

Some Poems on the Poet and his Problems

‘A contumacious poet in an unjust,
barbarous age’ (John Heath-Stubbs)

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We are still too close to the poetry written in the thirty or so years since the Second World War to be able to see which are the reputations that are going to last. Critics have, nevertheless, detected movements, groups and countermovements, including the New Movement, ‘Modernism’, the ‘Concrete’ poets, and now ‘Neo-Modernism’, to mention but a few. The pervasive influence of Dada can be felt throughout in a variety of forms, but it is not with movements as such that I intend to try and deal in this paper. Instead I would like to select some poems written in this period and reprinted in two or three of the more accessible anthologies, that reflect the poet’s idea of himself as a poet, what the poet feels it is that his poetry is trying to do, his concern with the language with which he struggles for communication, and by whom his work seems to be read. In this way we will have a glimpse at a spectrum, though I shall naturally have to concentrate on those poets who have been unusually explicit on these topics in their work. I have mainly selected British poets, but would like to refer to a few poems

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by American and Commonwealth poets when particularly relevant. American poetry continues to have an enormous influence on British poetry.

In the twenties and thirties, poets like W. H. Auden (1907-1973) and Stephen Spender (b. 1909) could feel that they were both intellectually, and even in Spender's case to some extent in practice, involved in the main events of their time.¹ The poet had an important role as political ideologies (mainly left-wing) were being worked out in front of them, for example in Spain. This confidence, even if in retrospect it may have been somewhat misplaced, has not really been shared by many poets in more recent generations. Auden himself sounded a sombre note in his well-known poem *In Memory of W. B. Yeats* (d. Jan. 1939):

...Mad Ireland hurt you into poetry.
Now Ireland has her madness and her weather still.
For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives
In the valley of its making where executives
Would never want to tamper, flows on south
From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,
Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives,
A way of happening, a mouth.

(Reprinted in the *Oxford Book of Twentieth Century English Verse*, chosen by Philip Larkin, 1973, No. 384, Part II). Louis MacNeice (1907-1963), whose somewhat over-optimistic *Epilogue* is chosen by Helen Gardner to round off her *New*

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Oxford Book of English Verse (1972) with the exhortation 'Let us make, and set the weather fair', paints a picture in *The British Museum Reading Room* (Gardner, No. 863) of

Cranks, hacks, poverty-stricken scholars,
In pince-nez, period hats or romantic beards

about their mixture of reading activities. This shows a more ominous, sinister scene that may be more suitable as a backdrop for the war and post-war years. This mixture of readers is there,

.....because they hope these walls of books will deaden
The drumming of the demon in their ears.

Outside are the pigeons and the refugees.

Michael Kirkham, writing on Charles Tomlinson, one of the most rich and potentially rewarding of modern poets, sets out with this statement:

'Many who assent to the proposition, poetry is the best that language can do, are reluctant to concede its corollary, that poetic thought is the best thought.'²

It is not likely that this proposition would meet with universal approval in all walks of life today, or, indeed, that it would ever have done so, and it is the tension between this idea, or at least the conviction the poet has that he is doing something eminently worthwhile, and the reality of how much and where poetry is actually read, that characterises the scene. Poems do

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not sell. A recent article in *Time* magazine (March 15, 1982), which rarely reviews poetry, mentioned the commercial risks involved. Although a poet, even an 'established' one, may not sell two thousand copies of a new collection, the article points out that nevertheless 'poets continue to write, and persistent readers continue to find them.' In practice, however, it is the anthologies, not the small first editions, frequently remaindered, that have increasingly come to provide many readers with their access to poetry. Peter Jones sounds his knell for poetry-reading, though, by emphasising the 'academisation' that has forced poets towards the university reading-list market, and points out the high incidence of practising poets on the staffs of academic institutions. 'The academy—schools and universities alike—has modern poetry by the throat. The market for books of poems is now pre-eminently academic. No new poet is safely established until he is on a syllabus.'³ Jones also seems a bit critical of the financial help given to some writers in the forms of Arts Council or Arts Association grants, though recognising that the 'boom' in poetry-writing in the 1960's and, to some extent the 1970's, was partly a result of this form of help. 'Poetry-readings', beginning in the United States of America, and spreading to some extent to Britain, had their own influence, not always entirely beneficial as Eric Mottram has pointed out. Ex-editor of *Poetry Review*, he criticises the contemporary 'Horatian' theory of 'poetry as a rapidly consumable entertainment article on a par with cigarettes, newspapers and booze, a source of quick minimal kicks which

