found / a mirror to worship.” A rose is a rose, yet the rose escapes any singular definition, although it may care to supply descriptions of its own. Shapcott explains that Rilke’s roses came to seem first like women and then like female genitalia. The ensuing conversation, or encounter, between the poems and their poets, pursues an affair of the imagination which is both fruitfully revealing (for there would be no point in repeatedly upbraiding a lover unworthy to be corrected), and, as though by its very intensity, destined to end in separation. The merely human status to which the participants must eventually return is revealed in ‘The Walk’, one of the book’s closing series of original poems, which comments on ‘The Roses’:

And now he’s over there, going:
how can I make him pass for an image?
His shirt-tail floats more alive than this line
which falls in love with him all over again.

Naturally, among the liberties affirmed in the Rilke-linked poems in *Tender Taxes* is that of experiencing pain and loss authentically, on one’s own terms. In Shapcott’s habitual clear-as-water yet mysterious way, the lines also warn against, and refuse, the kind of aestheticism whose occasion has departed but which leaves the risk of sentimentality in its wake, in the form of perpetual leavetaking, a contemplation of loss whose extent is known and thus reckonable. Many poets would accept such an offer, but Shapcott’s readiness to go on thinking and feeling, to go on imagining, whatever the consequences, is reminiscent of Emily Dickinson.

A significant part of the power of Shapcott’s latest collection may lie in the fact that she has made herself in one sense so remote from the familiar and the proverbial, from the reified commonplaces of mortality – the kind that A.S.Byatt once described as “the English feeling”, by which for example landscape signifies death as a known quantity. The test of Shapcott’s exposure comes with the encounters of mortality in the new collection. “I thought I knew my death”, she writes in ‘The Deaths’. “I thought he would announce / himself with all the little creaks / and groans you hear of”. This death seems like the one supplied by literature, but the true death is a she and goes unrecognized despite the eerie signs she leaves about the body, “until / I was gone and still I didn’t know.”

Shapcott is in a sense anti-Cartesian: consciousness enables the contemplation of the body but does not entail separation from it; the body is the origin and seat of thought, and the place where the physical and the metaphysical meet – insistently so in the experience of someone experiencing a grave illness such as cancer. Always strikingly aware of the physical (its delight, its comedy, its rudeness, its strangeness), at the opening of *Of Mutability* Shapcott renovates her apprehension of it in a series of six teeming, disquieted sonnets. Take, for example, ‘Hairless’, a poem about the impossibility of ordinariness in the light of mortality.

I saw a woman, hairless, absolute, cleaning.
She mopped the green floor, dusted bookshelves
all cloth and concentration, Queen of the Moon.
You can tell, with the bald, that the air
speaks to them differently, touches their heads
with exquisite expression.

In this instance, the poem requires us to suppose initially that narrator and the woman are distinct, but it goes on to suggest that this is a necessary but unsupported fiction, a development

of the device which Vicki Bertram has observed in Shapcott’s monologues, by which “the reader’s constant awareness of the poet behind the persona” enables Shapcott to provide “a running commentary on her own physicality, thus insisting on her existence as a subject”. In this poem Shapcott has moved on to explore her alienation from that central source of her imaginative authority, the body itself. The “openness” of which Deryn Rees-Jones has eloquently written in her discussion of Shapcott in *Consorting With Angels* is a gift that comes at a price. There is no emancipation from death. It can seem possible to know too much, though Shapcott shows no sign of wishing to renounce her understanding. In ‘Hairless’ the observing position is about to give way to a scream at the close, as though all the “pure knowledge, mind in action, / shining through the skull” must seem like madness when it becomes clear that it is simply part of a larger impersonal process of change and decay, where even the prized, subjectively immense and utterly central human conception of death has no secure or especially significant place among innumerable other events. The bald woman becomes a kind of cousin to Rilke’s angel, a vessel of the amazing and pitiless facts. The poem also seems to recall Rilke’s own poem “*Komm du, du letzter, den ich anerkenne*” (“Come now, the last that I shall know”), where the poet’s consciousness is likewise full of the insistently (and in Rilke’s case, physically agonizing) specific and yet also aware of the larger process with which even for the poet there might be no language to negotiate. Shapcott confronts conditions akin to those memorably described by Perry Anderson: “the absence of any divine authority, the delusion of any common morality, the transience of the earth and its species – every insight that religion must deny and society cannot survive.”

