

The New Poetry

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THE NEW POETRY

N. G. Wellings.

The arrival of this Penguin edition of modern poetry has prompted, after the initial disappointment, certain reflections on poetry and the literary-social scene. One wishes this 'slim volume' were slimmer although the range of writing, of modes and manners of expression, is wide. There are Donald Davie's Morrisonian elegies and John Wain's 'angry' (to be fair near-'angry') statements, R. S. Thomas's 'realism' and Peter Regrove's 'surrealism'. But this kind of pigeon-holing tells one nothing about the quality of the verse in the anthology. But despite the apparent range in manner, the book has a certain unity, a unity of flatness. This is not to say that there are not impressive things in this collection, but this impressiveness is local only, limited to a few lines in a few poets included here. But the overriding impression is that the book is one of personal lament (Perhaps one stage from the 'whine' of the 'angries'), the greyiness of which is relieved by the lighter tone and more assured handling of a few satirical pieces. But this collection is a disappointing statement and a fair

indication of a malais that has firmly established itself in English writing. And it is a disappointment in that one believes that poetry is important, that literature is important, and that any weakness in contemporary writing is an expression of a corresponding weakness in living, and evidence that the society of the Fifties and Sixties in England does not provide a satisfying framework for people to live by.

The problem of writing is expressed by John Wain:

This same sun, like a severe comet,
rises over old disappointments.

But how to accept it? is the problem.

How to bear the pain of renewal ?

It makes us cry out in agony,

this peeling away of old sorrows.

John Wain *The New Sun*.

But this is a problem not of writing in the present age but of writing in any age, it is the problem of living in a human situation and of accepting the facts of that situation. Disappointment, birth and renewal are painful but other writers have been able to surmount this, have been able to overcome and thus

accept in full recognition the facts of a human situation. Why then is writing felt to be an agonising problem at the present time ? I can only indicate certain pointers. It would appear the social sciences, sociology and psychology, have had a disturbing effect on the consciousness of writers. The same can also be said of literary criticism. Kingsley Amis's 'The Voice of Authority: A Language Game' is mere carping without any attempt to see the full implications. But it is felt probably as a result of the wrong use of the social sciences, that the world is a bad place, thus;

... Like the world, I've gone to the bad.
A deadly world: for, once I like, it kills.

Thom Gunn *Lofty in the Palais de Danse*.

But while the world is assumed to be a bad place, and we all know that it is, something else is required of writers, and that something else is an ability to come to terms with surrounding circumstance and in some way surmount it. Thus technically well controlled as it is, Eliot's *The Waste Land* is only a diagnosis, an impersonal diagnosis, yes, but only a diagnosis of the problem of living. And mention of *The Waste Land* is relevant; it appears to be the source of the great feel-

ing of emptiness that present writers feel obliged to examine. One does not wish to deny the value of diagnosis, or to assume that destructive criticism and constructive criticism are opposites, but only to point out that if poetry is not to bury its head in the sand, some recognition must be made of the fact that diagnosis is only the first stage in a complex human process which one believes that poetry should record. Poetry, or literature, does not, of course, give, pat answers, but on the other hand it should not be limited to asking questions only.

One believes that poetry is a human statement, an organization of experience, and of an experience which must necessarily be full, and that this experience must be communicated in words of a particularly evocative power. This is the major achievement of the best of G. M. Hopkins's verse, however much Hopkins became lost in the intricacies of his own technical innovations and over-statements. But it is this kind of full statement that is lacking. The experience recorded here is in no way full, and the words used have little evocative power. The poems remain fragmentary because the experience remains fragmentary. The wolf with its belly stitched with big pebbles: Nibelung wolves barbed like black pine forests

Against a red sky, over blue snow; or that long
grin

Above the tucked coverlet - none suffice.

Tea Hughes February.

To which there is no answer.

