

John Riley

SAMPLER

Selected  
Poetry  
&  
Prose

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Poetry & Prose  
*'The absolute is a room'*

SAMPLER  
JOHN RILEY

*edited by Ian Brinton*

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*To Kay, as ever,  
and to Kostas Madalaras*

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## Preface

'Riley's Light', the Leeds University celebration of the poet's work organised in 2015 by Helen Mort, to whom we remain immensely grateful, was represented by contributors ranging in age from Andrew McMillan and Vahni Capildeo to Peter Riley. Matthew Sperling, another contributor, also noted the range of publishers represented at the event including Cape, Carcanet, Chatto, Gallery from Ireland, Peepal Tree Press of the Caribbean and its diaspora, and Picador. Now Shearsman is represented and John Riley himself returns to print with this marvellous selection by Ian Brinton. Also in the audience at Leeds were poets as different as Michael Haslam and Paul Farley while Luke Kennard and Michael Symmons Roberts expressed considerable support although they were unable to attend. As well as the broad range of interest shown on that day, what made me confident that Riley's work would finally return to print was meeting Ian Brinton in person, whom I knew from his articles on Riley for various magazines over the years; I discovered that at a more immediate level, Ian had rescued the John Riley archive (now in Cambridge) from his widow Carol's nursing home, where it ran the risk of being dumped in the event of her death at a time when she was in very fragile health. 'Riley's Light' took place in an atmosphere of celebration of the poet's achievements but it was also tinged with great sadness, as Carol Riley Brown had died the preceding week; happy to see a new stirring of broad-based enthusiasm for her husband's work, we can only imagine the pleasure this publication would have brought her.

Sometime earlier, Carol had personally chosen her husband's widely-admired 'Poem for Rilke in Switzerland' to be set by Mike McInerney, which was re-recorded and made available again after 'Riley's Light' by Choros Gregorianos in their memory, an act of recovery foreshadowing that of this book. 'Poem' was also one the first of Riley's that dazzled me as it does many others when I show it to them, with its extraordinary conclusion:

The shock of re-

Turning to myself after a long journey,  
With music, has made me cry, cry out — angels  
And history through the heart's attention grow transparent.

I mention all this here in tribute to a unique love suffusing this book, a poetry coming to prominence now against a background of cruel losses.

Leeds was John Riley's birthplace to which he returned after important years in Cambridge and subsequent teaching, but it is also where his talent was violently extinguished in 1978 at the age of only forty one. I can't even guess at what we have lost because of this; as Ian Brinton's selection here demonstrates, Riley was at this point engaged in those poetry-in-prose alchemical experiments we have only recently become familiar with in this country. I contacted Tim Longville over 'Riley's Light', who like Michael Haslam stressed that the results moved beyond prose poetry into something new, and Tim was also keen for John Riley to be remembered as a Leeds poet alongside the international reach of his achievement. There is a strange poetry within the stark prose of his hometown, where I now live and discovered John Riley's astonishing poems. David Wheatley made the interesting suggestion in his paper for 'Riley's Light' that perhaps Leeds shared something of the eternal city reflected in 'Czargrad': "With his studied non-specificity, Riley does bring something democratic and ubiquitous to his 'City of God.'" Riley joined the Russian Orthodox Church here only for convenience sake, to practice and was buried by Polish Orthodox rites, an important distinction bearing in mind the performance of those two institutions in the Second World War. A memoir is being prepared describing Riley's complex religious views, but here I merely wish to observe how it is an almost apophatic theological paradox in itself that our poet most of light has suffered so much darkness, from his own violent death to the destruction of most stocks of his books in the IRA bombing of Manchester. Nevertheless, his poetry of crystalline intellectual poise, shivering with its own harmonics of hesitations, survived the blows and the bombs, the eclipse and silence following his death. This is largely due to efforts by Riley's friends and admirers whom I don't have room to thank individually here, but his reputation had also established itself abroad, particularly in the U.S.A., whose poets were crucial to Riley's own development. Irish poets figure in this story too and Peter Sirr has written well of Riley's distinctive pitch between personal and divine love at a time when few of his contemporaries explored spiritual and emotional complexities, let alone in Riley's visionary and highly-original way.

