

Review by Anthony Mellors of *Hariot Double*. Published in issue 68 of *Tears in the Fence* (Autumn 2018).

Hariot Double. Gavin Selerie, Graphics by Alan Halsey. Hereford: Five Seasons Press, 2016. Large format paperback.

The basics: Gavin Selerie's *Hariot Double* is a large-scale lyric sequence of poems focused on the life and work of the Elizabethan polymath Thomas Hariot and the Elizabethan jazz musician Joe Harriott. Apart from both living in the England of one Elizabeth or another, they appear to have little in common except similar surnames, and the initial question in titling / tilting the work must have been which version of the name to choose. Selerie's modus operandi is to fuse the tradition of English lyric with the longer tradition of pattern poetry, making him something of a postmodern George Herbert; so why does he plump for *Hariot Double* rather than *Harriott / Hariot* or *Har(r)iot(t)* or *Ha(r)rio(t)t*?* Serious though the underlying themes of the book are, with the doubling itself prompting questions of cultural and racial difference, colonialism and its legacy, and official versus 'barbaric' speech, the title's peculiarity is the first intimation of the ludic and humorous bent of the book. The formal principle of the work, almost Elizabethan in conception, is to yoke together two heterogeneous figures to see what strikes up. Harriott's medium is sound ('If abstract / who composed it'), Hariot's is vision ('Some See, Some Doe Not'); Harriott is a musical innovator, Hariot an inventor and mathematician: the differences are complementary, inviting readers to find possible connexions beyond the obvious and arbitrary similarity in names. One connexion might be a degree of marginalization shared by the two figures: Harriott's achievement on albums such as *Indo-Jazz Fusion* (1966) and *Hum Dono* (1969) was ahead of its time while being a perfect example of sixties far-outness, yet because of this innovativeness he seems to have become sidelined. Meanwhile, Hariot's privileged background did not prevent his intellectual experiments from being treated as dangerous and atheistic. If Harriott was working from the margins toward the centre of English-speaking culture ('Can I fluent Caliban / get accust, a-costumed'), Hariot moves from elite English origins to an eccentric vision of the New World ('there you lye beatynge upon ye shoale / with extreme hasarde of beying casteawaye'). The double narrative is in three sections, which quickly alert readers to a non-linear pattern. Harriott is first, Hariot last, concluding by falling into the hour of his birth. The two main sections are conjoined by an 'Intermean' (an early modern term for a transitional scene in a play), in which elements of the double theme mingle with more overtly autobiographical material. While this central section allows the two major discourses to intertwine (or basically do anything involving the prefix 'inter') and foregrounds the poet's researches, it's typically unclear as to who is speaking at any given moment or what is now and then or which then:

There's no place for fancy stuff,
throw the lumber over. Just need
a lamp and skulls to get through

or be born on the blarmed bit
to understand.

(‘Boat Spree’)

Presumably this is the poet recounting a jaunt up the Thames from Kingston to Oxford as part of a field trip to Syon House, a ‘Zion’ historically relevant to Thomas Hariot in a number of ways and linking his ‘Hampton, Kingston, Richemond / by farther curls, tyde-ruled’ to Harriott’s ‘Richmond Revel’ (‘Two sweeps of river by the Old Deer Park’) and back to his journey from Jamaica to Southampton. Indeed, the book’s blue cover might be said to represent its preoccupation with river and sea voyages. The passage from ‘Boat Spree’ suggests description as metaphor for research. Yet the antiquated slang of ‘blarmed’ comes from the world of *Three Men in a Boat*, which also happens to be the ‘record’ of a trip from Kingston to Oxford. So the poet’s voice – if the poet’s voice it be – is always already confused with other texts, with which an experience – if that’s what it is – is associated. Throughout, Selerie’s use of voice, whether his own or personae or coming from documentary material (e.g., Harriott’s girlfriend, and Pocahontas), is highly idiosyncratic and provisional, his style palimpsestic, cubist, overdetermined.