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do not interfere with the stability of class divisions and rigid labour/leisure proportions. The wreath is given to the hack who pleases the audience through recognitions of what it knows and likes rather than through an exploration of unconventional procedures.⁴ Mottram's view may contain some elements of truth, but perhaps he tends to throw out the baby with the bath-water. Jones, too, is, I think, rather too gloomy about the effect of the reading-list on contemporary poets and their work. It is surely good to have some alert young readers of university standard apply their intelligence to what contemporary poets are doing. Later I hope to look at this point in some detail, but the poets themselves, even when they come from an 'academy' background, which is not perhaps as prevalent as it at first might seem, have a traditional antipathy to being dealt with by the literary critics and seldom fail to take an opportunity to kick out at the desk-bound scholar. The custom of having a Visiting Poet, which has stimulated students in some American universities, is not so widespread in Britain so far.

The first 'group' of poems which I would like to look at in more detail concerns the poet's concept of what he is trying to do. The most outspoken and ambitious statement is a poem by Christopher Logue (b. 1926). In his *Foreword to NEW NUMBERS* (Larkin, No. 525) the opening line runs:

This book was written in order to change the world
and, despite the wit and self-deprecating irony of some of the

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lines:

On the day of its publication its price would buy
11 cut loaves,
3 yards of drip-dry nylon,...
....or a cheap critic,

it seems to suffer from a kind of bravado that detracts from an otherwise bold and exciting theme. The second and shortest section of the poem states that the book 'will offend a number of people' but 'its commercial potential is slight.' The third section offers a clever, condensed survey of the vast variety of activities in the modern world, including such unlikely candidates as 'multi-lingual porpoises...con/crete poets...transplanted heartmen...the Misses World, and those I love.' It ends with the lines:

if having read it you
are the same person you
were before picking it up,
then throw it away.

The very exhaustiveness of his survey of those to whom this book is ostensibly dedicated makes the reader reflect on the very limited potential audience the book is likely to have in reality, and the stated aim of the poet sounds superficial rather than challenging. To cross the Atlantic for a moment, this poem asks in some respects to be compared to a poem such as Howard Nemerov's (b. 1920) *On Being Asked for a Peace*

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Poem (reprinted in *The Oxford Book of Contemporary Verse 1945-1980*, chosen by D. J. Enright, 1980, p. 121). There is also a self-deprecating irony in this poem, but the poet, who gives himself the ambiguous name of Joe Blow, has a very realistic sense of the unlikeliness of his poem having much, if any, effect. He draws himself like an organist sitting before his instrument and making a few practice runs while getting ready to play his big piece. The poem Blow wants to write is one about the War in Vietnam. He calls the poem a 'sacred obligation' and

.....all by himself,
Applying the immense leverage of art,
He is about to stop this senseless war.

The awareness of the futility of the poet's attempt to have any impact at all is perhaps what makes this poem both sad and sensible, more realistic than Logue's apparent posturing. Nemerov makes Blow recall Homer's *Iliad*, which he jokes stopped the Trojan war, Wordsworth's 'stopping' the French Revolution's excesses, and Yevtushenko's invitation from the Times to 'keep the Arabs out of Israel'. Blow has visions of winning the Nobel Prize and anticipates the worldwide acclaim which will follow his successful attempt. The ironical last line runs:

Poetry might suddenly be the in thing.

Nemerov uses the cliché, the 'in thing', effectively here, but can also mock the over-literariness of the poet, and reveal

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his final impotence, by showing his difficulty over finding a good first line, and his embarrassing weakness in having to use 'O', an outdated apostrophe, to open. In revealing the impossibility of the poet's task here, Nemerov, with humour and a down-to-earth common-sense, makes an important statement on the place of the poet in the modern world. An intelligent and humane observer, he is powerless to get the attention that his point of view deserves. Nemerov's poem reflects the anxiety of many of his countrymen in the United States of America at the gap that opened between the general feeling about the Vietnam War and the line taken by the Administration. Britain also has its poets concerned with immediate political and social problems who try to address them in poetry. Adrian Mitchell (b. 1932) is one of them and his words are quoted in *World, Seven Modern Poets*, on this topic: 'If somebody I love starts dropping bombs on somebody, I'll certainly attack them... If they do things in a big public way—something very bad—I might find it necessary to attack them in print' (Penguin Education, ed. Geoffrey Summerfield, 1974, p. 192). Mitchell implies a confidence that such an attack in print would have an effect.