The same writer, who is in some way a literary
'figure', can also exhibit a devastating crudery in the
control of imagery:

This house has been far out at sea all night,

The woods crashing through darkness, the booming
hills,

Winds stampeding the fields under the window

Floundering black astride and

blinding wet

Till day rose;

Ted Hughes Wind.

Here the reader is asked to go through a series of
'emotional jumps' from one set of responses to another;
the sea (and loss), collision, noise, fear and movement
(but a land image here) drowning and sightlessness.
One can see how one image leads to another but that
'leading' is linear and the effect of writing such as
this is one of straggle rather than complex organiza-

tion.

But to be fair to the writers, they know, for the
most part, what their limitations are - in fact self-
consciousness is one of the nagging character's ties
of the anthology. Again John Wain, in Poem Without
A Main Verb, is a representative illustration:

Watching oneself,

being clever, being clever,

keeping the keen equipoise between 'always' and
'never';

Further he knows and dislikes his own clever-clever-
ness but such knowledge can in no way exist as a
defense, a defense something on the lines that the
values of society are clever-clever. But 'consciousness
of self seems to be the underlying note of the antholo-
gy - the writer is very worried by his own personality,
rather than his personality in relation to others.
Other personalities and the fine threads of communi-
cation is now not the stuff of poetry.

Since graduating from its years of flesh

The name has faded in the public mind

Or doubled: which is this? the elder? younger?

The statesman or the traveller?

Who first died or edited his works,
The lonely brother bound to remain longer
By a quarter century than the first-born
Of that illustrious and lost family?

There is little point here in the spinning out of the
questions, which just act as soporific fillers of an
emotional vacuum.

Turning: the brilliant Avenue, red, green,
The laws of passage; marvellous hotels;
Beyond, the dark apartment where one summer
Night an insignificant dreamer,
Defeated occupant, will close his eyes
Mercifully on the expensive drama
Wherein he wasted so much skill, such faith,
And salvaged less than the intolerable statue.

John Berryman The Statue (and above)

The poem is an elaborate (for what end) word-spinning
round the eventual comparison between the writer and
the 'intolerable statue'. And on the evidence of this
poem, in the particular value it gives to Night and
the linking with an 'insignificant dreamer', it amounts
to no more than a statement of insignificance and
mortification that the statue has a kind of immortality
the writer does not share. But other writers

are more explicit in their desire to record themselves
as detached observers of life:

Beyond all this, the wish to be alone:
However the sky grows dark with invitation-
cards

However we follow the printed directions of sex
However the family is photographed under
the flagstaff - Beyond all this, the wish to be
alone.

Beneath it all, desire of oblivion runs.
Despite the artful tensions of the calendar,
The life insurance, the tabled fertility rites,
The costly aversion of the eyes from death -
Beneath it all desire of oblivion runs.

Phillip Larkin Wants.

This, despite its balanced form and control of lines,
is no more than a dereliction of the responsibility of
being alive. And this note that is echoed throughout
the collection:

At such a price this bankrupt self is all
I have to give.

or

Sometimes just being alone seems the bad thing.

Solitude swell until it blocks the sun.
or

A classic composition; nothing strfs.

One little streak of grey that matched the walls
Removed, but in that half-light far too faint
To leave a gap, and soon to be replaced.

But the note of detachment becomes more strident
(one welcomes this as a relief from the essential
wanness of the above) in poems like *Old Woman* by
Iain Crichton Smith:

Outside the grass was raging. There I sat
imprisoned in my pity and shame.

Imprisonment and detachment are themes handled by
the majority but some not concerned with stating
their detachment, but of delving deeper:

Even in bed I pose: desire may grow
More circumstantial and less circumspect
Each night, but an acute girl would suspect
That my self is not like my body, bare.
I wonder if you know or, knowing care?
You know I know you know I know you know.

Thom Gunn Carnal knowledge.

