

ELIZABETH PERKINS

THE TENSION OF NOT BEING KILLED AND BURIED: JENNIFER MAIDEN'S *THE TRUST* AND ROBIN GURR'S *THE TIGER IN THE HEAD*.

There is and there can be no poetics which prevents the living experience of countless perceiving subjects from being killed and buried in art objects.

Christa Wolf, *Cassandra*, 1983.

In recent years, Christa Wolf's despair at finding an aesthetic or anti-aesthetic to go beyond art forms and art objects, returns to me whenever I read work by women writers, whether or not they are conscious 'feminists'. This does not imply that thousands of women have not written brilliantly and movingly, and indeed successfully on any terms, or that they are aware of struggling with their craft and its forms more than male writers do. But as a reader I have become aware of a constant and, at its best, a most productive tension in the work of women writers that is not felt in quite the same way in the writing of men.

Jennifer Maiden and Robin Gurr are mature and experienced poets. These are their sixth volumes of poetry, and both have written other works. In the poems of both collections there is something of a positive tension that comes, partly at least, from the way the poems move in and out of an almost ironic mode as each poem becomes aware, to a greater or lesser extent, of the difficulties of its making. It is not surprising that this often results in a frankly ironic wit which does not really resemble the wit of male writers.

Jennifer Maiden's volume carries a cover showing Maiden's own oil painting, 'The Trust', in which a reddish-brown male figure seems to hover in missionary position above a dazzling white female body with masses of reddish-brown hair. Certain details in the reproduction — the star-shaped objects floating in black and the bluish-green, curved horizon — recall the mythic copulation of Uranus the sky with Gaea the earth, rather than an encounter of mere mortals. Before the book is opened, it is possible to form an impression that, however private and specific the poems may be, they will have a vaster, ontological force. Since not even *Paradise Lost*, which aspires to such dimensions can actually realize them, (as Milton admits), a reader who interprets the painting in this cosmic mode already forms an ironic appreciation of the incompatibility between means and ideal ends. This particular irony, it could be argued, is implicit in everything that women write. Once inside the covers of the book, nevertheless, the reader finds in the title poem

that irony can almost be set aside as the poem recreates that sexual meeting of male and female that sometimes, however fleetingly, replaces ironic awareness of difference with a trust in total empathy. Yet I doubt that the poem 'The Trust' would be so completely successful in what it does if there were not a little of that irony implicit in its celebration.

To turn for a moment to the first poem in the book, 'White Noise', is to find immediate poetic satisfaction. Simply and directly, like a conversation, the poem talks about those noises which affect people differently as 'white noise':

With me it was the sound of ash . . .
with you it is scratched glass . . .

The lines modulate from sly fun towards mystery:

There are roaring sounds which still can preach
like protestants, so evenly: the lawn-
mower, say, or the vacuum, &
the drill. The saw & the welder's shrills
I find do not reproach so much
and are less torturing. They cry
perhaps a little hysterically
on something like creation.

In the final lines which suggest that deafness can be acquired against the dustbin lids clanged by children, the same modulation occurs, but more strongly:

just as one knows some sick men
who learn how to hear their hearts.

This is perhaps a minor poem in a very major collection, but it has the imprint of authority found in all the work here.

That the long, eight-part poem, 'The Trust', aroused much interest and controversy when it first appeared, indicates its strength and achievement. As Maiden says in a footnote, the work has been interpreted as a poem about a reader-writer relationship, and although this is a feature of the poem, 'it concentrates on all forms of intimacy.' This is explicit in the tone and cadences of the stream of consciousness communication which moves constantly forward, doubling back a little, and completes a circular statement, opening and closing with two phrases which articulate presence, repetition and communication: 'here it is. As it is always said . . . ' The voice of the poem does not claim either sex but seems to suggest that it may be the voice of sexuality itself. It may change places with the Other to whom it speaks, or with the reader. For example, it asks:

Have you
a name? A cry that I can cage you by
a name that succours life without
a cross upon my breast. I have the one
breast. I am no monster, no
hermaphrodite to gift with an adventure.