Three further poems might help to shed some more light on this sense of the poet's identity. Basil Bunting, of an older generation (b. 1900), catches the conflict between the sensitive young poet and the hard-bitten man of the world in *What the Chairman Told Tom* (Larkin, No 306). The chairman, interviewing the tentative youngster, insensitively mocks his

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deepest feelings by lumping poetry-writing together with model trains and breeding pigeons: 'It's a hobby.' The chairman's ideas about what poetry is reflect the ideas of society at large, to a great extent. He says, 'It's not work. You don't sweat.' He asks, 'How could I look a bus conductor/in the face/if I paid you twelve pounds?' He challenges the whole evaluation of 'poetic' language in the compact stanza:

Who says it's poetry, anyhow?
My ten year old
can do it *and* rhyme.

The chairman has an unassailable sense of his own importance—he is an accountant and never questions his value to society: he is worth 'three thousand and expenses,/a car, vouchers' and his suspicion of those who can handle language is condensed into this stanza:

Nasty little words, nasty long words,
It's unhealthy.
I want to wash when I meet a poet.

The illogical and emotional lengths to which the chairman's hysteria can quite easily take him are shown when he amplifies his suspicion and hatred: to him poets are 'Reds, addicts, /all delinquents.' The left-wing image is a common one and reappears in Gavin Ewart's (b. 1916) *A New Poet Arrives* (Larkin, No 461). This poet, presumably a speaker to a university audience, flies in from Manchester—the provinces

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reversing the role of the established centres—and hits several of the traditionally cherished preserves of the Establishment, to the implied approval of his listeners. ‘Death to the Public Schools,/Ready to piss in the eye of the Old Universities.’ Even though Ewart states ‘How right he is’, the hawkish figure of the New Poet leaves us with an uncomfortable feeling. ‘Through immense spectacles he sees clearly/That only a New Movement can save our souls’. Ewart manages to question the integrity of the speaker at the same time as approving of his inquisition into ‘vested interests’. The final sentence, ‘Change, in the Arts, is nearly always good’ has a superb irony about it. Philip O’Connor (also b. 1916) has an important poem entitled *Writing in England Now* (Larkin, No. 463), which carries the very specific subtitle ‘from a commercially unsuccessful point of view.’ The poem weaves three strands: the poet, unequivocally presenting himself as an ‘able writer’ and his admiring but indiscriminating audience, the language with which he wrestles to shape his point of view and with which his reader refuses or is unable to cope, and then the figure of the poet (part wish-fulfillment, perhaps, but shared by a number of other modern poets) as successful, or almost successful, seducer:

The able writer hears what he has written being said
by people
who of the right sex he wouldn’t mind in bed
before he writes it. It gives felicity to his writing.

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It makes his challenge biting
To save his readers writing
what they hear is very true,
they pay their servant.

The compact and unexpected syntactical development of some of O'Connor's 'stanzas' sends the mind back down the lines, enriching the meanings and underscoring their variety of possibilities. One of the important statements of this poem is on the apparent danger but inherent futility of being a poet:

Writing in England today is like waving the red programme of a bullfight at a menu with roast beef on it.

It also shares a very serious concern for the difficulty of using language, and the condition into which the media have brought English:

I have mangled the lavatory towel of this language as it
has become
through the terrified mastications of terrorized journalists
and brilliant, shocking and disturbing novelists until I
think it was toothpaste, and my teeth are black, it was
bad toothpaste.

I have not respect. I have not money therefore. I want
money.

Editor, print this and send me some when you call it a poem
to teach the reader what I know about writing in England
today.