The effectiveness of the poem would presumably
depend upon the juncture of a Shakespearian echo
with the weak, childish joking of the last line but
again one wonders at the effect aimed at here. Is it
conscious bathos? It appears that the personal private
problems of being a writer have affected his ability
to see (or feel) beyond the length of his own nose.
But this desire to delve deeper into one's own person-
ality has this debilitating effect on the quality of
writing. Yet even if the poet accepted the limitations
of his own ability, there is none of thmuscular vital-
ity that is so strong a characteristic of the Yeats of
The Green Helmet and Other Poemee(1910) , to which
most of the writers in this anthology seem thematical-
ly linked Neither is there the impressiveness of Ho-
pkins facing the same problem in his later untitled
sonnets. In fact, if we approach this anthology in the
belief that we will find anything of the order of Hop-
kins's

The rise, the roll, the carol, and the creation
then we are sadly disappointed.

I have pointed out above that I feel that many of
the writers, the representative many, are too intro-
spective and have suggested that this might be the

result of those writers' inability to come to terms with their own selves. But it is not only questions of personality that some writers are worried about.

I differ most in lacking their content

To be, no more. They're at mercy of the scent
Of hot, cold, summer, winter, hunger, anger,

Or ritual establishing the herd, smelling out the stranger:

I walk upright, alone, ungoverned, free:

Yet their occasional lust, fear, unease, walk with me

Always. All ways.

David Holbrook *Me and the Animals*.

The unnecessary punning in the last line, the only justification for which is the 'walk' of the previous line only serves to draw attention away from what appears to be a stumbling block in the writer's mental and verse-making processes. Yet the above quotation can be used in another comment which I feel has to be made about the anthology. The anthology is strikingly 'literate'; it is as if writers have consciously set about trying to put Eliot's Tradition and the Individual Talent into practice. Thus David Holbrook tries to 'find' himself by his echoes of Hopkins's

With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;
Pied Beauty.

except that mere reference, the slick allusion, to previous writers is not what Eliot intended, and further, and more importantly, not convincing as poetry. The writers are generally very conscious of the writing that has preceded them. Hopkins seems to be sought as a major influence;

Rain

And the probability of rain, tares

And their progress through a field of wheat-

These, though of moment in themselves,

Serve rather to articulate the sense

That having met, one meets with more,

Than the words can witness. One feels behind

Into the intensity that bodies through them

Calmness within the wind, the warmth in cold.

Charles Tomlinson *Winter Encounters*.

This is in fact the same experience that Hopkins tried to rationalise into his theories on 'Inscape' and 'Instress'. This poem is full of allusion, the parable of the tares and the wheat, but the allusions are not unified into a controlled pattern, and the significance of the inability to use words immediately becomes

apparent. Thus 'the intensity that bodies through them' is a mere verbal statement, not in any way a demonstration of feeling. It is this simple stating without active demonstration of feeling, that gives this poem, and many others, flatness. One of the more impressive poems in this anthology, 'The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket' by Robert Lowell, again suffers from this weakness, rich in allusion and imagery, but a simple word picture, not a significant demonstration of feeling; or of the fact that the writer was really alive to the potentialities of thought, feeling, and language arising out of the situation he found himself in.

But while the overriding impression from this anthology is one of poetic flatness this poetic flatness is in itself an expression of the difficulty many poets have in 'believing' anything. One does not ask that poets be Christian (Eliot's Anglo-catholicism has put many people off), but one feels that poetry and religious feelings are in some way connected. And it is this lack of 'religious feeling' that is so striking.

One would like to be able to write something for them not for the sake of the writing but because

a man should be named in dying as well as living,
in drowning as on his death-bed, and because
the brain being brain, must try to establish laws.

For the Unknown Seamen of the 1939-1945 war
Buried in Iona Churchyard.
Iain Crichton Smith.

