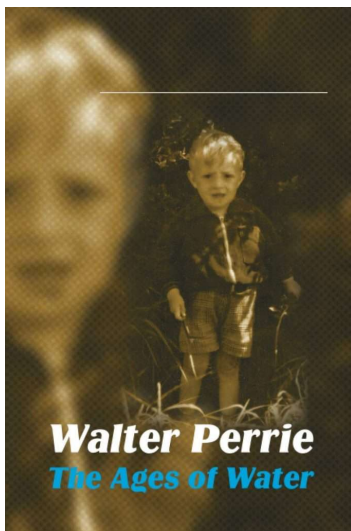


'The Ages of Water', by Walter Perrie

Review by Richie McCaffery



The Ages of Water, Walter Perrie's seventh book-length collection, has been six years in the writing but draws upon over six decades of experience. While there are hints of advancing age and *memento mori* dotted throughout, this collection is an impressive display of poetic as well as noetic vigour, Perrie having had a background in Classical philosophy which he brings to bear on his present and the natural world of his rural home in Dunning. In interview, Perrie has described this substantial collection (of over one hundred poems) as something of a battered old Gladstone bag into which he can drop and later retrieve 'all the elements of my experience', but it is perhaps more flattering to think of the collection as the koan-like tesserae of a mosaic made up of little fragments of lyrics and autobiographical shards that often catch the light:

*That pathos of domestic things
after our lives abandon them,
that creaking stair a requiem.*

('After-Life')

Perrie is too much of a seasoned hand to let the pesky first-person 'I' persona

clutter the poems and allow his emotions to slosh around like a messy confessional poet. However, he makes it clear from the outset that this is his story in verse with an epigraph from French writer Philippe Besson which translates (in my school-boy grasp of French) to something like 'do we ever tell anything but our own story?'. The writing in general is enriched by contact with other languages and cultures - French, Gaelic, Italian, Scots, Scottish-English, Celtic mythology - but there is a sense that Perrie is not dropping choice phrases and references like a dilettantish dandy but that he actively is a citizen of the world, forging new utterances from 'an ancient foundry':

*Snowdrops in the garden yesterday,
des perce-neiges;
I dreamed of you, forty years dead,
of reconciliation for a break
that never was;
only these little spears of loneliness
only irreparable loss.*

('A Grandmother')

The narrative thrust of the collection - that of an interior life spent devoted to words and the mind as much as an exterior life that marvels at and fears the natural world - surges like a river and each poem is a little tributary feeding into it. Perrie's writing is often pellucid and never allowed to meander too much as he ponders 'the weird intelligence that shapes a soul'. The unexamined life may not be worth having but Perrie warns against too much gazing upon the self and the job of poetry is not to explain the magical mysteries of life but to enumerate and illuminate them:

*Whatever may pass
before it, the mirror
does not bear grudges.
Peer too close;
breath smudges
the glass.*

('The Ages of Water')

Hugh MacDiarmid, whom Perrie knew as 'Chris', wrote in 'On a Raised Beach' that 'all is lithogenesis - or lochia', that the matter of the physical world we inhabit is either that of inhuman stone or of fallible, transitory flesh and that should be comforting, not alarming. And so, *The Ages of Water* begins in the fluid and messy birth of the poet who, as a baby, is both innocent and cunning, knowing naturally what they want and how to get it. The process of the poet is to learn that nothing can be fully grasped or possessed other than perhaps the acquisition of language, that the wisdom of aging is learning to make peace with the fact that, in the words of the late Alexander Hutchison, 'everything is vanishing' or in Perrie's version: 'Winter's poetry should be peace; / elegy, eloquence, release' (from 'Seasons') and that even here, in the territory of loss, 'there is a magic to be made' (from 'Redemption'). In Perrie's weltanschauung 'suffering does not cancel joy' ('Old Man Mad with Poetry') and in fact the two binary opposites are bed-fellows, one being meaningless unless countered by the other.

What Perrie devises in *The Age of Water* is his own personal credo or philosophy which, in the absence of a received god, becomes a sort of secular or humanist pantheism - that the life-force, symbolised by light, the elements and water flowing eternally and shaping our world, is what's truly sacred:

*Was Plato right; all histories are circular;
the songs, the wars, the witless kings?
Or Leibniz, rather, that the strings
that thrum eternal winds are sentience,
inventing boundaries, our Out and In,
where water and light are one,
lovers for ever, buzzard and prey?*

(from 'Reflections')

In 'The Ages of Water' water itself is accorded a voice:

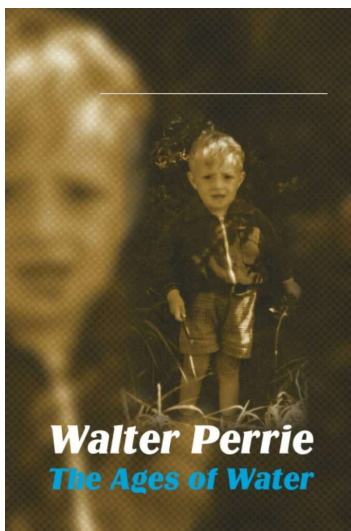
*I am everywhere in you, flowering desire.
Under my hands your body takes new shapes,
as water is shaped-by-shapes a stream.*

[...]

*Mind is a stranger, haunted by mortal mess,
blood, seed and marrow, carnal tenderness,
it hankers for chastity. But body's lexicon
is life, a metaphysic all its own [...]*

While this collection scintillates with moments of transcendence and enlightenment, Perrie's social conscience and consciousness never allow him to get too far flung or removed from our bleak present reality. In poems like 'Silence the Poor' and 'Pulcinella: *aria for a politician*' we feel the polemical stab of his pen as he takes aim at the mountebanks and self-serving frauds we call politicians, cast here as grim Mr and Mrs Punch-like figures, determined to grind the lower orders up to make their sausages. As such, *The Ages of Water* guides us through a spectrum of moods and emotions with language, like water, that is always clear and lucid. Ultimately, it is water and language that shape the vistas of this book and the life that Perrie marks and recounts is one that is simultaneously anabasis and katabasis - a voyage inwards and out, a descent as much as an ascent, a journey to the source and the terminus.

The Ages of Water is published by Grace Note Publications



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