The shifting pronouns do not bewilder, as sometimes may occur in this kind of writing, because they are so well managed that there is no abrupt dislocation as the reader passes from one to another:

He'll kneel if I let him go. I do.
Now let her kneel upon him, weak as snow.
My trust will travel far beyond my promise.

The poem could be seen to articulate the act of love-making at the edge of sleep: the experience which enacts perfectly the Renaissance concept of "dying" into love:

Do you think
they really fuck, yes, do you dare to
idolize the fucking between dead?
Or do you deceive they aren't dead?
Why even I this actor am the dead.
And what are you?

The poem partly reinterprets the book's cover for anyone whose initial response was the cosmic Uranus and Gaea interpretation. It is a pier out over water on which the figures lie, and her whiteness is the whiteness of the inside of the oyster-shell: this is itself a sexual image apart from recalling legends of sea-wives and oyster-women. The cover painting is summed up in three lyrical lines:

There are wharves outside and landing stages built
liquid on rippling night, and there are stars
pendulous and luscious.

The image of a pier or wharf over water suggests in itself a pushing out to the limits of solid, human experience, over and into the mystery of the unknown.

Part Five is the only section of the poem that leads indoors from the impressionistic yet strongly realized outerscape of littoral and park, but even this interior is a pavilion in the park:

With the quenching dusk
I pavilion and furnish the park
and tread the cinders under grassy silk.
I will escort them in, and bow
The woman converts simply to a chair.
The man becomes a table, well. The small

antelope sits feeding now.
It is clovenly exquisite,
picking softly at smoked entrails
with its enormous dagger.

Lines like these, without implying a denigration of Lawrence's initiative and achievement, do tend to make D.H. Lawrence's attempts to describe sexual intercourse seem boyishly immature.

'The Trust' could be described as a surrealist invocation of sexuality, but it is surreal only in the way that the landscapes of myth and fairy legends sometimes become surreal. Essentially, in the poem, the reader is led onward by images and phrases that take definite shape and design, like snowflakes, and then melt and dissolve. But the experience is cumulative, the flakes pile into snowdrifts, cold at first, but soon becoming a secure place in which some animals live out the winter and others drift into comfortable death. The mind that rejects the experience offered by 'The Trust' has to stomp over the poem in thick boots, heading for a room with four square walls and a rational fire blazing in an unambiguous grate, rejecting the experience offered where:

Holes

sleeked warm as cunts hide prey
outside where all treed sleep
dreams down to death in fur.
Be quiet and be good.
I'll turn you now and take you.

Other poems in this collection are in a different mode and mood. Often they have that irony which verges on anger that is seldom far from much writing by women. The last lines of the short piece called 'Anorexia' go straight to the heart of any clinical report:

She ate last night and will not eat this week.
Her body lives off itself like anger.
It was once too dumb, too soft, too tall.
She bites her mouth because it's still a stranger.

Many of the poems merge the domestic and the erotic, meditative and analytical concern, and the poetry is as much at home with intellectual concepts like 'Anthropomorphism' and 'Anachronism' as it is with idiosyncratic emotions. It might be inappropriate to call it cerebral poetry, but its sentient, emotional apprehensions are completely fused with intellectual acuteness and irony. It is, indeed, the lack of this irony in some forms of poetry, that is satirized in the poem 'Rewind':

The saddest man of letters lifts the knife.
All night the horses pranced like hail
with windwet manes upon the nightmare tiles,

and this blurred breakfast he still stares across
suburban fences to the gold glass church.
Its shrapnel beauty cuts him like a light
as linear as a laser to the eyes
and in his ears the dreams recede like hooves.
The man of sad and sanguine letters spreads
apocalypse with relish on his toast.

