répond par des mots porteurs de musique et d’images.

Non qu’elle crée pour nous un univers parallèle moins problématique que le nôtre. Pour elle, le poétique est non pas un ailleurs mais une autre appréhension de vie. Et si l’on trouve dans Entre l’outil et la matière une évocation du paradis, c’est celle d’un paradis perdu, celui de l’enfance, sous des cieux plus cléments :

O mer des jours heureux
forte insouciance de l’enfance

(...) Loin de toi aujourd’hui
je refroidis
(« Amilcar », p. 98)

Ce qu’elle nous offre, c’est, comme elle le dit ailleurs, « un regard lucide sur la fragilité des choses ». Ses textes dénoncent le « cancer atomique » (titre d’un de ses poèmes), les horreurs de l’Histoire, l’usure de la culture dominante :

O pâle enseignement
les traits tombent dans la nuit
Il n’y a pas de jouissance

(...) Le coursier magique
(« Mailles », p. 129)

On ne peut opposer aux angoisses et aux frustrations que la plénitude de l’amour et de la poésie, chantés tous deux en des « mots qui font naître », qui nous rendent le « torrent des merveilles » perdu depuis l’enfance.

Les images sont souvent fortes et surprenantes, comme celle qui ouvre ce poème :

Du côté de l’essentiel
un oiseau aveugle

(« Du côté de l’essentiel », p. 13)

Poème puissant, qui ne se laissa pas déchiffrer aisément. Il garde sa part de mystère, de par l’étrangeté de l’image. C’est d’ailleurs l’inattendu des images et de certaines alliances de mots qui retient le plus dans les poèmes de Lélia Young. En la lisant, on pense au précepte de Verlaine :

Il faut aussi que tu n’aillles point
Choisir tes mots sans quelque méprise :
Rien de plus cher que la chanson grise
Où l’indécis au Précis se joint
(Paul Verlaine « Art poétique »,
Jadis et Naguère)

Sauf que ce recueil n’est pas gris mais plutôt moiré, évocateur de moments et d’humeurs variés, allant de l’horreur à la sérénité.

Toutefois, si les thèmes sont parfois tragiques, le dernier mot est à la vie, et à la poésie qui l’incarne :

Le poème est le rappel
du vivant
(« Mailles », p. 129)

Un beau recueil, qui nous ramène « du côté de l’essentiel » et devrait toucher les lectrices des Cahiers de la femme.

LADY MARY WORTLEY MONTAGU: ESSAYS AND POEMS AND SIMPLICITY, A COMEDY


by Miriam Jones

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689-1762) is an intriguing character. She was an aristocrat and a well-travelled woman of letters, a self-educated scholar concerned with women’s education, a conservative political journalist and a medical pioneer who helped spearhead the smallpox inoculation campaign in Britain. This new edition of the 1977 collection of her writings, revised and with an excellent new preface by Isobel Grundy, is particularly topical in light of Grundy’s forthcoming biography and the widespread growth of interest in the writing of 18th-century women in general. Many texts have been unavailable until recently and non-fiction, with few exceptions, has been even less accessible, so this edition of Montagu’s poetry, essays and a play is most welcome.

Enamoured as we currently are with finding the subversive or radical voices from the past, to immerse ourselves in the writing of someone as comfortable with her privilege as Montagu may initially seem less than congenial. These pieces are politically conservative and emphatically situated within clearly defined 18th-century generic conventions. Given this double-axis of containment, Montagu’s critical stance as a woman—a stance that helped her, as Grundy indicates, to transform the functions of the various literary forms she practised—stands out in stark relief. Montagu’s play, Simplicity, is emblematic of the difficulties in reading her now without grappling with our own received ideas about “originality” in art. Simplicity is a loose translation of Marivaux’s Le Jeu de l’amour et du hasard, about a quarter of which, according to the editors, is original. Many of her poems also use borrowed or conventional themes and must be read in the context of the classical education of her class; the interest for the critic lies in the uses to which these inherited literary discourses are put.