The proliferation of watery images and themes is too diverse to do justice to here, and I cannot attempt a synthetic analysis or detailed appraisal of the work in a review. This is something Hariot Double invites with its whole being, yet while such an horizon of structural unity is desirable, and is almost inevitably a feature of the long poem or sequence of poems, it is also something of a red herring, in that the fractured metonymies of the modernist epic are, as Charles Olson suggests, more about finding out for oneself and making new connexions than they are about reconstructing an intentional program from what is basically an assemblage. This problem of the poetic matrix occurs in a more secretive way with single lyric poems, with the matrix resurfacing in postmodern readings as a kind of disavowed New Criticism. That is to say, the poem continues to be interpreted even as the form of its saying (to fall back into vaguely phenomenological terminology) defies interpretation.

The first thing that should be noted is that this book, like Selerie’s previous Five Seasons publication *Le Fanu’s Ghost* (2006) and West House Books’ *Roxy* (1996), is a distinctive, material object rather than a text made to fit into a ‘house’ style. While poetry is generally regarded as being in the mechanically reproducible sphere, its appearance on the page is always more than the printed representation of words, as readers of Bloodaxe publications will experience in a negative way. Complemented by Alan Halsey’s brilliant graphics and perfectly supported by Glenn Storhaug’s meticulous attention to production, *Hariot Double* feels concrete. It is a reproducible artist’s book; concrete as graphic and ludic, but also in the sense of foundness, as in *musique concret*. Visual elements, therefore, as in the best concrete poetry, become barely separable from sound and meaning; meaning is ‘significantly’ tied to voice and appearance, paradoxically at its most acute when presented in the form of a puzzle. Banal though it may be to say that Selerie is primarily a poet of

words and meanings, his interest in the history of ciphers, signs, alphabets, orthography, dialect, geometry, algebraic notation, and patterns springs precisely from his engagement with sense rather than being a way of confounding or transcending it. If there are many instances in *Hariot Double* in which poems are hermeneutically obtuse or hermetically opaque, it's not because they are performing exercises in homage to Schwitters or Cobbing, but because they are enjoying the challenges to sense occasioned by diachronic (e.g., archaic diction) and synchronic (e.g., patois) linguistic differences, or because codification and 'noise' (both aurally and visually) play a strong part in the transmission of both arcane and demotic wisdom.

What is both remarkable and perplexing is that this noisiness is introduced into a narrative scenario. Selerie describes his method as 'a dual narrative in fragments'. This is easily accounted for by the influence of Pound and Olson, whose orthographically disturbed long poems, punctuated by archaic fragments, ideograms and idiolects, form the basis of the modern / postmodern epic. Yet Selerie draws on these models for intimate excursions into a fundamentally lyric mode instead of epic extension, and his faith in the power of association is led by personal, quirky connexions rather than by the imperatives of cultural critique and historical destining. Olson, as already mentioned, worked from the local outwards, and his notion of *historin* is precisely that: finding large-scale resonances in the intimate and local, his 'method' being *meta hodos*, the path cut not followed. *Hariot Double* certainly takes off from this principle. And if the narrative idea is essentially Poundian, its privileging of a kind of archaeological approach to language owes much to Bunting, whose musical structuring is somehow not at odds with the injunction to 'take a chisel to write.' Similarly, for Selerie, 'Poetry is chiselled out of old narratives and faded objects, so as to create new perspectives and voice structures.' In this recent talk at the University of London's Senate House, Selerie contends also that '[T]he search for knowledge – musical, scientific, linguistic – can be compared to a labyrinth, as Francis Bacon does in the preface to *The Great Instauration*' and that textual complexity 'may also be regarded as labyrinthine.' Rebecca Solnit reminds us that 'a labyrinth has only one route, and anyone who stays with it can find the paradise of the centre and retrace the route to the exit', unlike mazes, which 'have many branchings and are made to perplex those who enter.' (*Wanderlust: A History of Walking*, 71) Selerie's heuristic model, then, is a rational one: his poetic enigmas are meant to resolve into sense. Yet the diversity of impulses and forms which make up the book are too mythically arranged to yield to anything like a single narrative goal, just as the 'metaphysical' bent of the *Hariot* conjunction never crystallizes into a clear theme or moral. One graphically inclined form Selerie doesn't mention is the sixteenth / seventeenth century emblem, and sometimes individual poems in *Hariot Double* read like emblems without legends, their picture-text combinations too personally devised to make much sense. In a recent review, Rupert Loydell complains that *Hariot Double* is unnecessarily difficult, leaving readers 'outflanked and outmanoeuvred'. This implies a war between the reader and the poet when I think the worst that could be said is that it's like a game. To be sure, the text becomes cryptic, especially at its most calligraphic, and there seems to be a level of

