

NICHOLAS ROE

Last Words

Deaths of the Poets

By Paul Farley & Michael Symmons Roberts

(Jonathan Cape 414pp £14.99)

At Plymouth last year I visited the home of Charles Armitage Brown, John Keats's friend and collaborator. Set back behind trees, Brown's Regency villa resembles Wentworth Place, the home he had shared with the young poet, who died, aged twenty-five, of tuberculosis. For fifteen years Brown thought about writing a memoir of Keats, but was unable to confront the anguish of doing so. Then, settled at Plymouth in 1836, he made a start. To offset his friend's 'disappointment, his sorrows, and his death', Brown began with Shelley's *Adonais*, the great Romantic elegy in which Keats hastens to 'the abode where the Eternal are'. Awaiting his arrival is the pale form of another

young poet who had destroyed himself, aged seventeen, with a cocktail of opium and arsenic: Thomas Chatterton.

Poets Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts contend that the perilous, self-destructive lives of Chatterton and a few other Romantics initiated a myth of doomed genius: that poetic achievement comes when life is pushed fatally to its limits. This Chatterton myth, they suggest, explains the 'skewed' popular image of poets as depressive, unstable, suicidal – and they may be right. My guess, however, is that a good many poets nowadays are comfortably tenured 'creative writers' with sidelines in broadcasting, journalism and public readings, a profile that fits both

authors of this bright and enjoyably upbeat book. Attracted by more risky, bohemian possibilities, they set off to the 'death-places' of poets, partly in homage and partly, they say, to 'interrogate' the myth of 'mighty poets in their misery dead'.

Encounters with Chatterton and Richard Savage introduce a world of more reckless genius, and soon Farley and Symmons Roberts are jetting off to New York's White Horse Tavern, where Dylan Thomas allegedly downed eighteen straight whiskeys. Next are the sites of two suicides: Washington Avenue Bridge, Minneapolis, from which John Berryman flung himself onto the Mississippi pack ice, and the house at Black Oak Road, Weston, where Anne Sexton asphyxiated herself. Suburban Rutherford is a backdrop for their visit to a tall, blue-painted house, home for half a century to the poet-physician William Carlos Williams. Back in London they trek to Sylvia Plath's lonely flat at 23 Fitzroy Road, then swerve east to Hull, where

Philip Larkin lived and died, and on to the Hotel Altenburger Hof in Vienna. Here W H Auden succumbed in 1973 after a poetry reading; the postmortem logged ‘arteriosclerosis, fibrosis myocardii, hypertrophica cordis, endocarditis recens’.

Not all of these poets fit the Chatterton myth. Williams died in his bed aged seventy-nine, Auden at sixty-six after years of chain-smoking, heavy drinking and amphetamines. Larkin endured oesophageal cancer until he was sixty-three. Thomas was sent off at thirty-nine by a dose of morphine on top of the whiskey. Only Plath, Sexton and Berryman follow the ‘skewed’ self-destructive narrative; most of the other writers covered in *Deaths of the Poets* lived long, albeit not necessarily happy, lives. Notable exceptions are the war poets Edward Thomas, Wilfred Owen and Keith Douglas, all killed in battle. The poet-painter David Jones survived the Battle of the Somme, but relived the carnage later while recuperating at Harrow-on-the-Hill.

The obvious difficulty with ‘death-places’ is that they tell you little about poets’ lives and the poetry that flowed from them. Go to Rome, visit the room where Keats died, count the daisies on its latticed ceiling and listen to the crowds surging around Piazza di Spagna. None of this can enhance understanding of ‘La Belle Dame sans Merci’ or the ‘Ode to a Nightingale’, just as my visit to the Dakota Building on West 72nd Street in New York told me nothing about how the songs on *Sgt Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* were created.

The best sections of this book explore the longer slide of mortality as faced by poets: Auden’s final phase at Kirchstetten, and the withdrawn lives of Emily Dickinson at Amherst, Stevie Smith at Palmers Green and Rosemary Tonks on England’s south coast. In the 1960s Tonks published six novels and two acclaimed collections of poetry, *Notes on Cafés and Bedrooms* and *Iliad of Broken Sentences*. Her poems inhabit half-lit streets and ‘whisky-dark hotels’, ‘gambling/Alone at dusk in that

dark city/To out-bid Eternity’. This was ‘a new modern idiom’, she told *The Times* in 1967, ‘you can’t turn your back on a whole way of life today’. And then, ‘tired out & ill’, she did just that. Farley and Symmons Roberts track her down, identifying her as the Christian fundamentalist Mrs Lightband, ‘a tiny, birdlike woman’, topped by a baseball cap, who lived for more than thirty years in Old Forest Lodge, Bournemouth, a neglected house stacked with paintings, books and papers, where dust



Anne Sexton: on the edge

hung ‘in swags from the ceilings like Spanish moss’. Their evocation of her strange, solitary existence – clutching a notebook, talking to the birds – tells us more about her poetry than might at first appear: locked in a Manichaean struggle against the slaves of Satan, her religious extremity in later life was already present in troubled poems she had written years before.

Individual chapters splice together sections on different poets and the places they inhabited. When this works, it makes for poignantly intertwined narratives, as in the stories of two poets who disappeared – Dickinson, who passed most of her life in a single room, and Weldon Kees, who vanished in 1955 near the Golden

Gate Bridge. Two clock towers link John Clare’s last years in Northampton with Roundhay Park, Leeds, where the poet John Riley was murdered in October 1978. Less assured is the move from Auden’s rusty Volkswagen to ‘another poet, often to be found behind the wheel of a car’. The fact that Seamus Heaney also drove a VW Beetle seems scant reason to veer from the Audenhaus to Anahorish and then, two pages on, back to the Palais Palffy, Vienna, where ‘Auden is coming to the end of his reading’ – a reading that we already know will be his last.

Deaths of the Poets is packed with anecdotes and macabre frissons; its forays through some of poetry’s more sensational edgelands make for a compelling read, even if they lead to no clear resolution. Having crossed countries and continents, the two authors come back to their own lives, one of them convinced by the Chatterton myth, the other not. Certainly the myth wasn’t patented by the Romantics, who looked back to William Collins, Thomas Otway and Christopher Marlowe, short-lived English poets remembered, in part, for their tough lives and terrible deaths (the results of insanity, starvation and stabbing).

Most poets live much longer, relatively healthy lives. William Wordsworth burned to the socket at eighty, Tennyson at eighty-three. W B Yeats got to seventy-three, T S Eliot to seventy-six and Ezra Pound to eighty-seven. Tonks died at eighty-five, having given away or destroyed many of her possessions; Kathleen Raine perished just five years short of her centenary. The Chatterton myth is still with us, though its young bards ‘borne darkly, fearfully, afar’ are now most likely to be rock musicians. Even then that’s not always the case. Having started out on burgundy and made it through much harder stuff, Bob Dylan at seventy-five is still on the road, passing from land to land like another doomed genius from a different Romantic myth: the Ancient Mariner.

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