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It is not surprising that the anthologies selected by working poets tend to include a larger number of poems reflecting the concerns I have been outlining. The selections of Philip Larkin and D. J. Enright are good examples. Enright prints a poem by Gavin Ewart, not quite as harsh as that poet's *A New Poet Arrives* (selected by Larkin), but which testifies to a serious concern with the quality of the language, the topic I have already broached, and which I would like to develop next. Ewart's *They flee from me that sometime did me seek* (Enright, pp. 77-8), is a modern parody of the poem of the same first line by Sir Thomas Wyatt (Gardner, No. 28) on his new and dangerous isolation. Ewart takes off at the same time the cliché-ridden language that seems so commonplace today, and by packing such expressions together in a simple but compact form, he reveals to us their awful imprecision, repetitiousness and unsuitability for serious communication:

At this moment in time
the chicks that went for me
in a big way
are opting out;
as of now, it's an all-change situation.

The poet, also exploring the theme of the poet as lover, is, however, mainly concerned with the shapelessness and flacidity of the clichés: 'at this moment in time,' 'an all-change situation,' and in the final 'verse' 'on-going', 'How's about it' and 'meaningful'. Whether these strike Ewart as unwelcome American

influences on the English language in Britain or not, or merely as unacceptably slovenly in any context, they are still presented for our disapproval. They predated talk of 'Haigspeak' by a considerable margin. Robert Conquest (b. 1917) also looks at the role of language, and of poetry, by writing a poem that imagines a visitor from space submitting a report on what he/she has found on earth. In *Excerpt from a Report to the Galactic Council* (Enright, pp.91-2) an objective assessment of communication between inhabitants on the planet described puts the 'poem' like this:

The 'poem' (at which this, in the biped dialect 'English',
is an attempt)

Is an integration of symbols which may be defined
As a semantic composition fusing what is thought and
dreamt,

And working in senses and thalamus as well as what is
called mind.

Moreover it liberates their symbolism from over-definition....

...The poem combines all these, so that the whole scene
Can penetrate the biped's organism at every level.

The 'officialese' in which the Report is couched adds a useful contrast to the concept of a poem as Conquest portrays it here, capable of combining the best that man has to offer. 'Verse' is better than the race's thought as a whole.' This poem underlines the belief that poetry is a superior form of communication:

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In general practice they reify abstractions; at
The price of wars, etc., fail to keep symbols under control.

Though there is no space to go into them here, many poems written in the last twenty years or so concern the impossibility of communicating, the difficulty of the individual trying to make contact with others, and the difficulty also of grappling with one's own experience. Stevie Smith (1902-1971) (see Enright, pp. 1-7) has several exceptionally fine poems on this subject, including *The After-thought*, and Sylvia Plath's (1932-1963) *Tulips* or *The Bee Meeting* are classics in this respect (reprinted in the *Cambridge Book of English Verse 1939-1945*, ed. Alan Bold, 1976, pp. 148-50 and 158-60). In Plath's case there seems to be a despair at communicating that intensifies, but the energy and richness of her language in the effort of trying to understand her feelings and the outside world makes her work outstanding. Edwin Morgan (b. 1920) somewhat trivialises the problem when he says poetry is 'partly an instrument of exploration, like a space ship, into new fields of feeling or experience...and partly a special way of recording moments and events' (Summerfield, p. 229).

Leaving aside the dense arguments of books such as Gerald Bruns' *Modern Poetry and the Idea of Language* (Yale University Press, 1974), in which, for example, Chapter 8, 'Poetry as Reality: the Orpheus Myth and its Modern Counterparts,' takes us into fields which I am not qualified to discuss, it is very clear that many modern poems raise complex

philosophical questions. Thom Gunn's (b.1929) *The Messenger* (Bold, p.127) tries to show that the mere labelling of things we see around us in the world fails to reach the essence of them. The poem presumably describes a tulip, and a man staring at it in growing understanding, but deliberately does not mention the name of that flower. By his intense absorption into the experience of seeing and responding to the flower, the man may be becoming an 'angel'. We do not need an extensive understanding of Gunn's possible symbolism to appreciate this poem which points out the inherent limitations of language while presenting a very intense experience.

Many modern poets, however, have justifiably been criticised for taking the use of personal symbols and meanings to great lengths. Whether this internalisation or introspection is some sort of reaction to the obvious lack of general appreciation or understanding, already mentioned, and the feeling that the poet is peripheral in the modern world, it may be difficult to say. But the work of writers like Geoffrey Hill, Patricia Beer, Anthony Hecht and even Peter Redgrove, all illustrate one kind of difficulty or another. Summerfield says in his Introduction, 'Geoffrey Hill's splendidly resonant and hermetic poetry yields up its satisfactions but slowly' (p.12). Summerfield's anthology (admittedly for the younger adult 'who wants to move more deeply into contemporary British poetry') excludes Ian Hamilton Finlay's work because 'I think the younger reader may well be puzzled, or even deterred, by the apparent eccentricity of Finlay's poetry' (op. cit.). There is some truth in this, but Finlay's

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exciting approach to the presentation of his ideas might do something to make the imagined younger reader widen his conception of what poetry is or might be.

