Mrs. Ramsay's Knee

Anderson, Idris

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The grave, measured poetic voice of Idris Anderson won me instantly, and repeated readings confirm the freshness of this remarkable poet. She has read deeply in Elizabeth Bishop, who I think would have liked this book. Anderson’s mode is ekphrasis, on which the best guide is John Hollander’s *The Gazer’s Spirit*. The paintings by Rembrandt, Monet, Dürer, Balthus, Henri Rousseau, Jackson Pollock, and Chagall are among the very varied provocations that Anderson’s gaze converts into poems. Elegant as her use of art works is, I am most taken by her stunning “Front Page,” which reacts to *New York Times* photographs of the war between Israel and the Hezbollah in the summer of 2006.

Anderson is too compassionate to be detached, yet her tone is uncanny in these recent poems. She takes neither side but gives all to vividness. Where Bishop’s art tended to be on the threshold between the visual and the visionary, Anderson’s swerve from her great precursor adheres to the visual, and yet teases from it what can be seen as an intimation at once immanent and transcendental.

Whether Anderson relies too much on painting and photographs will be more of a question when she goes on to a second book. Bishop’s famous eye was too much emphasized; we can judge now that her angle of vision counts for more than her descriptive precision. Anderson, like Bishop, tacitly undoes all ideologies.

This book’s epigraph, from Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*, gives us the provenance of her title. She seeks “intimacy itself, which is knowledge, she had thought, leaning her head on Mrs. Ramsay’s knee.” At their best, Anderson’s poems seek an intimacy with the reader, but never by way of confession, which I have trouble accepting in Robert Lowell.

It is difficult to prophesy Anderson’s future development, partly because her poems until now are mostly consonant with one author. It may be that, again like Bishop, her poetry will unfold rather than change. Still, the single poem I like best in her first book is the beautiful reverie on the death of John Keats, where a new tonality emerges:

We want to be changed
by what we enter, the dry,
bright air of warmer places
to which we book passage,
roads of emperors and poets strewn
with marble victories,
intimate rooms where the famous
dead lived vividly, where what
was beautiful was not easy
and what was true was almost endurable.

The intricate cognitive music of that stanza is heard more intently, because Anderson has no design upon us. Very subtly she plays upon the message that ends the “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” where “beauty is truth, truth beauty” is an absolute gesture. To know that the beautiful is difficult and that the truth is “almost endurable” is not a correction of Keats but a tribute to the pathos of his death. As with Shelley and Hart Crane, our loss was enormous. That sense of bereavement is expressed admirably by Anderson’s hushed eloquence.

Harold Bloom
MRS. RAMSAY'S KNEE