

HENRY GRIMES – *SIGNS ALONG THE ROAD: POEMS*

Review by David Grundy

The facts are well known. Henry Grimes, established as absolutely one of the leading figures in the new music of the 1960s, through his work with Cecil Taylor, Albert Ayler, Don Cherry and Pharoah Sanders, disappeared in 1968. Presumed dead ever since, he was discovered in 2003, subsequently remaining in demand around the world, playing with many different groups and in many different contexts, creating anew the wonderment of the 1960s' fervent ferment, with that same energy and ear for the serene howl of uncouth beauty. In the thirty-year gap, he did not touch a bass once. But neither did he suffer from the ills that forced so many jazz musicians off their paths of brilliant creation – drink and drugs. And thus his mind still roamed, seeking other avenues down which to travel, apart from the music which it sustained and which sustained it. It was to words that he turned, and though Marc Ribot claims in his introduction to this book that Grimes is “a man who almost never speaks,” through writing he was able to exercise his mind, to make that transference from thought to art. Filling thousands of pages with his thoughts, with diary entries and with poetry, he had no audience but himself (how different to the glass-clinking, cash-register-ringing, conversation-ringing atmospheres of the jazz-clubs in which he had played!).

Yet writing with this freedom imposed *more* discipline, not less – one should not expect anything otherwise, given the beautiful freedom of the bass playing. What emerges out of this selection from Grimes' notebooks is that he was truly was using poetry to *think*, deeply and seriously. As he treated music as a philosophical and spiritual activity, so he understood that poetry can be fundamental to an understanding of where and what one really is. It could be argued that this absolute concentration of faculties emerged from necessity, but it was also self-imposed: no one told Grimes to write, it was his own compulsion to do so. In the thirty silent years during which he remained virtually alone, poetry was a way of reaching deep into his own innermost recesses, but also of engaging with the world from which he had cut himself off – whether this be through the use of history and mythology ('a pre-revolutionary cabin', 'ortherama the king'), religion ('easternal mysticism, virtue, and calm') or consideration of the surrounding urban environment ('the arch stairwells').

Paradoxically, it may have only been by cutting himself off in this way that he could manage to so deeply engage, with the world and with himself – although it is worth noting that quite a few of these poems were written *after* Grimes' re-emergence. Nevertheless, it was arguably that extreme cut-off which presented the conditions in which this poetry could be brought into existence (though one must be careful not to romanticise solitude, 'dropping-out', as one might be tempted to in the cases of Sonny Simmons, Charles Gayle, or Guiseppi Logan (himself perhaps on the verge of a return)).

Part of the poetry's beauty is its individuality. Not for the sake of wackiness or trying to seem/appear anything. Compare these lines to your standard jazz poetry: "Distance was spatial/ and the time drew/fathomless,/ in quire to condescend/in the mystic measures/overlapping" ('the walk in the dark that was heard at night'). This is difficult stuff –not just because of the use of obscure words like 'quire', 'mien' or 'zygocity,' but because of the whole construction and content of

the poems' almost every line. Grimes' phrasing is genuinely knotty; he is genuinely attempting to say things that cannot be said any other way. Prose paraphrase will really not do. Recently I've been thinking about how it would be possible to develop a new vocabulary, or set of vocabularies, to deal with the intense demands that music like Grimes' makes on the traditional resources of music criticism/journalism. I think that 'Signs along the Road' is the closest that anyone has so far come to doing this, the trade off being that it is so much a *poetic* conception that I'm not sure it would, or could desirably, be fitted into the confines of criticism.

In any case, music is far from Grimes' only theme. "Events are the polarizing of urban waves in spiritual displacement": this is a poetry that addresses that great theme of Frank O' Hara –the contradictions of living in the modern urban world, and specifically, in the modern American city. Admittedly, Grimes' methods and results are very different to O' Hara's, his city poetry being interior and private-public. By this I mean that the initially inward meditations reach outward to encompass the public (most often in its facade as architecture and constructed living space – hotels, roads, churches, parks) rather than starting out and moving in. This is a more complex process than I allow, in fact, for an observed image tends to be the initial trigger ('signs along the road', 'the arch stairwells'), and the inward/outward relation often exists, as far as that is possible, in a simultaneous relation. Yet still I think there is a difference to O' Hara's predominantly social and public-private sphere – by which I mean that even though one is alone, one always writes about one's friends, about lunches and parties and boat trips and sexual couplings, that even one's deepest fears are considered in terms of others, and probably could not exist without them ("when anyone reads this but you it begins/to be lost" cements the very personal address of 'A Letter to Bunny'). Grimes' scope is both wider and narrower: 'the world our society, society our world' – this 'world' feels much more abstract than that of O' Hara, which is constructed almost entirely out of those that people it.

Considering one's environment so deeply inevitably leads one to question how one is placed within it. The poem just cited does this, to be sure, but perhaps the most direct engagement is in 'the place', found on pages 52 and 53. By its final lines ("and i was right: i knew/ just where i was"), one knows without a doubt that the piece's journey is genuine. It begins: "The place was always – a thing/ to wonder, and/ always it seemed like/ it had propensity/ to outright." This seems relatively straightforward, compared to some of Grimes' other contortions of syntax, but read those lines again. "The place was always – a thing/to wonder:" the dash placed between the first four and last two words of the first line, importantly adding an extra dimension of meaning. Not just "the place was always [some]thing/ to wonder [marvel at]", but "the place was always [in existence]," as well as "a thing/to wonder." Why would this be? Because 'place' is not just the realisation of where one is at any one particular moment ('I am standing on Fifth Avenue/ I am standing on 52nd street'), but of where one is *placed* as a human being within the world at large – beyond that, within the cosmos. "Going to the ritual,/ grown in time and beyond the gate...to the indoor place" ('eastern mysticism, virtue, and calm') – this awareness of the very largest context within which one is placed is the very truest way of understanding the very smallest context – one's self, one's body and soul. This mystic background forms an unspoken, but to my mind crucial part of 'the place's argument.

