Michael Bartholomew-Biggs
reviews
***Wounded Angels* by Murray Bodo** (Blissfool Books, 2010)
***Things to Say* by John Lucas** (Five Leaves, 2010)
***Whistle* by Martin Figura** (Arrowhead, 2010)

Murray Bodo's latest collection takes its title from the Hugo Simberg painting "The Wounded Angel". This picture (reproduced on the book's cover) shows two boys carrying a stretcher on which sits an angel with bandaged head and damaged wings. Bodo calls his book *Wounded Angels*, using the plural probably because he wants to explore the everyday hurts all his readers have experienced – and probably inflicted. It is also fitting that children appear in the picture, because Bodo uses part of the book to reflect on his own childhood.
Murray Bodo is a Franciscan priest and also a professor of English in Cincinnati. His poetry may not have been very well known in the UK before Blissfool Books launched *Wounded Angels* but in fact he has many publications in the USA including a best-selling book on St Francis. His Christian faith clearly informs his poetry; but it is important to say that the poems do not insist on the reader sharing his faith. He writes with compassion, humour and humanity about everyday life and experience.
The complexity of Bodo's tender poetry is shown in the first Wounded Angel poem. She is
blindfolded so she can't see
what happened to her, so we
can't see her eyes illumine ...
how we're the very ones who
wounded her...
as we cart her home to show
what someone else did to her.
Hurt and honesty are recurring themes: several poems deal sensitively with a two-edged relationship with guns inherited from his father. In "Gun cleaning" he writes: *This beautiful object / unmans me. Once it made me a man,/ you said.* "Dad's rifle" ends with the lines *When I was seven you taught me care/ of guns that would take care of me.* Bodo does not let a gun take care of him:

yet – like many of us – he may be at times uncomfortably aware that his peaceable existence could be said to be secured by weapons in other people's hands.
Bodo is an accomplished poetic craftsman, using free, unrhymed verse alongside stricter forms such as ghazal or rhymed couplet. He even makes poetry about the mechanics of poem-making – even down to the letters of the alphabet. On the way to his father's funeral he considers a photo of himself and his parents outside their grey family home

the picture that can
never be anything but three with its
"e's" like the "e" in "grey" and the "e" in me
turned in upon itself but not whole
like an "o", say ...
or the moon still tracking me
... behind the train.

In "Words that fly" he begins with a question that R.S. Thomas might have asked: *Do words take us further / than we could go without them?* That Bodo's words can and do take us far is demonstrated by the relatively long quotes in this review: his perceptive insights are often sustained over several elegant lines.
One place where the book takes us is inner city Cincinnati. In "Sunday with Julian", Bodo finds evidence on the streets that (in the words of St Julian of Norwich) *we are clothed, wrapped, in the goodness of God*. The poem starts in church but then moves outside to mundane encounters: a young couple in a burger joint; two prostitutes who ask him for a light (*is there a code here I'm not aware of?* he muses); and a teenage wife eating ice cream. In glimpsing good in the undramatic he is not being sentimental. Bodo's poetry most certainly does not come out of a detached, restricted or idealised world view. He has no illusions about some of his near neighbours (*The bathless stench/ you leave on my car seat*); and the last section of the book deals with tough political issues – particularly lamenting the human cost of the Iraq war (*No one notices their masked/ pain, their wooden pace, since he/ came home, a metal box ...*).
No one who heard him read during his visit to London in autumn 2010 would imagine Bodo to be "soft and fluffy". His steady belief

in The Incarnation leads him to follow St Francis and seek both to carry love and to look for love in ordinary life. Even a firmly non-religious reader might wonder whether the poems are brushing against something deep and worthwhile. Or, to be more colloquial, he might borrow the words of one of the prostitutes in "Sunday with Julian" and say *Okay, I like/ the jerk anyway*.