Charles Causley (b.1917) is included, however, and in remarks quoted by the editor he has this to say about comprehensibility: 'I'm very concerned about communicating with a reader—no use talking on a dead line.' This is a refreshing approach, but it does not mean to say he will simplify for the sake of immediate comprehension. He continues, 'But a poem mustn't be allowed to burn itself out in one brilliant flash; the poem mustn't be so explicit that there's no reason for the reader's imagination and sensibility to get working' (Summerfield, p. 22). Enright mentions that a lot of interest in modern poetry comes from those who write rather than those who read it. As an ex-teacher himself he is well-placed to ask if this arises from 'progressive or indolent classrooms' (Introduction, p. xxi). R. S. Thomas (b.1913) has an interesting word to say on the poet and his language in a couple of short poems. *Poetry for Supper* (Enright, p. 48) shows two old poets chewing over the old question. One says, '...verse should be as natural/As the small tuber that feeds on muck/And grows slowly from obtuse soil/To the white flower of immortal beauty.' The imagery is particularly striking here. The other poet replies, 'Natural, hell! What was it Chaucer/Said once about the long toil/That goes like blood to the poem's making?' They chew over the endless topic, and the lines are enriched by more of the striking imagery: 'You speak as though/No sunlight ever surprised the mind/Groping on its

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cloudy path,' but the poem reaches no conclusion, as indeed it cannot, except the ironic comment on both poets 'hunched at their beer' who are 'glib' with prose. The feeling that those days are gone is also reflected in the short poem, *Postscript* (Enright, p.49). 'As life improved, their poems/Grew sadder and sadder'. This poem ends with the words:

....Among the forests
Of metal the one human
Sound was the lament of
The poets for deciduous language.

There is a challenging ambiguity in the word 'deciduous,'

To continue next with the problems of language in relation to a particular audience, it is not surprising that there is a reflection of the teenager in the poetry of the period, especially from the 60's. I would like to look at two 'groups' of poems that show different kinds of teenager, those relatively uneducated and those at college. In *Printing Jenny* (Larkin, No.533), Matthew Mitchell (b.1928) draws a portrait of the daily life and concerns of a young girl who works at a printer's where Bibles are being produced. The ordinary young girl's dismissive attitude to the Bibles she helps to make, ('catch a modern girl listening to snakes'), points up the failure of religion to appeal to her, but in the language she uses to try and grapple with her problems, and those of her friends, she reveals a triviality and oversimplification, despite her genuine feelings and a certain

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sensitivity, that worry Mitchell. 'But, as the mags say, how to know love's real'. Jenny is concerned whether her jeans suit her or not, and she accepts 'philosophically,' that is by virtually shrugging it off, the fate of her friend who has had an illegitimate child, let it be adopted and is once more 'back/On Cost Accounting'. The irony tells, but Mitchell can also appreciate the animal energy of the girl, who has the last line in the poem. After a safe but dull day's work

(She) hurls her sixteen summers through the gates.

Another poem about young women, this time specifically located at the Mersey-side, is Adrian Henri's (b. 1932) *Mrs Albion You've Got a Lovely Daughter* (Larkin No. 561). Again, there is irony over the apparent frivolity and casualness of the lives such young girls might lead, and a regret that somehow they are beyond the reach of sophisticated language or thought. Yet Henri shows a sympathy for them, and an appreciation of their hopes and fears:

The daughters of Albion
taking the dawn ferry to tomorrow
worrying about what happened
worrying about what hasn't happened...

The poem makes a criticism of the contemporary scene, as does Douglas Dunn's (b. 1942) *The Clothes Pit* (Larkin, No. 580),

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in a rather similar way. Dunn's poem is more specific about what the women lack: 'intellectual grooming' and even the smallest of 'philosophies'. Dunn's poem seems harsher and less sympathetic, but it still celebrates a living energy in the way the girls flaunt their clothes, gaudy and tasteless as they may be:

But they have clothes, bright enough to show they dream
Of places other than this, an inarticulate paradise,
Eating exotic fowl in sunshine with courteous boys.