I should not like to find myself in intellectual straits in which I did not feel at ease with Maiden's poetry: it would seem like imprisonment from oneself. Maiden's poems are seldom easily recognisable as 'nocturnes' precisely, but as one poem comments, 'tamed rooms are not for nocturnes, not / good places for great long-conversing care.' Pity the reader who inhabits a tamed room.

Robin Gurr's collection *The Tiger in the Head* has a more ebullient wit than Jennifer Maiden's typically meditative collection, and the two books complement each other very well. In fact, they have much in common, while remaining quite distinctive, and like Maiden's, Gurr's poems merge the domestic and erotic, reflection and analysis within a very personal emotional experience.

The Tiger in the Head poems seem to be stalking Blake's tyger, partly to pay homage, and partly to ask what would Blake have done if he had discovered he was apostrophizing a female tyger? At the end of the book come two poems 'The Holy Bard' and 'The Seed Poem' that stand there as if to confirm the impression that Blake has been a shadow in the background: not a dark presence, but a regretful ghost. Blake after all was a great deconstructor of patriarchies.

What a woman's poetry does with the related patriarchal concepts of The Word and The Bard depends on how she feels at any particular time. Gurr's poetry is not disrespectful of the idea of the original patriarchal Word, but it does tend to place it in a new perspective. Blake's 'Introduction' to *Songs of Experience* begins:

Hear the voice of the Bard!
Who Present, Past, and Future sees;
Whose ears have heard
The Holy Word
That walk'd among the ancient trees, . . .

Gurr's 'The Holy Bard' renders the Word thoroughly physical while not denying that it is also 'skyspeech':

the word in the mouth
fatness of tongue
fullness in the throat
a surge of flux the palatethrob

And yet — and I hope the poem will forgive this analysis — I do not want to take the poem too seriously, because I feel it may be laughing at its own Bardic persona. ‘The Seed Poem’ is the final piece in the book, an apparently masculinist, phallic image of the seed:

sensing the thrust of the universe
feeling the will of the word . . .

and the ‘whispered seed-poem’ is

wanting to be somewhere warm
somewhere dark

wanting to exalt

waiting to exult
into the vessel of my pen

The poem makes an interesting invasion of the male anatomy, but if one did not know the seed was waiting for a woman’s pen and had not read the earlier poems, even the description of this directionless, shapeless, muffled hope of a seed might suggest some irony in the intention of the poem. It is like a little girl pencilling a moustache on her upper lip, quite aware that her unadorned luscious mouth has enough power to rule the universe. It resembles in kind if not degree the irony that hope might read into Blake’s ‘The Little Black Boy’.

The title of the collection, however, is not a Blakean allusion, but invokes Henri Rousseau’s painting ‘The Sleeping Gypsy’ which shows an apparently ferocious beast nuzzling the ear of a sleeping figure. Gurr’s poem, which is called ‘The Visionary at Dawn’, interprets the painting as an image of the sleeper’s mind:

Inside the cherished
chaparral of his skull
 nestles a stealthy drowsing
 tiger
 dusk still caught in its throat
vivifying him with its splendid growling

Energetic phrases and words like ‘tiger-drenched’, ‘gravelled snarling’, ‘musculous half-lights’, ‘fibrillates’, ‘encephalic predators’ and ‘fecund veldt’ recreate the exotic enamel and light of the painting. The painting, it is suggested, may be a symbol of the creative imagination, and it is this that also links it to Blake’s poem:

Inside the lucid
savannas of his skull
 a tiger

stalks in emancipated bliss
flashing poems from its sulphurous eyes . . .

This imaginative energy adds to that certain reserve one might have towards accepting quite seriously the rather drained concept of the word as alpha and omega, which is used in 'The Holy Bard'. These poems are full of a more chthonic energy than that which needs a Judaic-Christian concept to give it strength. For example, the speaker in the poem 'Fostering Time' is not afraid of time:

I think I would grow to love it
for I value savage animals

And although there are several domesticated animals in the poems in this collection, none seem to have lost all their primitive savagery. Even the placid fecundity of a pregnant bitch is seen as an image of classical treachery and belligerence; the wit, however, holds the homeric and heroic in ironic domestic and creative perspective:

My bitch is built
like a Trojan horse.
Inside the battlements
of her udders, lined

up like little mock
soldiers, the whelps
are ready to spill out
into serious war.

