

'Rhythm,' Roy Watkins says, 'became my organising principle' in writing *Simple Annals*. Of Norman Mailer's prose Christopher Ricks writes it 'has rhythm . . . a feeling for the mnemonic power of certain rhythms, along with an intuition as to how they are not only memorable but memory-charged.' The same can be said of Watkins' prose. Mailer himself wrote of the 'nervous circuits of the past' and Watkins' tightly honed, lyrical prose attunes itself to those electric and eclectic circuits in his memory and spirit.

The title needs to be understood vertically, like etymology, psychoanalysis, or archaeology (a preoccupation of the author as a child), so for *Simple* read 'as one, together with' and 'folded'. The narrative folds into itself over and over so that the past and present coalesce like twists of fire or water or atmospheres. For *Annals* read the way in which a tree makes inner circles year by year from an immovable core. 'Every word returned to me in its natural dialect,' he says.

The verve of vernacular (Lancashire, Liverpoolian, Welsh) overturns the officious claims of Standard English and Received Pronunciation. This book sings itself from its own deepest ear. This writer loves the sounds of language so much ('the magic shape of letters') that Welsh is made into phonetic spells, aural hauntings like '...*hlthroo woorubth ... mloomloomloom*'. Joseph Brodsky aptly said that 'Poets' real biographies . . . are in the way they sound.'

If this book is a memoir, it is not as a linear narrative but a memorial both mourning and celebratory for a family, and a mirror in which one man's entire life is reflected. But mirrors have black, mercury backs and *Simple Annals*' bones and sinews are made of the traumas of history with which he was obsessed as a child. The intimate consequences of war, absences, poverty, sexual violation, insanity show how the outside percolates and lodges in our veins and guts and unconscious.

There isn't an iota of sentiment or nostalgia in his recollection partly because the past isn't embalmed but seen as an ecstatic and traumatic living root and presence in the writer's being. Watkins has, quite naturally, reconceived the genre of memoir so that it has become linguistic incantation, hallucinations, dreamscapes, a kind of phenomenology of recollection.

In its grace, elegance, concision this writing is as great as figures such as Hemingway ('All night the stream roars in the valley over its stones. I hear it in my sleep. It runs through me, dark and anxious'); in its intimate homage to working-class life and especially the love for formidable women it resembles D. H. Lawrence ('swaying ferns, the new ferns curled tightly, little heads wound tight as Mam's green bobbins'); and in the minor shocks its sentences achieve it is like W. G. Sebald ('trolley wires in the sunlight coming out of a mist . . . dock cranes sticking up into the evening sky . . . searchlights sweeping the night, back and forth, back and forth'). But Watkins is entirely original and this book is a masterpiece. Both deadly serious but also deadpan comic. How he has seamlessly fused these elements is a practiced formal gift but with soul: 'I invented nothing – NO fiction,' he writes in the Afterword.

One of the startling elements of this memoir is the young child's infatuation and love for the mother of his friend. The sensual descriptions of this woman as well as of a young girl at his school are some of the most exquisite passages in this book.

Often the memoir is polyrhythmic on a single page in the way a child's moods can contract and expand or explode moment by moment; so although this is a book for adults it perfectly captures the first-person child narrator, albeit a precocious one.

This writer likes repeating words, he knows their musical and muscular power, the earworthiness of doing so. Ordinary words are undislodgable in his memory and a way to both celebrate the past and recalibrate the present. And the book deserves many rereadings.

Like all compelling writers, Watkins is metaphysically possessed but also cogent, convincing: 'I hear everything. I hear for miles and miles. I can hear everything that happened.'