

## Oli Hazzard's *Between Two Windows* – a review

It is the spring of 1936 and hot and humid day in Buenos Aires. Federico Garcia Lorca, who is fleeing the political debacle in Spain, takes to the stage in front of a numerous audience of students and poets. He is animated by a grand idea - great art has to and will always acknowledge the limitations of reason<sup>i</sup>. True to his passion for theatre, he begins his talk by setting the stage, recounting the story of the Andalusian flamenco dancer “La Malena” (Magdalena Seda Loreto) who, during a classical recital in Seville, whilst listening to a composition by Bach, shouted out half way through the performance “Olé, that has *duende!*”. It is for us to imagine the surprise and dismay of the starchy and stolid audience.

Lorca continued his lecture by exhuming the mythological bones of the concept of *Duende*, which in the Iberian traditions is envisaged as the dark spirit of inspiration, a worthy descended of the daimon of Socrates or of the melancholy imp of Descartes. Of course, over time, like all mythological creations, it accrued a conceptual validity as a psychological dimension to become a shadowy and palpitating heightened state of emotion, an expression of authenticity that comes from inside, from a place of darkness or light inside the body.

I mention this because it is the next distinction that Lorca makes, between the aristocratic Muse of Mediterranean poetic traditions (who for Lorca takes the poet to an exterior space, and elevates him to a place of acute angles) and the recalcitrant and impish Duende (that comes from the very soul of our feet and flesh) that offered me a great deal of insight into my ambivalent relationship with Oli Hazzards' new poetry collection entitled *Between Two Windows*.

And as I read the opening poem of the second section of the book, I remembered my first encounter with Hazzards' work, as part of the yearly collection “The Best British Poetry<sup>ii</sup>” published by Salt (2011 in this particular case), where his poem *Sonnet* glistened on the page with the inventiveness of his poetic language and the phonetic acrobatics it performed whilst being read out loud. Upon reading it a second time I felt there was something missing and I translated that intuition into a rational response as soon as I read the endnotes to the collection, where Hazzard confesses that the poem was written as an attempt to corral a series of ideas and half narratives in order to prevent them from resurfacing in other poems.

There are throughout the collection poems like *Sonnet*, poems that bend language into submission, with glib control, yet lack a certain ability to move me beyond intellectual admiration (the found poem - *The inability to recall the precise word for*

*something* being a good example; or the long *Home Poems*, even the frenzied *Solfege*). They are all to me the poetic equivalent of a Fabergé Egg, possessors of an admirable intricacy but nonetheless the receptacles of nothing more than the gifts of a much too cerebral Muse.

That being said, there are poems in this collection that stay away from the heights of intellect, which seem to have emerged from the recesses of an unknown, telluric self, which have, what Lorca called Duende. The first example would be *Entre Chien et Loup* which rapturously vanquishes the distance between it and the reader through its confessional aspects, and there are many, like *Mid Air*, in which the strength of the metaphors is overwhelming and *Four Landscapes* which, in my opinion achieves the very goal of modernity, that elusive quality of being sublime entertainment. They and other poems (*Manna*, *Sphinx*, *Badlands*, etc) somehow grab us, they hit us hard, they teach us and move us, but more importantly bend us, not language, into submission.

*Between Two Windows* is of course a valuable read, and a welcomed addition to any poetry reader's shelf, because it balances out almost evenly is intellectual pretention with the earnest emotion that some of us look for in poetry. More than anything I have read in the last few years, it illustrates the clash between the dark authentic spirit of the Duende and the ethereal downward gaze of the capricious Muse.

---

<sup>i</sup> The conference was later published *The Duende: Theory and Divertissement* in Gibbons - The Poets Work, university of Chicago Press, pages 28-47.

<sup>ii</sup> *The Best of British Poetry 2011*, Edited by Roddy Lumsden, Salt Publishing, London, 2011.