DIANA HENDRY

Ian Hamilton’s Oblivion and the Poet

The questions posed by Ian Hamilton in his introduction to Against Oblivion are those that nag at all poets — even, I suspect, the Heaneys and Sweeneys of our times.

Hamilton was asked to write “an updated, twentieth-century version of Samuel Johnson’s Lives of the Poets”. It was to contain a mini-biography and mini-critique of up to fifty poets — dead poets, like Johnson’s, but poets who had enjoyed “substantial reputations when alive”.

It was in the process of choosing his poets that Hamilton began brooding on the fact that of the fifty poets in Johnson’s Lives, he was only familiar with the work of half a dozen. Of the other forty-plus, some, like Thomas Yalden and Elijah Fenton had “vanished from the map”.

Inevitably, considering his own list, Hamilton asked “how many of my poets would ultimately go the way of Johnson’s?” And what of the poets on his “sub-list” — poets “once admiringly reviewed ... but now teetering on the edge of oblivion, an oblivion which presumably they had spent whole lifetimes seeking to transcend?” Teetering! The word is enough to give any working poet vertigo.

All the questions voiced by Hamilton hang on the major one that’s in the very title of the book. Is the driving force within a poet the desire for immortality? If so, considering the odds and remembering the lost Yaldens and Fentons, he/she could be on a hiding to limbo. Not only is poetic immortality a highly chancy business, depending, at least a little, on fashion and luck, but the poet may have a wholly deluded belief in his/her own gift.

Are those dreams of immortality which Hamilton describes as being central to the whole business of creative composition in the 18th century, still as compulsive today or have they been modified? I doubt that any poet today, aware of our celebrity culture, the publishing scene, the proliferation of poets, the shelf-life of books and the tremendous changes wrought by technology, can dream so sweetly as those 18th century poets. Nevertheless, I suspect that the desire for immortality, though undercover (has any writer you know verbalised it out loud?), is as rampant as ever. And is it, after all, such a folly as Hamilton seems to suggest? Is it not, in an exaggerated form, the desire, present in everyone, simply to ‘leave a mark’? And though in its extreme, negative aspect its consequences could be a wasted life, used constructively, could it not equally provide the impetus to produce the best
possible work?

If, having stared oblivion in the face, you should try to comfort yourself with thoughts of possible fame, modest success, a single poem lingering on in an anthology, Hamilton can soon discomfort you. According to Hamilton, what the 20th century poet could no longer hope for, “was the kind of central, civilizing social function for which... his gifts and insights so crucially equipped him”. Despite this, and despite the fact that poetry did not take over from religion, poets continued “to insist that what they had to offer was, potentially, of world-altering significance. In practice, the world did not have much use for them”.

So there’s the poor poet, with no place in heaven and, it would seem, of little use on earth but somehow “saddled” with the “strange conviction” that he/she has been “singled out for creativity” and still clinging to the belief that “being a poet really matters”. Hamilton finds it poignant to contemplate “whole lifetimes given over to a vocation for which the world in general has little use.” That a few poets are honoured and prized by the world only makes matters worse for the majority who then suffer a sense of “cultural neglect” and “professional exclusion” resulting in “a kind of career envy”.

It’s perhaps instructive to consider Hamilton the man, the poet, the editor, the critic, the biographer, in order to understand why his view of poetry and of the poet’s life is so glum. Against Oblivion was written when Hamilton was suffering from cancer. He died before the book was published. Easy then to think that he was working on it while facing his own possible “oblivion”. But in fact most of the thoughts found in the introduction inform his biographies (of Lowell, Arnold and the aborted one on Salinger) and his book on literary estates and biography, Keepers of the Flame.

What bugs Hamilton most is, at heart, a moral conflict. Does a great gift, such as Lowell’s, give a poet the right to live his life in a way that is destructive of others, that is ruthlessly ambitious and dominated by egocentric vanity?

In Ian Hamilton: In Conversation with Dan Jacobson Hamilton talks about his biography of Arnold and says that the question for Arnold was “how to lead a poetic life without turning into a monster or without making terrible compromises that might sap whatever creativity he had...” Added to this is “the debilitating stress” of wondering if you were any good at it in the first place or of discovering, half way through your creative life, that you weren’t. It sounds like a nightmarish scenario yet I suspect all poets are afflicted with such anxieties and conflicts.