Of her poems, Grundy remarks that they “set out to explore multiple viewpoints rather than define a normative one; but complaint against men is a leitmotif.” Her writings could be termed a series of explorations that
return again and again to women's experience. Halsband and Grundy each calls her "feminist," but perhaps "proto-feminist" would be more accurate. An example of her engagement, the poem "Epistle from Mrs. Yonge] to her Husband" is explicit in its negative assessment of contemporary divorce laws, and its justification of an adulterous wife:

Are we not form'd with Passions like your own?  
Nature with equal Fire our Souls endu'd,  
Our minds as Haughty, and as warm our blood,  
O’re the wide World your pleasures you persue,  
The Change is justify'd by something new;  
But we must sigh in Silence—and be true.

Her sharply critical view of 18th-century gender relations at times extends beyond sexual politics and indicates an indictment of masculinist social institutions. For example, her writings on smallpox inoculation privilege a feminine, non-Western tradition over the interventionist model of Western medicine. She rejects outright the misogynist satires so common in the 18th century:

Such a paper, either to ridicule or declaim against the Ladies, is very welcome to the Coffee houses, where there is hardly on Man in ten but fancys he has one reason or other, to curse some of the Sex most heartily. Perhaps his sisters' fortunes are to run away with the money that would be better bestowed at the Groom porter's [in gambling], or an old Mother good for nothing keeps her in love with him. These are serious misfortunes that are sufficient to exasperate the mildest tempers to a contempt of the sex.

Her criticism, however, is doubly-veiled, first by an irresistible humour that for the most part sweetens the potential violence of her scenarios here, and also by her adoption of an anonymous male persona. This writing across gender is one of the most fascinating aspects of the collection. Montagu turns what was essentially a necessary strategy in the literary market of her day into a vehicle for the exploration of multiple subject positionings: a vehicle, moreover, with immense potential for irony. One anonymous editorial essay opens thus: "I have allways...profess'd my selfe a Freind thò I do not aspire to the character of an admirer of the Fair sex," and in another she writes:

I am very much entertain'd with the variety of Censures that are pass'd on my harmless paper, which I hear allmost every day with an Indifferent Face, and to say truth without much violence to my selfe, not feeling the paternal Affection that most Authors do for their productions, neither my Fame or Fortune being any way affected by their Success. My Acquaintance think me no more qualifi'd for a writer than for a General....

She is here tweaking the readers' noses with their own prejudices about who may write and publish. The joke is no less rich for being essentially private.

Grundy pays particular attention to the production and publication of the texts, and the collection is noteworthy for its scrupulous scholarship. The preface contextualizes Montagu's work within current critical traditions, broaches questions of censorship and self-censorship, alludes to Montagu's critical reception and calls for scholarly revaluation. Grundy locates this collection as part of the ongoing recuperation of a tradition of women's writing, and argues persuasively that Montagu was herself conscious of her position of a woman, writing.

EDUCATED AND IGNORANT: ULTRAORTHODOX JEWISH WOMEN AND THEIR WORLD


by Katherine Side

I learned to make my mind large, as the universe is large, so that there is room for paradoxes.

—Maxine Hong Kingston

It was El-Or's title that immediately caught my attention. Education and ignorance are often considered paradoxical companions. Furthermore, the blatant characterization of a community of women as "educated and ignorant" seemed to me to be a bold statement. Yet, El-Or, in this detailed ethnographic study of women in the ultraorthodox Jewish community, cogently demonstrates that education and ignorance are conceivable, and in this case, desirable companions.

El-Or worked, as a doctoral student, among Israel's Gur Hasidim, on the outskirts of metropolitan Tel Aviv. The Gur Hasidim are a Jewish religious sect, conspicuous by their strict adherence to mid-18th-century dress and customs, and characterized by Gur mens' devotion to religious study.

El-Or's research revolves around the core themes of women, literacy, and education. Gur Hasidim, recognizing that girls and women who do not receive religious education are susceptible to assimilative practices, have established an elaborate educational system for a population that,