This distanced anti-religious attitude is, I feel, symptomatic of a more distressing surrender to the attitude of 'Nothing has Value'. But while there is this empty attitude-making, other poems strike one as religious, but without any religious or emotional intensity:

By blood we live, the hot, the cold,
To ravage and redeem the World;
There is no bloodless myth will hold.

And by Christ's blood are men made free
Though in close shrouds their bodies lie
Under the rough pelt of the sea:

Though Earth has rolled beneath her weight
The bones that cannot bear the light.

Geoffrey Hill Genesis.

When the writer forgets to sound like the inversions and archaisms – 'By blood we live', 'There is no bloodless myth will hold the verse and thought become banal.

The impressiveness that is to be found in this anthology is only of individual isolated turns of expression in certain poems – there appears to be a groping towards verse than any fully resolved poetry. 'Merlin' by the same writer as the passage quoted above, while in no way complete, contains sombreness of thought moving through a slow, sombre control of language. It is in poems such as this that it would appear that the only success is to be found. Other local success exists in Ted Hughes 'natural life' poems. These, although at first striking one as thematically trivial, contain some writing that is effective in its organization and precise in its vision:

Reflections live on. The heart beats thick,
Big trout muscle out of the dead cold;
Blood is the belly of logic; he will
Lick the fishbones bare. . . .

Ted Hughes An Otter.

The vision is there, some kind of awareness of words

is there (muscle out) but these qualities become sacrificed to what is only verbally striking and by the time we read on we see that verbal strikingness is the only quality, if it is a quality when isolated, that remains. And the significance of this is that vision and expression become blunted and tawdry.

Of more success are the poems of R. S. Thomas, in whose poetry a sense of 'realism' seems to control, although only at times, a desire to be removed from the limitations of a realistic approach. His poem 'Welsh Landscape' suffers from this pull and the 'neat' ending can in no way resolve the difficulty:

Mouldering quarries and mines,
And an impotent people,
Sick with inbreeding,
Worrying the carcass of a dead song.

Yet the limited success that Thomas can achieve, and it is relative only to the disappointment of the work of the other writers in this anthology, comes from an unaffected naturalness, an unrefined 'honesty' which allows some integrity to come through.

His clothes, sour with years of sweat
And animal contact, shock the refined,

But affected, sense with their stark naturalness,
 Yet this is your prototype, who season by season
 Against siege of rain and wind's attrition,
 Preserves his stock, an impregnable fortress
 Not to be stormed even in death's confusion.
 Remember him then, for he, too, is a winner of
 wars,
 Enduring like a tree under the curious stars.

R. S. Thomas A Peasant.

But the limitations of Thomas's verse are apparent in his romanticising, a romanticising which is not in any way saved by his surface realism, and more importantly, by the introduction of the extraneous curiosity of the stars. It is too pat, too neat, and it takes attention away, outside the poetic statement that Thomas is trying to make.

I have suggested above that most writers are very conscious of their own limitations and the only successful poems in the anthology are successful because they are written within these limitations. Such pieces which are successful are, I would suggest, 'Living! Our Supervisors Will Do That For Us! ' by David Holbrook.

Dankwerts, scholarship boy from the slums,
 One of many, studied three years for the Tripos,
 Honour, English: grew a beard, imitated the
 gesture
 And the insistent deliberate (but not dogmatic)
 'There' of his supervisor.

But the 'satire' is in itself restrained and the something that is restrained is weak (the use of a name with unpleasant connotations) Further the poem as a whole depends upon a certain knowledge of the Cambridge academic scene with its references to Dr. Leavis, his gestures and use of Johnsonian English. Yet it would appear that only in this very limited satire is there any success. D. J. Enright can also achieve success within these limitations, 'A Polished Performance' being an example:

Citizens of the polished capital
 Sigh for the towns up country,
 And for their innocent simplicity.
 People in the towns up country
 Applaud the unpolished innocence
 Of the distant villages.
 Dwellers in the distant villages

Speak of a simple unspoilt girl,
Living alone, deep in the bush.