To Jacobson, Hamilton acknowledged that he was attracted to
writing about writers he both admired and was repelled by. Jacobson suggests that Hamilton’s engagement with such writers was due, in part, to “a deep ambivalence about the activity of writing, as such, let alone about the nature of the persons who actually do it”. Hamilton replied that he certainly felt ambivalent about the “airs and postures” and “sky-high hopes” attached to writing. “Think of whole life-times devoted to an objective that may be worthless because of a lack of talent anyway. And because it doesn’t do anything...”

Apart from this last statement reiterating Auden’s debatable dictum that “poetry makes nothing happen”, a key element of Hamilton’s moral being resides in giving something to the world, being of use, of contributing to the common welfare of mankind. And this, in a way, seems to be at war with his undoubted passion for poetry.

In the late eighties, when Faber published Hamilton’s Fifty Poems, Lachlan Mackinnon lamented the fact that “shunting poetry aside” has left Hamilton so little work to show, suggesting that he could have been a larger, more influential poet. Perhaps the rigorous critic in Hamilton — so valued by many — worked against him, for in assessing his own poetry he “came to the conclusion that there wasn’t enough in me to sustain a full poetry-writing life”.

Was he right or was it that he didn’t dare risk it — the possibly wasted life? To decide to dedicate one’s life to poetry is to risk wasting it. To attempt poetry at all is a risk. It’s as large a risk as love. But then what life worth living doesn’t involve risk? And are there not millions of seemingly ‘wasted’ lives and who is to judge them as such? Every aspiring poet must be familiar with those hours, days, weeks of wondering if one’s time could have been better spent digging the garden or making soup. Here’s T.S. Eliot, in 1942 in wartime London, working on ‘Little Gidding’ and writing a letter to E. Martin Browne:

In the midst of what is going on now, it is hard, when you sit down at a desk, to feel confident that morning after morning spent fiddling with words and rhythms is justified activity — especially as there is never any certainty that the whole thing won’t have to be scrapped.

Hamilton’s focus on the “airs and postures”, the “sky-high hopes”, the “tyrannical” quest for “after-fame”, doesn’t take into account some of the many effects on an individual of attempting to be a poet. The attempt involves a study both of history and literary traditions, a striving for honest
expression, a careful listening to oneself and others, a training in acute observation, a learning of craft and technique, a developing consciousness, a musical ear, the act of attention that Simone Weil likened to prayer — not to mention the battle with the demons of ambition, vanity and egocentricity. You may not become a good poet but you might become a better person. Alternatively you might end up embittered and disappointed though either way might be as much to do with temperament as lack of success. I am of the opinion that the art itself serves as a major antidote to the worst psychological faults and vices, for nothing can so wreck a poem as a false thought or feeling. And all this is not to forget the rewards — the absolute delight in sometimes producing a poem that is more than you are.

Perhaps, currently, there’s a new zeitgeist. In a recent review of D. J. Enright’s final book, *Injury Time: A Memoir*, Ian Sansom contrasts poetry’s “high road” which “takes itself utterly seriously” and the “low road” in which “you understand writing as an aspect of wise living”. According to Sansom, apart from writing a lot of poems about death, Enright “seems to have lived a good and truly lively life”.

But this still leaves unanswered Hamilton’s view that the world has no use for poetry, that it won’t “alter the world or make the world a better place.” I turn to the title essay of Seamus Heaney’s *The Government of the Tongue* in which he comments on the letter from Eliot quoted earlier:

Here is the great paradox of poetry and of the imaginative arts in general. Faced with the brutality of the historical onslaught, they are practically useless. Yet they verify our singularity, they strike and stake out the ore of self which lies at the base of every individuated life. In one sense the efficacy of poetry is nil — no lyric has ever stopped a tank. In another sense it is unlimited. It is like the writing in the sand in the face of which accusers and accused are left speechless and renewed.

It is not enough to quote another’s claim for the value of poetry. I’m left wanting my own testimony. Poetry can comfort, explore, disturb, lament, praise, surprise, delight, provoke thought, bear witness, companion you through almost all life’s experiences, offer you something which, at its greatest, comes from something unconquerable in the spirit of humanity. How could we live without it?