This dream may never come true, (it would be a stark contrast to Terry Street), and the poem ends on the note that I am concentrating on here, their lack of a real language. Dunn makes them walk down the street

...with the summer wind.

The litter of pop rhetoric blows down Terry Street,
Bounces past their feet, into their lives.

In this poem, 'pop rhetoric' is criticised for its simplified code and cliché-ridden nature.⁵ In a rather ambiguous poem, *On the Move* (Bold, p. 118), Thom Gunn is also criticising the younger generation, this time the young motor-cycle gangs who 'almost hear a meaning in their noise', as they roar down the road to nowhere in particular. One last poem worth mentioning in connection with this first group of relatively uneducated youth, is Elizabeth Jennings's (b.1926) *The Young Ones* (Larkin, No. 522). This poem manages to convey at once

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the sense of insecurity concealed behind the apparently bold surface the girls put on, and the empathy of the older woman observing them. Unlike Gunn in his poem, Jennings is not concerned with wooing approval, she is aware that her generation is quite different in many respects, not all of which are superior:

Without fuss

These enter adolescence; being young
Seems good to them, a state we cannot reach,
No talk of 'awkward ages' now.

But even when the poet is addressing himself to a supposedly more discerning audience, there is still frequently a sense of alienation and lack of contact, not to say hostility. To switch for a moment to the novelist, the comparatively successful arch-rival of the contemporary poet, Anthony Burgess's recent novel, *Earthly Powers* (Penguin edn. 1981), may prove to be a modern master-piece, but it certainly contains many excellently drawn vignettes, one or two of which are relevant to my point here. In Chapter 62, the ageing literary 'hero', Kenneth Toomey, a successful but therefore by definition not top-flight author, is in the Agnes Watson Auditorium at Wisbech College, Indiana, where he is to address five hundred students and faculty. The scene is drawn with masterly economy and the writer talking about his somewhat outdated concerns contrasts with the contemporary manners, and mores of his young listeners. The question-time is particularly wittily depicted.

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One student has never heard of the *New Testament* (Toomey is much concerned with the relevance of Catholicism, though his homosexual preferences have forced him to a life of separation from the faith), and another student politely, but somewhat inarticulately, puts the point:

“‘I disagree with what you said, sir. I mean when you said a writer doesn’t know what he’s writing. I mean the important writers say important things and they know they’re important if not they wouldn’t write them. Like God Manning.’

‘Like *who*?’

There was amusement and some anger at my ignorance.... Several young voices repeated the name..

..‘He wrote *Call Me and I’ll Answer...*’” (p.498).

Toomey jokes on the appellation ‘God’ and is accused by another student of being ‘frivolous’. The irony of the whole scene only becomes apparent when it turns out that the God Manning in question (a figure having much in common with the Jones of the Georgetown massacre) has a commune in which he systematically exploits the fear and naivety of many young people. Burgess’s comment is, of course, about the uneven quality of colleges in the United States, and the failure to ‘educate’ those who attend them. His criticism also extends to the illiterate young, those who have no grasp on language and hence no grasp on life. In the novel, Toomey’s niece, Ann, has a daughter, Eve, inarticulately keen on movies,

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and the simplistic communication between herself and her tongue-tied, 'nice' boyfriend, Bob, is depicted in Chapter 71. Toomey dismisses the younger generation of their sort:

"And off they went, inheritors of movies with popcorn and coke machines in the vestibule. And also, though some place else, mushroom clouds and starvation." (p. 568).

Reverting from prose to poetry once more, both the campus audience and the professional literary critic of the university cut rather poor figures in a number of poems, also casting light on the problems of communication, perhaps where one would have expected communication to have been most likely to take place.

John Berryman (1914-1972) in his poem, *A Professor's Song* (Enright, p. 50), shows that the teaching situation in general in campuses (here perhaps in his native United States of America) is not particularly enlivening. The teacher is merely earning a salary and despises both his subject and his students—"I want to end these fellows all by noon"—'these fellows' being the eighteenth century couplet writers and Blake! This professor makes feeble jokes about what to Berryman are obviously key ideas emphasised by the concern for mundane comfort:

'A poet is a man speaking to men':

But I am then a poet, am I not?—

Ha ha. The radiator, please. Well, what?

