

JOHANNA VAN PROOIJE

YOUR FRIENDLY FASCIST
Ed. Rae Desmond Jones

FOOT FALLS AND NOTES
by Philip Hammial

REPLACING MIRRORS
by Graham Rowlands

RITUAL SHIFT
by Jennifer Rankin

SCOP (Saturday Club Book of Poetry)
Ed. Patricia Laird

Modern poetry is difficult to evaluate, because it discards traditional techniques, and so cannot be judged by its more or less successful use of these techniques. What can be done is to convey what some of this poetry "means" to me. And even this modest aim is straight away fettered by the problem which confronts all reviewers of modern poetry. That is the fact that modern poetry is not supposed to "mean" anything. And quite frankly a lot of it does not mean anything to me. I am tempted to say with James Dickey, who faced the same trouble,

"...I find that my tastes in poetry are actually quite simple. I wish merely to be able to feel and see and respond to what the poet is saying and with as much strength and depth as possible. The difficulty is that much contemporary (and other) poetry is made up of a number of totally unconvincing postures and induces a kind of disbelief in the reader..."

('Babel to Byzantium', New York, 1968, p.6)

Indeed, the most irritating feature of some of this poetry is the pseudo-intellectual posture of "rebels" who string words together, not to express a thought or emotion which the writer feels but purely for its theatrical effect. The whole editorial of 'Your Friendly Fascist' is an example of such puerile affectation, and tends to deter any serious interest in the poetry it prefaces. One wonders if it is not too much of a compliment to read or review poetry when the editor writes:

We warn all present recipients and hopefuls that there will be no more of this nonsense about literary merit or intellectual content. (First page)

However, a poet is not responsible for his editor. But to sift the material I have found it useful to keep in mind the four categories which Dickey uses (p.3) and which are based on the reaction of the reader: (a) probably not true, and anyway, couldn't care less; (b) true as far as it goes, but well...so what?; (c) convincing; (d) a new kind of truth. I would suggest that most poetry in 'Your Friendly Fascist' would fall into the two first categories. Occasionally the attention is caught by a sudden spark of recognition. The ranting old woman in "Colour T.V." by T.T.O. promises life for a moment, but fades out again straight away through incoherence and lack of form:

lier. lier. my choolden
got life.
you can
do dat.
you. yes. (Third Page)

However, there are others.

In "Guests" of Peter Murphy the short iambic sentences, which are far too often and generally used in most modern poetry, are well suited here to give the deadly chill atmosphere of polite sadism:

They sense the tension in her voice
and carefully begin to see
how far they can go in insulting her. (Fifth Page)

This poem seems about the only one which shows care and craftsmanship, the carefully worded details and form all helping to express the cynical impact of the subject.

Philip Hammial's *Foot Falls and Notes*, No. XV in the Saturday Centre Poets' Series, shows the same indifference to the organisation of the material which the majority of the poems in *Your Friendly Fascist* shows. Mr Dickey points out to impulsive writers like this: "... your 'song' was only a kind of monstrousness that has to be understood and ordered according to some principle to be meaningful." (p.4). A fair example is "The Big Thoughts":

run together,
coming. Should I?
Should I not?
make show of alarm? (p.14)

I must add that this is the whole poem, not just an extract. That is, if one can use the word "poem" for anything as un-made as this. In spite of Prufrock's echo "Dare I disturb the Universe?" its work does not show the hand of a diligent disciple of such a careful craftsman as Eliot.

Where Hammial's aims are less high than alarming big thoughts, the incongruity of his modest expression is less striking. Some promise might be found in the play with words in "Christmas Eve":

my sister hangs
& I hang back
black stockings. (p.21)

Graham Rowlands in *Replacing Mirrors*, No. VIII in the Saturday Centre Poets' Series, is more articulate and technically capable. He has a tendency to cut out articles and unimportant words to give weight to his utterance, which might slightly crush his lighter imagery. For instance in "Void":

All things turn on hollow centres
bud folds on itself, opening red
in burning point of fire, beginning
going back to vacuum of beginning –
petals diminished within themselves, flames
alight round bud-centre of air.
cyclone turns on still cone.

(p.37)

As can be seen from the last line of this extract the poem is not pre-occupied with the softness of the bud (the subject is sex, by the way), yet the bud image seems to lose some of its intimacy by the short-bitten handling of the lines.

Sex is his main subject, with some irritation against religion thrown in here and there. Yet in spite of these fashionable subjects his poetry is convincing, not just because of his greater craftsmanship, which raises him above the general cynical postures, but more specifically because of a sincere search for realism. Not the sort which is content to use "bad" language with the sole purpose to shock, but realism which looks at things as they are, stripping away polite conventions and cliché attitudes. For instance in "Seriousness":

Marriage is serious
a matter of squeaky black shoes
and bow tie, some moth
settled near Adam's apple
that bulges like a fish
on its way down a water-bird's windpipe.

(p.28)

The sense of nervousness which manifests itself in irritating personal discomfort is well sketched as being at the moment much more important than the occasion which causes the nervousness. Among some of the cliché attitudes he exposes are those of the would-be poets. In "The Poet" he finishes:

He's rage raw, rage red on whisky
genie, fierce genius gone
doomed and entombed
in bottle empty and sinking.

