

## Stephen Barton: A Brief Introduction to the Poetry of Tony Flynn.

This careful selection lays out the critical themes and transitions within Tony Flynn's mature canon. The finely wrought discoveries of his ravishing theology-poetry. A profound, often playful wonder at his precise craft and the shape of language and meaning. The intellectual reverberations of a scholarly, European tradition. And the wit and resilience of the intensely personal and the defiant, earthly erotic.

'Near and Far' is Flynn's pivotal poem. It is the sounding board and the touchstone for each of these poems and for the poems in his collection *The Mermaid Chair* where Flynn is already mapping transitions: domestic and personal, the personal and the political and the theological - the reclusive 'Interminable days, and the mind become/ a burning-glass turned in upon itself'.

In 'Near and Far' an accomplished poet is at work, shaping each verse, each compassionate step, and each, sometimes shocking transition. Given the allusion to the *Song of Songs*, and the poem's breath-taking cast-list, it is heart breaking that the lines he only has in translation 'which though they speak to me will never sing'. But Flynn's own lines do sing as he seeks, again, to find and untangle the divine and the beloved.

These poems connect and resonate with each other, just as the poems do in *The Mermaid Chair*. The intimate, every day, and maybe forsaken, god of 'Mathew 27:46' becomes '...suffused in time/with all that ever was'. And 'orphan-stars are lost/ entirely in light' – wonderfully illuminating the mystical capture of immanence and transcendence, the 'Near and Far'.

Typically, 'Muttersprache' sits beautifully on the page in one long, broken line. Flynn is not afraid to wear his learning on his sleeve and does so here, in memory of Paul Celan. But he often wears his learning lightly, especially around his family where he disguises it with humour and compassion. Already, in 'The Wireless' (2008) he is signalling 'Muttersprache' (and W.S. Graham) with his 'grandmother's silent *Amen*' – and, with her he '... learned to love how words disclose/what does not correspond to anything'.

It is entirely apposite that 'Elegy' goes back to Flynn's time in Hull, in style and, tragically, in content. It is a fine memorial. Within the carefully crafted enjambments *ae* conversational metaphor works perfectly, until the intimate conversation jolts to a stop. Then the metaphor breaks down, but not the poem. We are taken to a seemingly unrealisable, unbearable but inevitable truth.

In 'Holy Communions' and 'Joy' Flynn is having fun, arranging favourite tropes alongside each other, philosophy, theology and a witty eroticism (although perhaps not a partnering of Wittgenstein with Rimbaud).

'The Old Poet' - is the defiant old-goat poet, showing off his poetic rhyming chops with accomplished playfulness. Shifting tense and fiddling with the script - hammering out irreverent alternating rhymes and ending, as we all must, with a last rueful joke.