referentiality that is hard to glean. But that's because keeping it strange is what the documentary poet does. At least unless s/he wants to write an essay or what Jack Spicer calls 'a letter to the editor'. Loydell wants more explanation, and there were many times reading this book when I felt a similar need for something to hold on to. Yet the Poundian insistence is for record and document to be present in their stubborn materiality, so one shouldn't expect a site map. A poem such as 'Mariner's Mirror' is not difficult in terms of its general subject-matter (the moon viewed through a telescope, then compared with the terrestrial world) but in comprehending its precise images and the figurative relationships between them:

Over this verge, a little ragged, are seas
I'll hatch or score: ye Caspian, great rug-fleck,
then below, Foecund and Tranquill
a jointed arm with tiny ears,
and either side
a dream cup and nectar scutch.

Lines cohere soundwise: 'hatch' will be echoed by 'scutch', mediated by 'score' and 'Foecund' and 'cup'. The lyricism is reassuring, by turns mellifluous or crunchy, yet the images drift from easily resolvable ambiguity ('hatch', 'score') to something more recalcitrant: as a verb, to 'scutch' is to separate out the valuable part of a thing from its chaff, which might fit with extracting nectar; as a noun it is the swingling tool itself, or a brick hammer, and also a clump of grass. Nectar scutch seems more of an action than an image as s(c)u(t)ch, and how it connects with 'dream cup' ('cup of dreams'? 'ideal support'?) is anyone's guess. The continuing description of Hariot's diagram shown on the adjacent page resolves into

a pencil stare into sharper grip
for any translated spirit

reminding us that, just as in Hariot's day the line between science and the metaphysical was mutable and in the process of being radically redrawn, so poetic language draws on a metaphorical tradition which translates the 'spiritual' into the concrete, and the concrete into abstraction. What is a 'pencil stare'? Etymologically, perhaps, the act of attention through drawing? To stand and stay at attention rather than, say, 'gaze' at the object drawn? At this point, the poem seems less about images than language at its most abstract. While readers might hope that the poem will resolve its documentary sources into a figurative scheme, the documentary element in the facture becomes a knot of linguistic indeterminacy and possibility. The easy way out would be to accept the documentation as simply what it is in its concrete, archaic randomness, yet there's just enough agency in the choice of found text to lure one into the sense of sense. And this is even more so in a more minimalist poem such as 'Cubic Triolet', which demands an organic link between its form and mystical expression: 'not everie part scene / tells its place in here'. The recursive, dialectical rumination is beautifully set in the triolet, yet how does this 'cube' embody 'a bore in

a sphere’? A complicating factor is that the geometric and numerical cubes of Harriot’s world are associated in the larger scheme of the book with the Harriott poem ‘Cane to Cube’, where sugar is ‘cut into CUBES / all clean & white – empire tight’, and there are further metamorphoses into the dice of Harriot’s gambling addiction and into his abstract musical shapes (and by extension Selerie’s own ‘cubism’).