In fact, there has been no poet like John Riley since his time either, although if you are new to his work, you will notice traces of his influence on many poets after you read this book, particular in the younger generation. Its publication makes available to a larger audience the work of a poet



brilliant in so many ways, enhancing our understanding of poetry after the Second World War but also enriching our poetry's present and future if we will in turn give it the heart's attention it deserves.

Ian Duhig

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## Introduction

Judgement, like an epiphany, comes unexpectedly and, according to 'spring . diversion', one of John Riley's last published poems, 'so does glory / ready or not'. The chanting from a children's game of hide and seek suggests that we are not only the pursuers after truth and beauty but also the pursued and in the same poem we are presented with a spiritual conundrum that is central to Riley's poetry:

the absolute is a room  
without doors or windows

The opening lines of his major poem, 'Czargrad', raise a question of Heideggerian proportions as knowledge of *dasein* is incorporated within a sentence which is already *on the move*

to get to know the flight of birds, blossoming  
of lilac-bush tipped with white flame  
see the movement of the wind and try  
to reassemble quietness from the creakings of the house at night...

There is a sense of the spiritual here, as in so much of Riley's work, and a tracing of the unchanging eternal perceived through the transient noises of the now. Andrew Crozier, in his contribution to Tim Longville's collection of writings *For John Riley*, pointed to a 'dogmatic or magisterial' quality to much of this poetry 'in which the commonplaces of human experience become realistic emblems of man's spiritual nature'. Within this context it should come as no surprise that Riley's name should have become associated with that of the thirteenth-century Bishop of Lincoln, Robert Grosseteste, whose own short treatise *De Luce* ('On Light') merged an Aristotelian terminology with a concern for matter as substance. The light of which Grosseteste wrote was not the ordinary physical light of everyday experience but was a simple substance, almost spiritual in its properties. There was a distinction in the philosopher's work between *lux* and *lumen*, the former being light in its source, whereas the latter referred to reflected or radiated light. In John Riley's terms *lumen* was inseparable from *lux* and it still strikes one as appropriate that Michael Grant, a friend of Riley's from Cambridge days, should have opened his Afterword to the 1995 Carcanet Press edition of the *Selected Poems* with a reference to this preoccupation.

Grant pointed out that the 1970 poem, 'The Poem As Light', 'does not merely describe light: the poem's language appears informed by it, seeming to participate in the world that it invokes and delineates'. It was in the first section of that poem that Riley introduced the reader to a 'dream / Of Byzantium', that city which in turn became Czargrad, and referred to Art as 'the building, moved in, breathed in'.

Grant's introductory comments also drew attention to the importance of icons for John Riley and writing about Russian Orthodoxy, the Church to which John Riley sought admission, Nicholas Zernov suggested that icons were not merely paintings within the Russian Orthodoxy:

They were dynamic manifestations of man's spiritual power to redeem creation through beauty and art. The colours and lines of the icons were not meant to imitate nature; the artists aimed at demonstrating that men, animals, and plants, and the whole cosmos, could be rescued from their present state of degradation and restored to their proper 'Image'. The artistic perfection of an icon was not only a reflection of the celestial glory — it was a concrete example of matter restored to its original harmony and beauty, and serving as a vehicle of the spirit. The icons were part of the transfigured cosmos.

This was perhaps part of what Riley's friend, Mike Chamberlain, was suggesting when he wrote to him in November 1971 about the 'endless quest to make piety formal, leaving words open for the reader but helping him to avoid making ironic selections.' Referring to an icon in the closing lines of 'Czargrad II' the poet presents the reader with a 'bright cloud' that is 'fixed'

that love  
is never fulfilled  
but the ways  
of approaching  
endless

The connection between stillness and movement, the phenomenology of the world as set against the light emanating from the icon, was caught for Riley in that section of the poem where he referred to 'keeping house, a few precious objects / clarities, the form of gratitude'. The 'gathered circle of

light' which immediately followed this line is also a reminder of an iconic presentation.

