

This review is taken from [PN Review 207](#), Volume 39 Number 1, September - October 2012.

Late Gifts Arthur Boyars, Dictations: Selected Poems 1940-2009 (The Philidor Company) £16.00

Arthur Boyars was precociously successful as a poet almost seventy years ago. His first book of poems was published when he was only twenty-one by Fortune Press, chosen by the same savvy editor who had published Dylan Thomas and was soon to bring out Larkin's *The North Ship*. Boyars had already made something of a stir at Wadham College, Oxford. With John Wain, he edited *Mandrake*, a magazine which continued to appear until 1957. Some years after Oxford, Boyars was one of the poets Alvarez included in his anthology of *New Poetry* (1962), alongside Ted Hughes, Thom Gunn, Geoffrey Hill, R.S. Thomas, Charles Tomlinson and others whose names have lasted half a century. Then, for his own reasons, Boyars abandoned poetry, aside from some fine translations of Russian poets, including Yuli Daniel and Yevgeny Yevtushenko.

He dedicated himself instead to the world of early music, and the remarkable publishing house run by his wife Marion Boyars, with a distinguished list of authors including Elias Canetti, John Cage and Hubert Selby Junior. He was a remarkable musicologist, yet it is much to be celebrated that, after the death of his wife, poetry has been returned to him. I use the passive voice deliberately here, because the title of this book *Dictations* is meant to be taken seriously; he insists the lines are not his own but rather gifts from a divine spirit:

At night to demonstrate your power,  
Have woken me from sleep to tell my truth

And so involve me in your miracle.

This is a profoundly unfashionable belief, of course, but what makes it also unsettling is Boyars' refusal to find any consolation in it, or indeed to put much value on being alive himself. In a recent poem about the peaceful state of being before birth he reflects:

Oh great Heaven, who would not call back  
Their ship from the volatile ocean  
Once they had learned the fate of all voyages?  
Had suffered the entry to false ports  
Had tethered to false moorings Had found no safety there...

No one can miss the plangent music of those lines, which make the poem one of the most moving in the book. He holds the great privilege of human consciousness more

cheaply than I could, but so, I suppose, did Sophocles and Beckett.

About the incapacities of old age, of which (at 86, I calculate) Boyars has some experience, he can be amusing: 'the unremembered name / The syllable not quite on the mind's lid', for instance. However, the poems I particularly enjoy look *out* with a relish his habitual pessimism would deny at an occasional blue jay or 'a lean black swan / with ruby beak', or marvel at an unknown man caught in the pale dissolve of sea and shore in a painting by Whistler in the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Formidably cultured from his earliest poems onward, Boyars is a poet who does not deserve to be forgotten.

ELAINE FEINSTEIN

This review is taken from [PN Review 207](#), Volume 39 Number 1, September - October 2012