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John Lucas would probably describe himself as a religious sceptic. The title of his collection *Things to Say* comes from an R.S. Thomas poem: *And I would have / things to say to this God/ at the Judgement...* His voice is that of an honourable man who looks for justice and fairness and is indignant when he does not find it. He does not expect to look to God for any consolation or explanation: and yet he seems not entirely to disagree with some of Bodo's sentiments. *Love, like art, can happen anywhere* he tells us in his opening poem, reflecting on a train journey through the grimness of the Black Country. Another rather striking intersection with Bodo's book occurs in the poem "Callings" which is set near the Franciscan shrine at San Damiano. Lucas is duly sceptical of some of what he sees (*etiolated, creepy statues*); but is persuaded not to be too sweepingly dismissive of all that St Francis, along with his *grounded congregation of birds*, has come to stand for. After all, he observes, *no good can come of **not** loving [the creaturely earth].* And the poem ends with a kind of echo of St Julian: *Love calls us to the things of this world./ It does too*.

It would be wrong to overstate parallels between Lucas and Bodo. But since they are about the same age, it is not surprising that *Things to Say*, like *Wounded Angels*, also opens with poems of childhood reminiscence. (The collection is, in fact, published as a companion to *Next Year Will Be Better*, a prose memoir by John Lucas about England in the 1950s.)

Although Lucas and Bodo share some similar memories, they handle the poetry of recollection in quite different ways. Lucas makes more use of traditional forms and rhyme schemes. He manages to do this in a way that does not feel old-fashioned. Where Bodo's memories are rural, those of Lucas are largely urban and give a quite broad picture of the England he grew up in, mentioning political, sporting and cultural events. (Indeed I was glad to have *Next Year Will Be Better* at hand; I might otherwise have been

puzzled by some of the literary references which Lucas, as a Professor of English, can readily deploy.)

Lucas devotes the middle section of his book to war poems. In a poem about a solitary woman bereaved by war he cleverly adapts a line from Larkin: *If all that survives of us is love/ what will survive of those who lack for it?* He also offers an unusual take on The Few:

... after we've seen off Hitler,
what's to become of them, these heirs
to wooded acres? What song
could blend my buffed Black Country
with their expansive drawl ..?

Particularly moving is "June 1942" which tells how the poet's mother sat at her dressing table to make up her face during an air raid. *Of course she doesn't think that what she's done // might shield her children...* But she is

... *making the case*
for all who offer nothing against violence/
but instinct of a pure, unsaving grace.

("Grace" is another word Bodo might have used ...)

The final section of the book includes some rather more knockabout pieces by "Thorn Gruin", who is an *alter ego* of Lucas. This is good fun, but lends a slight unevenness to the collection. Even the excellent and mainly serious first and second sections contain a few weaker pieces – birthday greetings for friends and a found poem consisting of the (admittedly eyebrow-raising) names of British residents in war-time Cairo.

Being only a little younger than Bodo and Lucas, I found the 1940s and 50s poems quite accessible. I too encountered schoolmasters like "Cheesy" in the poem "Mission accomplished"; my children's generation would expect such a teacher to be dismissed and prosecuted! Similarly, today's football fans would hardly believe that the ball might go

back to the far end, blurry fast,
and yowls tell us what we can't hope to see
in unlit 40s mist.

I hope however that *Things to Say* is not overlooked by readers under, say, fifty years old. These fine, well-crafted poems are a

pleasure to read. What's more, they reflect a time when courtesy, honesty and patience seemed more overtly valued than they are now (at least in certain areas – and Thorn Gruin might wish me to mention financial industries at this point).