The closer contextual proximity of Joe Harriott’s world makes for stronger referentiality, but the poems work hard to defamiliarize their documents, and the point again is that Selerie is not looking to translate Harriott’s experience into the immediately empathetic but to formalize it. While risking cultural appropriation by using a Jamaican Patois Harriott did not speak publically, he is aware that the poetic rhetoric of simile is a form of assimilation, and therefore avoids the ‘relatable’ approach of another recent sequence on Harriott, Hannah Lowe’s Chan. This is not to say that Selerie fails to convey a powerful, immediate sense of Harriott’s milieu; on the contrary, Harriott’s successes and failures, his passions and anxieties, as well as his life in the London of the 50s and 60s, are documented with great care. But there is a formal distance generated by wordplay and musical equivalence which prevents the poems from becoming an exercise in mimicry and fake authenticity. Harriott’s ‘voice’ shifts between Jamaican English and received orthography. There’s nothing patronizing or condescending about the way Selerie channels it, and it’s made constantly the subject of self-awareness and cultural difference:

Plum talk is just the way we got it
out there. More Britt-ysh in pitch
than the clipped drawl that toggles
here.

(‘Tonal’)

Formally, again, the Patois connects with Harriot’s archaic English and creates a kind of unifying ‘free play’ for the slang and idiosyncratic diction displayed throughout the book. Nothing is systematic, and the pidgin is complemented by poems that would not be out of place in Chan:

If you’ve got big hands you struggle
to get from one note to another.
I’m sliding around, missing a key
here and there.

(‘Mark 6’)

and poems that are in another place altogether:

They’re naked and they dance (40 watt orange bulb,
broken kitchen chairs). Swedish lessons, phone GER
6651 (smear window). Young girl seeks
unusual position (baize board). Lady-owner driver

offers fast sports job (blind alley)...

(‘Turf Aslant’)

If I understand it, not understanding and the possibility of misunderstanding are a constituent of the poetic strategy. This is not a simple matter of textual obscurity but a crucial factor in what brings together the pieces of the book: Hariot’s mathematical discourse, his wordplay and ‘universall Alphabet’ of Algonkian (which John Aubrey thought devilish), Harriott’s scat, and his experiments at the limits of the jazz idiom; the ideological and physical damage caused by mistranslation and appropriation in the colonial and post-colonial settings of Ireland, America, and Britain: ‘They think it god-worke.’

Like Allen Fisher, Selerie chivvies his readers to research, yet there is always the ‘sense’ that no amount of delving will bring them closer to the poetic translation of the source material. You feel that Selerie is a poet strongly in control of his material and that he owns notebooks in which every sign, every quotation and allusion, is carefully logged. Yet none of that tells us very much about the poem as poem. It’s useful for the biographer trying to fit an oeuvre to the human subject who created it, but again the presumption is one of rational totality, when the reality is that poets are always writing lines they can’t remember having written and can’t explain. Such negative capability demands a reader keen to make it all cohere yet unfazed by chance and meaninglessness. In the process, you learn about language itself more than the subject matter, its slipperiness, its musicality, its design, but none of this would happen without the drive to meaning and reference. Ultimately we’re responding to imagination over explanation. Picasso said (I learn from a wireless discussion of Guernica) that the finished painting is a dead painting, and what I find disappointing in the work of ‘mainstream’ poets is exactly this drive to finish and to comment on completeness, usually in an elegiac tone. It’s as if, in order to comply with the directive of ‘serious literature’, the poem has to die and in its sighing end explain its existence and existence in general. Which in a sense, a very big sense, is true – at least it’s true when Frost makes a whole poem like ‘Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening’ the subject of exquisitely shrouded and illuminated fatalism. But it is not true when in countless Faber-esque jeremiads it becomes an empty reflex, a form of positive incapability. Selerie’s achievement is to lead his readers a very long way from this kind of bogus authenticity and toward an exhilarating if sometimes mystifying focus on recalcitrant idioms. He jams together a variety of poetic responses to disparately connected subjects, forming a completeness of artifice while maintaining an horizon of incompleteness, allowing free play within a tightly organized conceptual structure.

*the typographer has addressed this issue in reverse on the verso facing the title page.

Anthony Mellors