



Mary Coghill, *Assay of Blood and Gold: London Poems (City of Poetry, 2017)*, ISBN 9780957351011, 84 pages, £8.00

Reviewed by

Sogol Sur

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Mary Coghill's *Assay of Blood and Gold: London Poems* is a collection of fifty-one poems thematically united by a focus on London and, as the poet points out in her introduction to the volume, gold. This is immediately made evident by the table of contents, called 'A to Z', as most of the poems listed include the word 'gold' in their title, and a sense of the urban is frequently invoked by words such as 'city' and 'citizens'. Archaic or Latin terms also predominate, in titles such as 'Alembic City Sun', 'Noctiluca Citizens', and 'Lex Aurandi'.

The 'A to Z' guide to the volume is followed by the poet's introduction, in which she explains that the poems can be read in 'any order' because they are 'separate journeys' (unpaginated). This is a truthful claim, as the individual poems reflect a distinct lack of harmony. In a four-page footnote at the end of the collection, titled 'Route Map', the poet explains some of the references and Latin words in order to orient the reader in the collection, yet these poems are often self-referential to the point of detachment from the world outside the book. This makes the whole collection slightly claustrophobic. When the poet shifts her focus from the abstract, archaic, and philosophical, however, there can be found stunning imagery within the poems, such as in the first line of *Fool's Gold*: 'a moonlight slither basking in the real gold' (10). Or some of the lines from the first stanza of the poem *Golden Reflections*:

I am what I see and this is evening

where the slate blue-grey of the dusk
is pitted with darker windows
and punctured with shards of last light
a slash of sunset flashing sodium flares (19)

The poet states in her introduction that '[t]he poems can be hard to read. Any city dweller will understand that this is an accurate interpretation. Leave the difficult poems if you just want to keep it light, keep it "natural", pretend you don't live in a city...' (unpaginated). Although the volume thus makes a claim to the 'accurate interpretation' of a London landscape, the speaker in these poems is no flâneuse. The poems are so abstract and nebulous that the idea that they represent London may be easily lost. For instance, the poem *Rapid Exchange* appears to be firmly located in London by several specific mentions of Charing Cross, but the poem itself is trapped in a solipsistic over-conceptualisation that leaves no concrete trace of Charing Cross as a place. It offers no colour, no imagery, no emotion, no movements. It is possible that the poet means to substitute for this lack of passion and imagery the use of Latin and archaic terms as well as general philosophical concepts such as 'truth', but no attempt is made to make these complex ideas tangible and relevant to the immediacy of their London context. The final stanza from the poem *Wings of Gold* is an apt example of this:

Fly twice supported by beating wings of gold
escape and return searching out horizons
leaning forward yearning ranks departing though
shadows recall failure – fear of taking flight
spells truth – pulsing seconds flight defeats lament
movement bears victors hope not vain memories (74)

Stanzas like these leave the reader wondering: what shadows? What failure? What truth? In this way, the volume as a whole evokes more questions than it answers.

In her introduction, Coghill describes her work as 'difficult'. Much of this difficulty, however, appears to derive from the presence of archaic words and abstract nouns that seem to lack substance and consequently ring hollow and verbose. If, as the poet points out, the main theme of this collection is gold, it could be possible to consider gold a metaphor for London. The title and the introduction raise hopes that the volume would expand on the theme of the colour gold in a similar vein to Maggie Nelson's stunning, discursive, heartfelt, and intellectual meditations on the colour blue in *Bluets* (2009). Indeed Coghill does play with colourful imagery, as in the first poem in the collection, *Alembic City Sun*:

you give it to me gild leaves leavings
beyond the pain of setting sun
repeat red sulphur gold cheating hope
grey weld and massicot (2)

This opening sets the tone for the rest of the collection, but while the poems that follow carry forward the theme of gold, they cannot be said to develop it; rather, the intent of the individual poems and the collection seem to be obscured by a sense of excess in word choice. Bulky alliterations, such as 'juggling juxtaposing' and 'poetically poetical', at first glance seem quite crafty, but as one ponders upon their meanings, the words come to feel lost and lazy.

Like the first poem, the final poem in the collection, *Word City Goldly*, is abrupt, nebulous, and inexplicable. A footnote informs the reader that the title is taken from 'Lucien Tesniere (2015) *Elements of Structural Syntax* Amsterdam, John Benjamins, Translators' Introduction section 4. 1 and 4.2 pp xxxviii-xli [1959]'. However, this rather lengthy piece of information does not assist the reader in decoding a poem that starts with:

exchange the practical workings of
poetical exchange of writing
poetically poetical
writing style crampily cramped style... (75)

This stanza continues in the same vein for a few more lines with the repetition of the words 'poetically', 'abandon', and 'words', until it abruptly ends with a claim with which it would be difficult to argue: 'This is a cheap hoard of words' (75).

In her introduction, the poet poses a few thought-provoking questions: 'Who is the poet of the city? What does the poet perceive? What do the past and future hold?' These questions are followed by a promise of 'a range of strong and vehement emotions' through the poems. This sense of emotional expression is unfortunately lost in the overly wordy expression of the individual poems, and the volume overall obscures the poignancy and urgency of the questions its introduction asks.

Note on Contributor

Sogol Sur is a London-based performance poet and writer. Her debut poetry collection, *Sorrows of the Sun*, was published in 2017 by Skyscraper. She is currently working on a short story collection as the creative component of her doctorate in Creative Writing.

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