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Martin Figura was born in 1956 and hence is the youngest of the three poets considered here. Nevertheless, in his new collection *Whistle* he has chosen to write entirely about his boyhood. This is understandable because Figura has a terrible story to tell – worse than tales of sadistic schoolteachers or post-war austerity. This review will not reveal the central, shocking incident (although it is clearly stated on the book's back cover); it is enough to say that by the time he is nine years old, Figura's mother is dead and his father is in hospital. He is taken in by relatives, sent to boarding school and then abandoned to children's homes and foster-carers. Figura deals with this harrowing story much as Bodo might have done: seeking to be honest about what really happened but also trying to be understanding about the complexities that lay behind the harms he had to endure. Indeed, the book's first poem is like a declaration of intent, ending with the line *Let this be mercy, and I a good son.*

Figura is a photographer as well as a poet so it is not surprising that many of the poems resemble snapshots. Events are described rather than analysed: comment is implicit and subtle, resting mainly on careful choice of words to frame and illuminate a moment. Most of the poems are quite short. This seems to increase the impact of the occasional longer ones such as the extracts from his mother's letters, incidents from a visit to his father's home in Poland and portraits of his companions in a children's home.

The early years of childhood are portrayed with affection. In "How to Steal" Figura realises *I can be trusted on my own for a few minutes* and so he raids the larder to make and gobble a ketchup sandwich before his mother returns. His final word of advice to himself is *Don't blink when she takes her hankie/ and wipes the sauce from the corner of your mouth.* His father, building a fireplace, *tapped in each careful stone/ to the satisfaction of the spirit level.* Before a music lesson, the piano *attempted/ to conceal itself/ behind the standard lamp.*

Then, after losing a fountain pen, he realises, with terrible but

unconscious prophecy
if one or both of your parents
were to die in a terrible accident, then
the small matter of homework would be forgotten.
Finally, when a tragedy does occur,
The whole thing turns upside down
... Cups and saucers
spin away – disappear
into the infinite Artex swirl.
As he is driven away to stay with an aunt and uncle, a boy on a bicycle behind the car *pedals like mad to stay with us, but we stretch away,/ leaving him stranded.*
The story continues to unfold in episodic fashion. Figura's discomfort at living with his uncle is captured in the prize-winning poem "Morning Room": *The family sits round the table/ ready for the meal which is me.* Later, in "Strange Boy", we see him through the impersonal but not unkindly eyes of schoolmasters:
We know he steals but are letting it go for now
He pulls a face when he concentrates
The other boys have noticed this
He has invented an elaborate past
Later still, after being briefly reunited with his father, he takes a girl friend round to meet him. After a meal
[Dad] fetches the camera,
from the drawer in the wardrobe,
poses us on the sofa
in case we never come back.
All in all, this is a remarkable book: moving yet very controlled by virtue of its economy of language and its spare, tight verse structures. It is probably a book to read at one sitting, following the pull of the narrative thread. Afterwards there will be episodes that demand to be revisited.
All three books raise the interesting question of how to handle poetry which responds to facts or events unlikely to be known to most readers. As mentioned earlier, Figura presents the key elements of his story on the back cover of the book. He does not, however, give a detailed timeline for his travels and trials; hence there are some poems which introduce people whose place in the

story I was not quite clear about. I did not feel this to be much of a shortcoming.
Bodo and Lucas both need to give a context for some of their poems. Bodo prefers to use notes at the back of the book – although I wish these had explained the real-life inspiration (if any) for "Aristotle in Africa". Lucas likes footnotes at the end of a poem and "The Scents of an Ending" is a good example of the benefit of getting background information *after* a first reading. Tackling the poem without knowing who the characters are produces a haunting rather desolate effect which remains even when more facts are revealed. Having the characters' identities and history from the beginning could have been a distraction.
It can be argued that the poems themselves should present their own background and that notes should be limited to things like translation of foreign or technical words. There may sometimes be a case for this: but it also presents a challenge. It is possible to write poetically about reactions to events that may in themselves be quite mundane; but to use part of a poem to narrate the actual events can be an open invitation to be prosey! There are probably no hard-and-fast rules: but the authors of these three strongly recommended books do, on the whole, find appropriate ways of providing the reader with the "inside knowledge" needed to appreciate their excellent poetry.

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