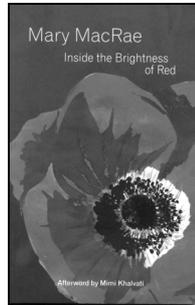


ANNE CLUYSENAAR REVIEWS MARY MACRAE

Inside the Brightness of Red, Mary MacRae, Afterword by Mimi Khalvati,
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*“the extraordinary acuity
with which she observes
'simple' realities and turns
them into words”*

The Resonance Of Simple Things...

The deeper I go into Mary MacRae's poems the more spacious my own world becomes. In her first collection, *As Birds Do*, it was already clear that this poet is fascinated by the packed, corrugated, wrinkled, layered, coiled nature of the world, offering as it does potential openings and unfoldings both within what we call material reality and also within our cells and synapses, the layers of human thought and feeling. A poem in that book, *Visitants*, commented: “how close unfold is to enfold”.

Inside the Brightness of Red, a substantially longer second collection, deepens that perception. These poems explore human permeability to the world as an indication that the world may perhaps answer humanity by being permeable to us in return, not only during life but after death. As before, there are surfaces with hidden facets – tousled, honeycombed, tucked, frilled, crinkly, spiralling, criss-cross. And there is “more to be seen in reflections than in things” (*Nocturne*).

Actual reflections, the evidence of one thing appearing in another, now seem crucial, as are also things seen “at strange / intimate angles”, in mirrors or their bevelled edges, through doorways and windows, reflected in glass, glimpsed behind falling snow or as shadows through paper. In keeping with such perceptions, what we see is “saturated” not with meaning but with “suggestion”, and even suggestion will elude us “unless we return that gaze”, the questioning gaze of natural or made things (*Vaso di Fiori, After Giorgio Morandi*).

Constable remarked that ‘painting is only another word for feeling’ and Mary MacRae's translation of the visual into words is often associated with painting. When she knew cancer had returned, she wrote, in the title poem here: “... Among the long-stemmed reeds / birds I've never seen before are hidden / in silky fronds then swing down to feed // and I want all this to last forever, / never to end, it is not that I want to be / outside, merely a passive looker-on – // I want to be inside the brightness of red...” She goes on to express the desire to “understand / what it is to be these things”.

And indeed, the extraordinary acuity with which she observes ‘simple’ realities and turns them into words is, I believe, of particular value to contemporary culture. I'm reminded of Rilke's belief that the duty of the poet is to transform the world into language. Our modern world, while we tend to insist on its materiality, leads us to puzzle over the nature of matter itself.

We have seen those unexpected ripples which enabled our universe to expand, clump and evolve and, at the other extreme, we know how vast is the space within the atom. Remembering no doubt G M Hopkins' sense of ‘God's Grandeur’ as a “freshness deep down things”, Mary MacRae admitted in *As*

Birds Do, “how hard it is / to feel the freshness of things”. Nevertheless, the straightforwardness of her writing creates miracles of freshness.

In *Elder* for example, she watches how “... with one swift stab / the fresh-as-paint / starlings get to the heart / of the matter / of matter // in a gulp of flesh / and clotted juice that leaves me / gasping for words transparent / as glass, as air.” Reading, she implies, should be like seeing for ourselves, through air or at most through glass. Watching a bird, Keats felt himself ‘take part in its existence’ and that is what happens here, although – or because – the poet claims to gasp for the breath of words.

Keats knew that when we face life’s complexities, ‘many doors are set open – but all dark’, and yet that we find ourselves ‘capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact & reason.’ If Mary MacRae’s poetry asserts, and exemplifies, anything, it is that the human mind is capable of true insight, when “what’s closed opens”. So it was without surprise that I came upon this evocation of Keats’ dying moments in *Piazza di Spagna, January 1821*:

Once there were words, doorways to wide
rooms he could move around in, the shape
of a poem that was a place to live,
a space to breathe easily in...

Now his room’s in a frame, like sky
and trees reflected in a mirror at strange
intimate angles, somewhere empty
other people live, afterwards.

Un-named, the last poem in this collection, tactfully echoes that vision, the poet “turning back” to find

the view from the window of elm-tree
and rickety fence, all reflected
in the glass of a picture-frame, familiar,

my study still, and utterly transformed,
drained dry and clear, unweighted.
Inviting. Oh, how inviting!

I once left a Dufy exhibition to find the squares and horizontals of the Belgian coast revealed as arabesques of ‘endless variation’. Mary MacRae would surely have enjoyed that. Her own art is revelatory. It offers “doorways to wide / rooms”, rooms inviting to live and breathe in.

Anne Cluysenaar