Paintings also have their own energetic life, and 'The Painting Makes a Traffic Signal' is a piece that should accompany one to most exhibitions, although few artists really encourage spectators to burst into laughter in front of their work. Despite its humour, however, Gurr's poem pays a very valid tribute to certain kinds of paintings:

Don't get in my way
this is an emergency

I have somewhere important to go

don't bother me with tedious detours through the brain
I've scarcely time for a cerebral bypass

by my nature I'm a very reckless driver
I'm coming pretty fast right now
I'm steering right out of my frame
I predict a collision that won't be an accident

I want to have a smashup with your heart

Gurr's poems may often be tender towards children and wild things, but there is no doubt that there is also a tiger in the head here, and much of the irony is tiger-like in its sleek ferocity. 'The Lover' is a beautifully shaped poem written in two-lined stanzas, and the voice of the poem is sincere:

. . . although I give my love with inspiration
I am a woman playing on a cheap piano

I have not chanced nor even won
the accolade of finer strings . . .
I am a great lover
a pianist of outstanding talent

a pianist of outstanding talent
is a pianist of outstanding talent

even without a piano

The poem may be read as concerned with personal relationships, or with the relationship of the poet to her art, which is the most intimate of all relationships, and it raises the question outlined at the beginning of this review in Christa Wolf's comment: are women writers waiting for a poetics that will offer them always something more than 'a honky-tonk' piano on which to practise their art, whether it is the art of loving, of living or of writing?

Much time is given to music and sound in Gurr's poetry. In 'A Tierce de Picardie Dulcifies Eden' it is suggested that Adam's presence, in an Eden in which a discordant strain had been sown, sweetened the harsher minor sound just as the major third at the end of a piece of music in a minor key leaves the ear with a sweeter or 'happier' final chord. It is difficult not to feel that the poem after all preferred Eden with its 'flawful mode', its 'stridors' and 'embittered boughs of lemons', because it claims that while this tierce, the major chord,

bleaches the heart.
Citron dispirits the timbre
and sullies the harvest of godheads and gardeners.

The poem begs for the question: and how could we allow that?

There is much wit and humour in the collection, apart from those poems already mentioned. 'A Gift for a Gifted Relative' warns a clever and captivating young girl that 'Nobody likes a clever performer, /

nobody wants the smartest bitch.' In the suburbs, if not in other places too, the poem warns:

The audience claps her with tumultuous love . . .
before it nails her back inside her cage.

Clever play with words in 'The Windy Scribbler' makes a nice critical point about writing that has fed on too much literature, and uses elegant scatological puns to make its point.

Yet perhaps the lasting impression of *The Tiger in the Head* is a thoughtful compassion for sufferers and victims of many kinds. 'A Calf at An Art Exhibition' is a cleverly realized poem in which sympathy for artists wherever their work is exhibited for the critics' gaze, is conveyed through the image of the slaughter of a calf, vulnerable in the impotence of its young potency:

they say a cut bull isn't worth
its truckfare back to the attic

this one is struck and slaughtered
for its fat and succulent cheek

The vulnerability of children is the theme in 'Her Father Who Plunders Her Room', 'You have been here before' and 'Honey'. The last poem ends with a typical suggestion implicit in the poems in this collection that there is a bitterness at the heart of many experiences:

my mother eats me like honey
for I try to be a lovable child
and covets the treasure of my nectar
crafted in my bitter sticky home

The collection also, however, seems to assert that this bitterness is preferred to compromise; the jarring note in Eden is not the minor key but the sugared opulence of the Adamic major chord, the aesthetic form in which living experience is buried in an art object, oh, unmistakably, an art object!