Paradoxically, of course, it’s clear from *Against Oblivion* that Hamilton couldn’t. Excluding the four great poets he calls the overshadowers — Yeats, Hardy, Eliot and Auden — Hamilton chose forty-five poets as potential
‘survivors’.

In part, Against Oblivion works as an anthology: every poet, apart from Plath (whose estate refused permission) is represented by one or two poems. It’s easy to query the choice of poets and to plead for the doomed, as Anthony Thwaite did in his Sunday Telegraph review of the book, complaining about the inclusion of “some not-very-good (or awful) American poets”. But this always seems to me to be a pointless exercise. However erudite, well-read and of sound mind an editor or anthologist might be, there is an inevitable subjective judgement at work and perhaps never more so than with Ian Hamilton who regarded “a genuine poetic moment as miraculous, or near miraculous, akin to what I imagine might be the moment of revelation for a mystic”.

Against Oblivion is an immensely readable book, critically astute, wittily rude and written as if Hamilton is a kind of Apollo assessing the poets as they appear at the foot of Parnassus. He’s refreshingly rigorous about it so that you feel most poets only just scrape in with “could do better” written on their earthly report cards. Here are a couple of samples:

On Hughes’s Lupercal:

...in the general enthusiasm few critics were ready to take note of the discrepancy between the poet’s lively, expert eye for nature’s detail and the crudity of most of his ideas.

On Frost:

Now and then Frost jawed on tiresomely and was always too fond of the cracker-barrel aphorism, but every so often he achieved an intimate, intense and yet forbearingly intelligent dramatic forcefulness...

These examples typify the Hamilton method of appraisal which is to balance praise and complaint, to set up and knock down or vice versa, condemn and redeem. John Carey, reviewing Against Oblivion in The Sunday Times, wrote that the book “glitters with insights like flecks of mica”. This is true enough, though it has to be said that all that glitters is far from kindly.

Aphorisms abound. Robinson Jeffers’s work described as “highprophetic and low-readable”; H.D. charged with “cosmic breathiness and fiddling narcissism”; Lowell’s early verse defined as “strait-jacketed hysteria”;
Stevie Smith’s religious conflicts described as her “cute spiritual despairs”.

Well, you have to laugh, and quite often say “yes, that’s it exactly!” In an editorial in PN Review, Michael Schmidt contrasted two views of Hamilton. One has him as “grudging”, “narrow”, “impatient”, “hasty”. The other as “exact”, “rigorous”, “fearless”, “urgent”. Perhaps Douglas Dunn is closer to the mark, writing in an as yet unpublished elegy, of Hamilton’s “withering wisdom, tenderness, concern...”

For a quick and lively overview of “Some Lives of the Twentieth Century Poets”, Against Oblivion is just the ticket. Were I to recommend a book to someone approaching twentieth century poetry for the first time, this could be the one. Yet I’d want to add perhaps another two. Michael Schmidt’s An Introduction to Fifty Modern British Poets for its breadth and because it includes the “overshadowers”; and Heaney’s Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971-2001, because Heaney seems to possess a greater generosity of spirit and never fails to acknowledge the poet’s struggle. With Hamilton, you get no marks for trying.

It’s perhaps unfair to contrast Heaney’s full-blown essays with Hamilton’s pithy appraisals, but a couple of examples would seem apt. Writing about Elizabeth Bishop’s last volume, Geography III, Heaney speaks of “a consciousness squaring up to itself and taking the measure of its own strengths and weaknesses”. Hamilton, commenting on the same volume, writes “even the one or two late pieces of hers that have been called ‘confessional’ are essentially well-guarded, wry, rueful, and impressively resigned”. And, by implication, disappointing.

Then there’s Hugh MacDiarmid. Presumably Hamilton only included MacDiarmid because he met the criteria of being dead and having “enjoyed a substantial reputation” for he has nothing good to say of either the man or his poetry. His appraisal concludes “better — perhaps — the fake-Scots of this bad-tempered poet’s youth than the prosy dreariness of his maturity”. Consider Heaney’s account of MacDiarmid’s later years, years in which “he now endured the beginnings of an ordeal in his poetic being, one in which the megalomaniac and the marvel-worker vied for the voice of the bard”.

But I’m carping. Hamilton’s prose, critical acuity and wit are a delight. Few books of criticism can make it as bedtime reading. Hamilton’s can. And my guess is that his work will survive at least until the next century.