Deep in the bush we found her,
Large and innocent of eye,
Among gentle gibbons and mountain ferns.

Perfect for the part, perfect,
Except for the the dropsy
Which comes from polished rice.

In the capital our film is much admired,
Its gentle gibbons and mountain ferns,
Unspoilt, unpolished, large and innocent of eye.

Here the quiet (one feels that full potentialities are not engaged) use of satire as a effective instrument the 'sick' country-longing of the 'citizens of the polished capital' is sufficiently controlled to bring in associations of the innocent eye (and therefore false) eye of the camera, the lying quality of films, and also bring in the play of opposites in 'polished' and 'unpolished' and the implications of this. But when Enright moves outside his limitations, he writes something like 'Apocalypse' which, however 'true' it may be, is an unconvincing statement as poetry.

But these quietly satirical pieces, which do not bring

into active play the whole range of human emotion and thought, are the only successful pieces in the book. And the compiler of this anthology, A. Alvarez, is dissatisfied with the selection, although in his opinion the best available. He finds a weakness in the poetry and suggests that poetry should find a new seriousness, which will also include a new impersonality. One can definitely agree that the poetry in this anthology is not 'serious' and not impersonal, and although one further agrees that it is necessary for poetry to contain these qualities, and they are qualities, as basic conditions for successful poetry, one cannot agree when he attributes a middle-class ethic, that of gentility and decency, to the poems and claims that writing must go beyond gentility. This is unfair, I think, as it stigmatises the writers for something they have not done. The main charge, given the flatness of the anthology as a whole, would appear to be the fragmentariness, and consequent vapidty, of the experience. The present pricers are bogged down, not so much by their upbringing, but by an inability to come to grips with their own personalities, and by an inability to see themselves as belonging to a significant scheme of living. What is wanted is a writer who can, given the conditions of life today; urban

society, in which rural values have very little place (and it is to a certain rural longing that one can attribute, despite his great achievement which, with a few notable exceptions, is virtually unrecognised, the present 'boom' of Lawrence who remains essentially a 'rural' writer) and the apparent complexity of modern living which an urban society has given rise to, a writer who can in some way see through these complexities to what has permanent value, a writer who can in some way surmount these difficulties. This has been the achievement of the writers in the past, and one's belief in the potentialities of man makes one confident that such a writer will emerge. This is not easy, in fact there is strong evidence for saying that it has never been easy (one thinks of George Eliot) and it will require a poet or a novelist who is the equal of any of the past, and who is sufficiently equipped with enough vision to take advantage of the opportunities which exist in the framework of modern living, unsatisfactory as it might appear. This is, and will not be, a purely literary activity and while it appears foolish to make prescriptions, it does seem that the writer will have to be equipped with enough knowledge of the ideas and modes of feeling prevalent in the England of today. Thus what is so, painfully,

lacking in the present anthology is the presence of a writer who is so equipped, of a writer who has the comprehensive vision necessary for this readjustment. Thus the flatness of the present anthology is depressing in another way; it means that poetry is aiming only at the achievement of a localised poetic mood, a poetic mood that has very little relation with the actual business of living. Thus the present anthology appears as cowardly as the major part of Victorian verse, which was prepared to turn its back on the world.

Before this strange disease of modern life,
With its sick hurry, its divided aims.

Matthew Arnold The Scholar Gypsy.

This is the dominant mood of the present anthology.

But if there is to be a future in English poetry, that is if there is to be any writing in the future which belongs to English Literature, and one's faith in the potentialities assures one that there is, it will not be brought about the present practice of regarding poetry as a reaching toward oblivion, a state of not being aware. And it is this state of not being aware that is the death not only of poetry but of vitality in human

relationships. And this is, I would suggest, the primary reason for one's feeling of keen disappointment with the 'New Poetry'.

The New Poetry: Selected and Introduced by
A. Alvarez.

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