In ‘Somewhat Unravelled’, one of the finest poems in *Of Mutability*, Shapcott returns to this sense of things, reporting from the lives of two women, the aged “auntie”, who is suffering memory loss and the poet-narrator, her niece. The younger woman copes lovingly with the older one’s ignorant barbs (“the way you wish poetry / were just my hobby”; “Just as well *you’ve* got / a good appetite”) and crazed assumptions, while recognizing that the auntie’s disordered thoughts, as well as being simultaneously humiliating, comic and poignant, have, in the larger context of mutability and decay, their own truths to convey, when the old woman says:

[...] come with me
and rootle in the earth outside my front window,
set yourself in the special bed, the one only
wasname is allowed to garden and we will practise
opening and closing and we’ll follow the sun
with our faces until the cows come home.

This combination of horror and comic tenderness is rare, a more difficult thing than the familiar reflex of compassion which, though wholly proper, sometimes amounts to little more than good manners. Here Shapcott presents another example of “penetration”. Interesting too that at the point where Shapcott comes closest to writing about character as it is conventionally understood, the personality she observes and dramatizes is undergoing disintegration, the auntie experiencing, and becoming, an exploded view. Reading ‘Somewhat Unravelled’ brings to mind Thom Gunn’s ‘Sunlight’:

Great seedbed, yellow centre of the flower,
Flower on its own, without a root or stem,
Giving all colour and all shape their power,
Still recreating in defining them,

Enable us, altering like you, to enter
Your passionate love, impartial but intense,
And kindle in acceptance round your centre,
Petals of light lost in your innocence.

Shapcott's poem seems to cast a penumbra of horror about Gunn's "petals of light" lost in the sun's "innocence". Wonderful as Gunn's poem is, its acceptance of the cosmic order seems like the promulgation of an attitude rather than an experience, and to be almost a renunciation of knowledge, in particular the knowledge on which Shapcott focuses, that consciousness is both a privileged and a terrible condition, especially when it experiences love in the knowledge of the frailty of oneself and others. For the Auntie, "acceptance" is a consequence of declining powers, not a condition of wisdom; nor is it likely, given her preoccupations and her plight, that she will be thinking herself justified as an aesthetic phenomenon. A familiar anecdote tells of an encounter with T.S. Eliot at a party. Asked if he was enjoying himself, the poet agreed that he was, as long as you allowed for the underlying horror of the situation. The story is usually employed to poke fun at Eliot, but reading Shapcott reminds us that he may have had a point.

In the teeth of the evidence, however, there remains the instinct to make a home somewhere in the world. Often as much intuited as seen, the landscapes of the Welsh border in the opening sequence from *Tender Taxes* have seemed to offer such a place. Now, in *Of Mutability*, a series of poems about trees serves as a leavetaking from this setting. 'My Oak' concludes:

It remembers the seasons, or at least the length
of darkneses which distinguish them:
our word is photoperiodism, but remember
is not the word, nor is it my oak although
I used to watch it every day, when
I lived across the field, to watch it
respond to everything, everything else.

The single scientific term here points up the audacity and melancholy passion ("everything, everything") of the plain language which surrounds it and which dramatizes both renunciation and affirmation. This might seem to be the last word, but Shapcott closes *Of Mutability* with poems which are in a sense about what someone of the auntie's generation might have thought of as the necessity of just getting on with it, though there is little of the joyless stoic about Shapcott. 'Stargazer', 'Procedure' and 'Piss Flower' all take survival and the here and now as an opportunity to be seized. 'Stargazer' sketches the fulfilment of the impossible by using the strange liberty inherent in language, with Shapcott hoping "to say everything, all / at once, to everyone, which / is what I'd like if only / I could stay beyond this moment." As Sidney puts it, "the poet [...] nothing affirmeth and therefore never lieth", and yet has powers inaccessible to history or philosophy and, it might be added, to science as our age understands it.



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