That should not imply any sort of shallow mysticism – rather, much of the poem is concerned with observations of thing seen, with sense-data – "a place, a

hotel room...architectural archetype sameness...roadside slides". But these things are always more than single, solid concepts, leading instead to trains of thought and association; in this highly charged context words assume more than themselves, have the ghosts of other words behind them – so that the beautifully assonant "roadside slides" conjures the phrase "roadside dives", and makes one ponder the use of metaphors of movement ('slides', 'dives') to talk of places, buildings which do not move – and this ties back to the road ('roadside'), to the way that cars slide or dive (in rain) along its surface, or that people slide from their cars out to these 'low dives', dive out (while never escaping) the cold comfort, the "couching ambiguity/ of modern life". And then those roads connect to those "signs along the road" which make the subject matter of the titular first poem. Grimes is not necessarily thinking about these connections explicitly – they are not necessarily 'there' in the surface linearity of the poem's observations, but, because of his depth as a thinker and artist, they enter his words anyhow, as if oozing from the fibres of his being.

In the poem discussed above, Grimes notes that "the place has...propensity to outright." One can clearly not take 'outright' as meaning any bald, factual, common-sensical statement. The sense of Grimes' poetry, so much a product of his senses (sensual attune-ment to, at-one-ment with the world), is far from common, if 'common' means 'repeated into triviality'. Yet the humanity it translates to words could, potentially, be common to us all – it's just that there are only some people who are willing to confront themselves and their environment with as much as honesty as to be able to access it.

Based on all this, one should be able to class Grimes, along with Cecil Taylor, as the jazz musician-poet *par excellence* – or, like Taylor, as more than this: as a poet whose conception is undoubtedly musically informed, displaying the same resources, reflexes, turns and emotions as his music-making, but whose writing stands alone, independent of the music. Grimes captures this best himself, in one of the few poems explicitly about music, 'monk music': "Music functions in a pattern./Patterns." That line-broken, end-(full)-stopped ambiguity is something to be savoured, as it teases out this meaning: that music is both patterned and patterning, the patterns created by the musicians in some mysterious way turning round to pattern them. In that sense, Grimes goes some way towards allowing us a glimpse into just what people mean when they talk about the 'magic' of free improvisation – the sense of being both in and out of control, of controlling the music's flow while also not knowing what is going to happen next. Grimes is also saying that music cannot be limited to just one pattern (the full-stop and line-break act as a pause, a hesitation before a correction – "Music functions in a pattern – no, wait, that's not quite right, it functions in *patterns*.") If we apply these insights to the poetry, I think we gain something useful: Grimes' poems use patterns, but not so much the traditional patterns of strict metre and regulated stanzaic shapes, coming nearest to such a tradition only insofar as the 'open field' of Charles Olson hovers somewhere in the structure of 'signs along the road being put there' (Olson's conception obviously a reaction against those older patterns, anyhow). Instead, these patterns tend, perhaps, to emerge more from a way of thinking and speaking unique to Grimes (just as reading J.H. Prynne's prose helps one understand some of the characteristic twists of phrasing that contribute so much to the strangeness of his poems).

Perhaps they emerge from the patterns of jazz also– the sense of placement and timing in 'monk music' does become a lot more comprehensible if one thinks of Thelonious Monk's playing. This is a poetry with an intensely oral/aural effect (as

indicated by the fact that Grimes now recites his words as well as playing bass and violin), but the intricacy of its many effects is very textual – not in terms of numerous allusions requiring hoards of footnotes to decipher (though the range of reference is very wide), but the way in which many of the twists of meaning simply cannot be understood by hearing the poem read aloud – line breaks, punctuation, differing implied emphases which occur simultaneously. It is perhaps for this reason that ‘signs along the road’ seems to read itself aloud inside one’s head as one reads. It’s a phenomenon that I don’t recall ever happening to me with any other kind of poetry – the voice that plays itself out in my head is not that of Henry Grimes, nor is it mine, and perhaps it is not even fully a voice, but it does exist in some capacity. This sounds fanciful, but one could describe it as the voice of the poem itself, speaking independently of writer and reader but emerging only from the encounter between them. I hope, and I don’t think, that such philosophical considerations are something I am imposing on the poetry; rather, they arise from the conditions which it creates – it *makes* one think in this way. It forces one’s experience to become enriched, with the gentlest and most studious of touches.

It’s a shame that the book doesn’t seem to have received much coverage, either from the jazz critics (who might not be quite sure what to make of it), nor from the literary critics (for whom this is off their usual radar – ‘what does a free jazz bassist from America have to tell us about poetry?’). There *are* ways of writing about it intelligently, though, as Marc Ribot’s introduction shows. Thankfully, he doesn’t try to grasp for too many literary parallels – but he does mention Celan, which I think is appropriate, given the stress that both place on individual words and phrases, the way they force language to say things that one almost feels it doesn’t want to – the way that their poetry is wrenched into being from the very depths of their self. Such poetry is incredibly honest, and incredibly generous; it is what is meant by being aware, awake, and alive.