Ezra Pound's awareness of the significance of light was central to his essay on Guido Cavalcanti:

We appear to have lost the radiant world where one thought cuts through another with clean edge, a world of moving energies '*mezzo oscuro rade*', '*risplende in sè perpetuale effecto*', magnetisms that form, that are seen, that border the visible, the matter of Dante's *paradiso*, the glass under water, the form that seems a form seen in a mirror, these realities perceptible to the sense, interacting...

As John Riley would have been aware, one of the striking images in the opening Canto of Dante's *Paradiso* was the contrast between 'terra quïete' and 'foco vivo', earthly stillness within living flame. The connection between the stillness of Art and the Life Force which prompts it, diffusion of Light, is there too in Canto IX where we 'contemplate the art that makes beautiful the great result, and discern the good for which the world above wheels about the world below'.

Grant had referred to Pound's ambition 'to write in such a way that language might once again manifest this radiant energy, this fructifying and vivifying light, of which Erigena and Grosseteste had spoken'. He went on to suggest that Pound's 'practice leads us to believe that the energy for which he sought manifests itself only in stillness, and to a scrupulously vigilant and concentrated attention'. Part IV of 'Czargrad' was to conclude with the 'slight stir of air through grasses' bringing back to our minds the 'delicate' wind 'through silken corn' from the poem's second section.

In *Ways of Approaching*, and appearing between 'Poem In Four Parts' and 'Czargrad', Riley placed his 'in memoriam Charles Olson' with its reference to love as 'the mover or the move'

the stain of it  
in the midst of struggle , the story in the  
mouth with figures

The world of Art / Poetry is like the impression left on paper, the 'stain', the 'move' prompted by the 'mover', the Byzantine *troparion* or *kantakion*, hymns shining out from the icon and this highlights one important connection between Riley and Olson: a belief in the *polis*. The first two

sections of 'Czargrad' had appeared in *Grosseteste Review* where they had attracted the attention of J.H. Prynne who was prompted to write to Tim Longville about the poem and some of the letter was then used as a flyer for the publication of the later four-part sequence. Prynne had referred to the possibility of some readers of 'Czargrad' dismissing the poem as 'maudlin theism...cathected into the lyric stream' but concluded that the 'dangers of this are part of the risk we are part of'. With a reference to the early Greek mystic Hierotheos Prynne suggested that Riley's 'Czargrad' was 'speechless above speech', echoing the early Christian's transportation wholly outside himself through his deep absorption with the sacred things celebrated in hymnology. In February 1963, after reading Olson's *Mayan Letters*, Prynne had written to Olson:

I have a profound suspicion of this golden severance of sequence, that the past is idealised by standing beyond the reach of knowledge (not the reach of science & museum teams, but the passage of the imagination). To travel to the geography of it is in part enactive of retrogression; but how to "come in quite fresh from the other end", to the choking beauty of inaccessibly remote nouns...The mass and weight of it, this is no less than the truth; but (from outside and afar) does this exclude the gerund of it: the stone, and also not far off, the sea?

The centrality of Grosseteste's work for the author of 'Czargrad' is perceived in the noise made by the 'wind' in the second section of the poem:

delicate the wind through silken corn

The movement of this diffusion, 'hills over hills', a sound ('the sighing of the wind') becomes matter 'weighty in the palm'. This wind is perceived as 'wisdom' which 'hovers' and cannot be held despite its tangibility 'between sense and idea / the cupped hands'; the gesture of receiving in 'cupped hands' allows us a sense of knowledge ('to get to know'). The elegiac sense of loss is hinted at with the juxtaposition of the 'wonders of the brain' that can hear music and multiple softness with the recognition that the 'music' has 'gone'

gone, gone, but here and the form

If there is still an echo from that polis of spiritual awareness it rests now within the form of poetry, the 'music of the line'. However, this realisation in Riley is followed immediately with a reservation, an awareness that art itself may provide a trick like 'man's art we heard / a priest chant vespers to an empty church (save / for us, spectators) God / in the City.' The poetic echo here is from the concluding section of Eliot's *The Wasteland* with its chapel which is empty and yet the wind's home. As the cock stands on that chapel's roof, reminding us of St. Peter's denial of Christ, his calls prompt the arrival of rain.