(p.40)

Ritual Shift, by Jennifer Rankin, is most reminiscent of Judith Wright's *South of my Days*. But the carefully drawn pictures of a beloved country carry something more with them than just the pleasure of recognition. The nostalgia of the memories seems to imply a sense of leave-taking, of things gone past. In "Ritual Shift", the title poem, the woman who has been wrapped all day in a cocoon of work is described at the end:

It was after nine that night before we saw her face,
drawn in firelight, thinning leaning to catch
the rattle of the window and the long train passing by.

(p.8)

The pictures themselves are precise and imaginative, carrying with them a sense of conviction and satisfaction. In "Night Ride" the coming of the dusk is described in a metaphor of two people casting a veil over the city between them:

Travelling with a city laid
in the triangle they carried between them
they commandeered the road
and occasionally handed out
parcels of strange light
to be mingled with the gauze
they cast across the open square. (p.18)

The 'gauze' somehow seems to attract the idea of 'mauve' at the same time, giving a perfect impression of the light reflexes of dusk. Each picture is satisfactory as picture alone, yet their accumulative weight carries a conviction of symbolical meaning. The sharply drawn details add up to a sense of coming death or past time. "Last Wind" ends, for instance:

The birds shall all be small the nearer they are to earth
pulling out their colour from the ground, teasing the sky
with an irregular haze, while above in certain space
large black birds belonging not to earth will always be
when I sit down. (p.19)

In spite of its enigmatic tone one cannot escape the feeling of more than surface meaning.

The editorial purpose of *SCOP* is a sympathetic one: rather than to offer poetry according to the taste of one or more editors, they offer a cross-section of the material which is sent to them. The result in this Spring issue of '75 is a fair amount of variety: variety in literary genre from poetry to television play (or film-script) and short story; variety in the age of the poets, catering for young poets as well as for the more established; the variety among the poetry itself which ranges from graphic verse experiments to poetry along more conventional lines, as for instance "Gossip's Luncheon" by Winsome Smith.

The television script, "The Intergalactic Salesman", by Grant Williams (p.32), is a rather sharp and grim satire on the brain-washing techniques of our commercial materialism and greed. The short story, "He lies alone at night" by John Jenkins (p.16) is a touching sketch of the misery of insecurity experienced by a child of a broken home, driving him towards the dangerous temptation of escape into the self. The short story is better than his poetry which seems too self-conscious to be convincing — a fault which many of the poems share. Of his four poems in this issue I prefer "City/Suburb Lines" (p.18). The seemingly unconnected details are well chosen to give an impression of desolation, so typical of the weary business of travelling to and fro.

Quite another sort of poem is Winsome Smith's "Gossip's Luncheon". Kept in strict form in rhyming quatrains, the poem shows a choice of words which is savagely sharp in its characterization: "jabbing at them with forks"; "in a batter of disapproval"; or, to keep it in context, for the contained form enhances its sharp effect:

They dissected their aunt and cousins,
slicing them limb from heart
and simmered the bits in vinegar
to make sure they came out tart. (p.25)

The variety makes it hard to give a general idea of the contents, yet I would like to look more closely at the Young Poet's corner, and particularly at three poems, two of which exemplify modern trends.

The first one, "Wednesday Morning" by Rodney Downey (aged 17), is a fair example of the cynical posture from which so much modern poetry suffers. One would be tempted to think, "He will grow out of it", if it were not the bad example of his elders which causes the cynicism rather than his own immature outlook. It is the well-known attitude of blasé cynicism which, if it were real, would not be bothered with the writing of poetry:

The fragile smile, the colored face
The spluttering fire of disinterest
 which pervades my life.
 What is the point
of this bored little beetle
in a basement? (p.iv)

On the other hand, Adrian Stevens (aged 17) seems to represent the trend in which the modern poet is bowed down under the tread of our time. In a very compact little poem he deftly juxtaposes Biblical and contemporary details, and this juxtaposition gives rise to tension:

From Babylon to New York
From Cain to Hiroshima.

The compact form and short sentences give a sense of claustrophobia which is sharply brought out by the image in the last lines:

Man a defeated foetus
Bottled up in his own hate.

The third poem (p.7: "And God can weep a rain for forty days") does not represent any modern trend, but instead follows an older example — I cannot even call it a tradition. It is written in the style of Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky" poem, and it was the one poem which wholly delighted me. The writer, Stephen Parratt (aged 14), has managed to capture meaning in words which should not have any meaning, if they behaved according to the book. Called "The Chimerical Knioppfelschnyck", it starts:

The dark and glymph gastle globed
As marching on to thee,
The Konig's soldiers snabberowed
With death for all to see. (p.1)

One could, like Lewis Carroll, rationalize the "portmanteau" words by picking out some of their meaning. "Glymph" — glimpse, flimsy, gloomy, which carries its vagueness over in the softer "g" of "gastle" instead of the sharper "castle". But these are rationalisations after the words have presented themselves. Words in poetry should not behave according to the book, and that is what gives the pleasure in this poem, in contrast to a lot of far more serious poetry.

Also, the rhythm is pleasing, the four lines coming to a strong climax on "snabberowed". The traditional metre contrasts favourably

with the short iambic sentences which impart a sense of desolation to most of the poems under review. Some are successful, when their subject asks for this treatment, as was "Guests". But a sense of desolation is imparted even to poems which do not seem to mean anything at all, for instance in the poem in *SCOP* by Stephen Kenneth Kelen, "Flashes mute on a screen : dream of memories":

the mosquito
hanged
by a thread
of spider's web
swings madly as I blow it. (p.47)

Reading through modern poetry like this, it is this grey beat which causes the depression:

this endless march of iambic feet
on short rations
marching to
the knell of doom.