To the memory of Adrian Mitchell

David Walsh
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This is more of a personal response to the death December 20 of poet Adrian Mitchell than an informed, much less scholarly, commentary. My encounter with his works took place several decades ago and I'm not knowledgeable enough to comment more than obliquely on his recent efforts.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s Mitchell was an important poetic voice, perhaps the strongest poetic voice in English. For a brief but significant time. He meant a good deal to a great many people.

His volume of poems *Out Loud*, which appeared at the beginning of the combustible 12 months of 1968, helped articulate the feelings and concerns of a generation, a generation somewhat younger than his own.

Adrian Mitchell was born in London in 1932. Educated at Oxford, he worked as a journalist, on the *Oxford Mail* and the *Evening Standard*, from 1955 to 1963. For another three years he toiled as a freelance reporter for the *Daily Mail*, *Sun*, *Sunday Times* and *New Statesman* before becoming a full-time writer in 1966.

Mitchell believed that poetry was meant to be read "out loud" and is considered "one of the leaders of the revival in oral poetry in Britain which started in 1959," and gave a large number of performances of his poetry on several continents.

He also wrote novels and adapted plays in English, including, most famously perhaps, Peter Weiss' *Marat/Sade* (*The Persecution and Assassination of Jean-Paul Marat as Performed by the Inmates of the Asylum of Charenton under the Direction of the Marquis de Sade*) for the Peter Brook production at the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1964. He is also credited with the screenplay and verse adaptation for the film version (1967), likewise directed by Brook.

Weiss' play may not stand up to the closest scrutiny, and it certainly falls short as an examination of ‘critical questions of revolutionary strategy and morality,' as once was claimed, nonetheless it remains a fascinating and lively work. It was also graced with an extraordinary cast, including the incomparable Ian Richardson as Marat, Patrick Magee as de Sade, and Glenda Jackson as Charlotte Corday.

The Marat-Sade exchanges have perhaps lost their electric charge, but no one who has seen the film is likely to forget the seductive, insinuating opening number, which, in Mitchell's version, begins:

Four years after the Revolution
and the old king's execution
four years after remember how
those courtiers took their final bow ...
Four years after we started fighting
Marat keeps on with his writing
Four years after the Bastille fell
he still recalls the old battle yell

Mitchell also produced adaptations of stage works by Calderón, Ibsen, Gogol and Lope de Vega.

In "Loose Leaf Poem," from *Ride the Nightmare*, Mitchell wrote:

My brain socialist
My heart anarchist
My eyes pacifist
My blood revolutionary

The best of him was mobilized in the great shift to the left of the late 1960s, which attracted some of the best artistic minds in Britain toward the revolutionary movement. A long-time foe of nuclear weapons and imperialist war, Mitchell was horrified by the Vietnam War and the complacency of those who refused to take a stance in opposition to US crimes.

In 1965 he performed his "To Whom It May Concern" (often referred to as "Tell Me Lies") at an international poetry reading at the Royal Albert Hall in London. The angry, compelling reading can be seen here (You Tube link).

The poem, which Mitchell described as "not about the Vietnam war but about being in Britain during that war," begins:

I was run over by the truth one day.
Ever since the accident I've walked this way
So stick my legs in plaster
Tell me lies about Vietnam
Heard the alarm clock screaming with pain,
Couldn't find myself so I went back to sleep again
So fill my ears with silver
Stick my legs in plaster
Tell me lies about Vietnam ...

Many years later, Mitchell would add Iraq and Afghanistan to the list of wars his poetic persona wanted to be lied to about.

"To Whom It May Concern" is included in *Out Loud*. The volume also contains "For David Mercer" ("I like dancers who stamp") and the moving "To You" (also available somewhere in a reading by Mitchell), which starts out:

One : we were swaddled, ugly-beautiful and drunk on milk
Two : cuddled in arms always covered by laundered sleeves.
Three : we got sand and water to exercise our imaginative faculties.
Four : we were hit. Suddenly hit. ...

There is also the oft-quoted "Celia Celia" (dedicated to his wife, who survives him):

When I am sad and weary,
When I think all hope has gone,
When I walk along High Holborn
I think of you with nothing on.

At times an irritating facetiousness and sloppiness is present in Mitchell's poems, justified presumably in the name of ease of popular access and ‘informality' of approach. Nonetheless, the book overall is moving, lyrical, funny and scathing.

His next volume, *Ride the Nightmare*, registered something of a decline, but still contains a number of lovely and meaningful pieces.

On its first page, that book contained the following mock serious warning:

"Note to Examiners, Children and Students: None of the work in this or any other of my books or articles is to be used in connection with any examination whatsoever. This also applies to beauty contests."

The titles of some of the poems in *Ride the Nightmare* tell you something about its contents:

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"To a Russian soldier in Prague" ("You are going to be hated by the people")
"Flag day—but not for the revolution"
"Let me tell you the Third World War is going to separate the men from the boys"
"Under photographs of two party leaders, smiling"
"Ode to Enoch Powell"

In a way, *Ride the Nightmare* is a more politically radical work and less successful poetically. And Mitchell repeats himself somewhat. He has his satirical poems about politicians and other public figures, his occasional poems, his tributes to favorites (Blake, Byron). But we've already seen a good portion of this in *Out Loud* and it's not as fresh here. The book also includes commentary he wrote for Roy Battersby's *The Body* (1970).