Writing to Grant at the end of December 1976 Riley made some comments about the world of modern poetry which brought into focus his state of mind at that point, after the completion of 'Czargrad':

It's difficult to know quite where to begin, but for me a sense of extreme dissatisfaction with the kind of poetry that is being written now, here, gives onto it. So much of it, not only the Larkins and Brownjohns, comes out of the 'individual' – what is uniquely 'mine' and what 'I' – or more usually – 'I personally' have to say... the man who is governed by his nature and acts in the strength of his natural qualities, of his 'character', is the least personal. He sets himself up as an individual, proprietor of his own nature, which he pits against the natures of others and regards as his 'me', thereby confusing person and nature... The poem is always grounded in the 'authenticity' of the self – usually by a language guaranteed to convince us of that authenticity – its honesty, sincerity etc... citing of details, or the fact that 'I' am writing this poem... The effect of this is to make a fetish out of the created world and to blind us to what is truly Other. It seems to me the proper business of the poem... does not affirm the 'reality' of the world, it negates it. The poem is a turning which literally turns the reader with it – literally con-verts him; the reader is called into the poem so that together, reader and text, a movement of the spirit takes place.

### *Acknowledgements*

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of John Riley

*'The absolute is a room'*

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# Ancient and Modern

*For Pamela*

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## Ancient and Modern

Away from the house the snow falls slanting,  
And trees almost in leaf in yesterday's sun  
Put on today an elegant new shape,  
A complex, streamlined growth. Did you ever see

The maidenhair (some few survive), a pre-  
Historic tree? Limpid leaf, irregularity,  
A touching intent to grow come what may  
With perhaps insufficient means: a pleasure

To look on. As who shall see in winter leisure  
Compassionate history take lucid measure  
Of our too-obvious nourishment on hate,  
And love that can't pass for understanding.

## Views of Where One Is

Go by train from here in any direction  
And the land is flat: but imagination  
Like Mount Tabor is above us all to see

As if on the horizon, so distantly

Trees like maps of intricate green continents  
Floating in blue oceans: a constant movement  
From mechanical habit to consciousness

Distantly, distantly, on the horizon.

## Pentecost

In the night the struggle of men is not heard  
And here I am at almost thirty walking in it.

The animals we have not yet managed to banish  
Cry and are doubtless lonelier for our lights.

Were they gathered in one room or under sky  
When the cloven tongues as of fire descended?

They were all with one accord come in one place.  
At any rate they heard the sound as of a

Rushing mighty wind. How far we've walked since then.  
I hear a nightjar's crying by the roadside

It cries and my passing doesn't disturb it  
So near it makes the moonlit night less lonely

## After the Music

After the evening's music comes a storm.  
The lower air so fills with light and thunder  
I wonder the air itself does not catch light.

It's filled by vertical rain and insects crawl  
For shelter under night-green leaves: passions fall.

Meanwhile Americans and Russians walk in  
Slow motion one hundred and eighty miles up.

A space a world to move in as in music.  
A given time and strict measure to resolve this  
Curious involvement, a dominant species.

## This Time of Year

Autumn can keep very very quiet  
The mid-day sun hotter  
Than ever summer was  
Hot mist curls into trees

Form is deceptive  
At last the days bite  
My room is heated all day  
Evenings turn into night

All love stops but mine  
Goes on I said  
And I was wrong  
And I was right

The days bite deeper  
Poets are such liars  
What do they know of love  
More than its absences

I stop to admire  
The sky through an arch of branches  
And thinking to go higher  
Am caught in this gesture of pleasure

Appreciate the sagging hayrick  
Its antiquated cottage form  
Destined to keep cattle warm  
Through winter

How much deeper must the days bite yet  
There is a region where it doesn't matter  
In the receding sky  
Our gestures point to it.