

Muddying the Waters Without Doubt

Hegemonick, Andrew Jordan (112pp, Shearsman)

Andrew Jordan seems to have been busy of late, having published a new collection with Smokestack - *Bonehead's Utopia* - in 2011, and a new *10th Muse* in the offing, hopefully. Which reminds me, I must re-subscribe. Although it's not a magazine that comes out with regularity it's still one of the most interesting publications around, both for the obsessive insights of its reviews section and for the poetry itself, which is always stimulating and generally includes new writers of note.

This is an astonishing book, which includes Jordan's deep relationship to time and place, both as a satirist and up-ender of tradition, but also including a more lyrical streak where his modes of thinking about language and archaeology are genuine attempts at breaking away from reductive models of 'the pastoral'. The playful yet serious use of footnotes in this collection recalls Flann O'Brien in *The Third Policeman* and there's a quotation in the end-notes from Raymond Williams' classic 1976 volume - *Keywords* - which gives an introduction to the notion of Hegemony (shades of Antonio Gramsci) that serves both as a way in and to further muddy the waters.

Jordan has the astonishing facility to be both a deconstructionist and 'pricker of pomposity' while producing texts which while being parodies of high art also embrace something of its methods and are riveting to read. He seems to 'really mean it' while also, at times, taking the piss, yet this appears to be an even darker book than *Ha Ha* and is a much more uncomfortable read. He has a somewhat committed, almost utopian political take on things but his is a stance which is constantly undermined and challenged by hard experience and by a dark suggestiveness which permeates the book. As Peter Philpot says on the back-cover blurb - 'The hair on the back of my neck rose'. This is not a book for those of a nervous disposition!

If we take the notion of hegemony to indicate a totalising system, then Jordan's book can be seen as a political satire, which embraces a love of landscape with the downside of the surveillance state, a questioning of the way we are controlled by our political masters while also taking on something of the implications of a system which implies self-censorship and self-mastery in a somewhat negative sense. Jordan's aim isn't to produce reverential 'spirit-of-place' poetry which fuses the Romantic tradition with Hoskins' *The Making of the English Landscape*, but to open up a dialogue (multi-voice response) about our relationship to our surroundings and the conditioned nature of our response(s) to our time and place as related to the power of received mythology and historical constructs. The fact that Jordan is writing 'about' the South West and such heavily over-mythologized concepts as 'Wessex' makes his enterprise all the more intriguing.

Hegemonick is a book in six parts. Its cover, a b&w photograph from the 1930's is of a man and a girl in a field looking upwards, presumably, so it's suggested, to the lark ascending. Above the title is a crown, hinting at a long history of 'hegemony'. The titles of each section imply a tradition of English poetry which is very 18th century and fuelled by an awareness of landscape and its associated 'baggage', for example, property, ownership, the common wealth. These titles include Part One: The Sonnet Past; Part Three: A Further Survey of the Hill. The layout and construction of the sections is varied in a formal sense and contributes to a feeling of the overall architecture of the poem, which is in itself impressive.

There are references to what may be 'key moments' - a German bomber pilot and a British Hurricane airman both shot down in 1940 and contributing to the sense of landscape and history. There is a lot of walking going on in this book and references to Ordnance Survey maps. Passages of pure description - either real or imagined - are juxtaposed with an intense psychological enquiry, as in 'Theory: The Self' where place and person are imaginatively subsumed into a whole. At times this reads like one of those conspiracy theory fictions - The Illuminatus, for example - or even something from the pages of H.P. Lovecraft's subterranean ponderings:

The psyche exists within affective walls.
It has a single bank and ditch enclosing
a rectangular precinct surrounding a circular
timber structure which may have been roofed.
The latter appeared to him in a dream
as a series of three concentric V-shaped gullies,
the innermost containing post holes. Two
large post holes flanked an entrance

on the eastern side. This is where the self lurks,
holy mutant, craver, administerer of small things,
an addict swayed by sentiments, stupidly
vain host to thoughts, this dark interior.

(from 'Theory: The Self')

Jordan engages with topics of political radicalism, with the damage that is done to children, with paedophilia, - a minefield which most avoid discussing or negotiate indirectly - with a whole host of dark materials, in fact, including an astonishing section on the hounding of the unabashed porn star Mary Millington:

I had to visualise Mary and walk across the slope.
"Maintain images of Mary in my head," I said, "a close-up
of her face bathed me in rays." Her body is gone
into graphic litho but it's vitality is replicated
in a shabby or desperate honesty
like the face of the Queen on the coin of the realm.
Images of her body are a currency. Power flows through her.

(from 'Inside Mary Millington')

But already it was the place that propped up
yesterday's future, there was a fugitive sense of
a ground that was lost, of a better world
in time to come from an obsolete past.
and then the landscape began to give way.

(from 'Research: Hillsley Road 1978')

It's that mix of what appears like undermining satire with genuine feeling and direct speaking which makes Jordan, at his best, such a powerful writer. I could go on at length about this collection; there is so much meat here and so many varied avenues to explore, such rich variety amid its dark materials. The finale has an almost apocalyptic feel to it:

In the distance I saw the children we had seen
in the old Paulsgrove House air raid shelter,
they were looking at a boy who had died.

We watched as they approached him, accepting him
as one of their own.

We saw him rise and coat himself with dust.

And then one by one they embraced him.

(from 'How the Last of the Light is Held')

Wow - this is almost William Golding territory. As I said earlier, an astonishing book. I could end on this dark note but I'm inclined to recall a relevant story which I first remembered when reading Jordan's previous Shearsman collection *Ha Ha*.

I'm reminded of an art historian called Michael Dames who wrote a book about Silbury Hill and argued that it was, without doubt, an ancient fertility symbol. He then photographed a number of art students who were encouraged to run down the hill each carrying a white-paper toilet roll which they unveiled as they ran. This was mythology in the making and I believe it turned Mr Dames into a minor celebrity for a while. There's a lot to be taken from these poems. You can enjoy the serious nature of the enterprise, relish the high-art nature of the language or you can laugh your socks off as Jordan undermines his own seriousness as he goes along. However you decide (or are 'decided') to approach this writing, it's well worth the effort and I sincerely hope that Jordan hits the wide readership he clearly deserves.