In any event, Mitchell remained a loud and visible voice of compassion and outrage. An interviewer once asked him, "What do you think should be the relationship between a poet and the society he or she lives in?"

He replied, characteristically: "I used to dream about the bomb and I sometimes still dream about the bomb because the bomb hasn't gone away to fairy-land—it's still above our heads. So I react to these things. And I react to the fact that we've got an incredible number of poor people in this country, and throughout the world there are an awful lot of poor people, and there's a war between the rich and poor people, and so I take notice of these things. I try to write about everything. I write about nature, I write about dogs, I write about high art, I write about low art, I write about the people I love especially, and I write about politics and war, and peace. Peace most of all.

"But I can't tell anyone else what to do, and I wouldn't want to. Poetry is a free country, a really free country: you've never been in such a free country. And there's room for everybody. Well, just about, I mean I'd kick you out if I thought you were a racist. Or a fascist. Or you were trying to tell me what to write. No, don't let's do that to each other. When people ask me ‘can I do this in a poem?' I say ‘yes'. I spend a lot of my time saying ‘yes'. When I work with children, they say ‘Can I write about my dog?', ‘Can I write about my football team?' Yes. Yes yes yes yes. So I like to say yes. My poetry likes to say yes. And I'm sorry so much of my poetry says no, but so much of the world is poisoned and painful and dangerous, so I say no as well as yes." (*The Poetry Archive*)

I corresponded with Adrian Mitchell in 1972. I sent him a letter in October and he replied in December, apologizing for the delay. He included a clipping from the *Guardian* of October 28, 1972 (which I still have), which has an article and a poem by him. Mitchell explains in the introductory piece, how he came across a story in the news about a woman who left her baby "strapped in the pram." The baby eventually starved to death. The obviously troubled woman was arrested and prosecuted.

Mitchell writes in the *Guardian*: "First I read halfway and stopped because it was unbearable. Then I read to the end and wept. There were many reasons for weeping. The baby. The woman. The man who left the woman. (I left my own first wife with three children). The dog who also starved and who is not in the poem because there was enough already and starving dogs are not so rare. The welfare department. The defending lawyer. The prison sentence."

He explains how he came to write a poem, in collaboration with others, and its connection to Bertolt Brecht's great poem about the infanticide, Marie Farrar. These are the first verses of Mitchell's "Saw It In the Papers":

Her baby was two years old.
She left him, strapped in his pram, in the kitchen.
She went out.
She stayed with friends.
She went out drinking.
The baby was hungry.
Nobody came.
The baby cried.
Nobody came.
The baby tore at the upholstery of his pram.
Nobody came.
She told the police:
"I thought the neighbors would hear him crying
and report it to someone who would come
and take him away."
Nobody came.
The baby died of hunger.
She said she'd arranged for a girl;
whose name she couldn't remember,
to come and look after the baby
while she stayed with friends
Nobody saw the girl.
Nobody came.

In the accompanying letter to me, Mitchell, also characteristically, wrote: "At least in England I can nowadays give all the poetry readings I have time and energy to give. And to me the readings are the important thing because you get a lot back from an audience and if you can meet them in the pub afterwards you get even more back and can sometimes give even more. I don't know if you've got my last book of poems Ride the Nightmare, so I send my last poem ["Saw It In the Papers"], not very typical as you'll see from the essay with it. Since the poem things have moved a little. I had ninety letters, eight unsympathetic, mostly wanting to do something positive. Results so far: 1. The woman is getting letters, visits, magazines etc regularly from a small group of us. She'll be met and helped find a job and home when she comes out. 2. Many people have written to MPs and Home Secretary for her case to be reviewed. 3. Others are ‘adopting' other prisoners. 4. The hope is that others will be activated into something more than charity. But I think that, while we have to work to make the Revolution, we can't abandon the victims of our society to rot. We better do both. They shouldn't have printed a photo of me with the poem but they did. They should've printed a photo of the bloody prison.

"No revolution without compassion
peace
For everything that lives is Holy (Blake)
"Adrian"

It seems to safe to say in the intervening decades that political discouragement took its toll on Mitchell, as it did on many of his generation. His poetry, although it remained intelligent and sensitive, became somewhat routine, without the same force. Difficult times are especially difficult for poets, who take in the world through peculiar antennae. Mitchell turned increasingly to children's stories and poetry. Fellow poet Ted Hughes commented, "In the world of verse for children nobody has produced more surprising verse or more genuinely inspired fun than Adrian Mitchell," and there is no reason to doubt him.

Mitchell's political views, which once verged on the revolutionary, turned rather amorphous and vaguely humanistic and he joined the great British Left, that all too-well-discovered "country from whose bourn no traveller returns." He appeared and read poetry at misnamed events like the Marxism 2008 festival, whose participants included former bourgeois cabinet ministers—Anthony Wedgwood-Benn—and out-and-out scoundrels—Tariq Ali. Of course Mitchell would have considered such characterizations the worst sort of ‘sectarianism,' but then he was more scrupulous about his poetry than his politics.

In any case, we have the verses and that's what counts most of all.

"I like dancers who stamp," he wrote. "Elegance / Is for certain trees, some birds, / Expensive duchesses, expensive whores, / Elegance, it's a small thing / Useful to minor poets and minor footballers. / But big dancers, they stamp and they stamp fast, / Trying to keep balance on the

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globe. ...

"I like dancers, like you, who sweat and stamp / And crack the ceiling when they jump."

The news of his death is very sad.

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