There is also a reflection of the awareness that fiction has for

the time being topped poetry:

Alive now—no—Blake would have written prose.

But the dreariness of the dead classroom is partly responsible for the desperation of the professor himself who bursts out at the end of the poem in a kind of harangue, perhaps internal, but nevertheless deeply felt:

.. Twelve. The class can go.

Until I meet you, then, in Upper Hell

Convulsed, foaming immortal blood: farewell.

The professor is to some extent to be sympathised with for wishing his unresponsive students (and ironically himself) into one of Dante's most unpleasant circles. He seems to be sure that none of them will catch the meaning of what he is saying, and this reminds us of the scene referred to in Chapter 62 of *Earthly Powers*. Another American poet, Anthony Hecht (b. 1923), whose tough, energetic but curiously sensitive poems explore the inner experience, has written, in *The Ghost in the Martini* (Enright, p. 175), of an ageing poet who wrestles with himself and his 'mindless self-regard', while at the same time virtually despising the adoration he seems to be receiving at a cocktail party. He sets himself to try and seduce one of his attractive fans and the poem ends with him telling her 'to find her purse' as they make their escape. But the poem shows the tortuous self-concern of the poet, and his suspicion that any adoration he may receive is paradoxically both unworthy and

yet well-deserved, even though he doubts his own integrity. There are a number of other good poems which contribute to the exploration of the campus situation, and the teaching of literature. The Australian scholar and poet, A. D. Hope (b. 1907), wittily imitates Pope in his *Dunciad Minor* and chastises the foolishness of literary critics in extracts such as *On Shakespeare Critics* (Enright, p. 20). Kingsley Amis (b. 1922) manages in *Beowulf* (Enright, p. 140) to recreate a feeling for the energetic power of the Dark Ages, and portrays the effete contemporary world called on to make trite literary judgements for the purposes of examinations.

Peter Redgrove (b. 1932) seems to get carried away in his cynicism about the triviality of some university courses and the meaninglessness of over-specialisation. His rather shrill poem *Dog Prospectus* (Enright, p. 255) imagines dogs following courses on 'Elementary Urinology, and Advanced /Urinology' and so on, but he labours the point. Though he claims to be writing for the 'few humans left' and to be making a stand against superficiality, and though what he criticises obviously deserves it, his strident tone over-rides the touches of sympathy. Two poems which manage to touch the note of sensitive concern in the midst of foolishness and falsity are another of Hecht's, *A Lot of Night Music* (Enright, p. 179), in which he admits the posturing and idiocy, the speciousness of many poets' efforts, but calls for a realisation of the genuine sincerity of a few:

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Yet there are honest voices to be heard,

and Derek Mahon's (b.1941) quiet *I am Raftery* (Enright, p. 272). Raftery seems to be a sensitive and sensible student (?blind), 'hesitant and confused among/the cold-voiced graduate-students and inter-/changeable instructors'. But, despite the effort of studying in the cold East Anglian winter, and the difficulty of reading Joyce 'by touch', he feels he is in search of something and that his search is important:

..Look at me now,
my back to the wall, taking my cue
from an idiot disc-jockey between commercials.

Philip Larkin (b. 1922) has an excellent dig at the cynical American postgraduate student in *Posterity* (Enright, p. 153), but I would like to finish this section with two poems which bring us firmly back to the poet, albeit seen in a campus situation. Louis Simpson (b.1923) catches the poetry-reading scene very neatly and wittily in *Before the Poetry Reading* (Enright, p. 186). The rather clumsy and impractical poet coming to read his work searches through his opened case in the rain for his manuscript. The superficial chatter of the people standing by reveals a deep-seated lack of concern for poetry. They tell the fumbling poet that if he had come on any other day but that one he would have had a good audience:

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'For we here at Quinippiac (Western, or Wretched State
U.)

Have wonderful audiences for poetry readings'.

Simpson echoes the poets' concern that the novel is taking precedence—the car drives off with his only available manuscript, and Bellow and Baldwin on the front seat. The second section of the poem shows the glaring insincerity of the person who is to introduce him—he knows absolutely nothing about the poet and wants to be told what he should say. The third section catches the superficial voice of the lady who is giving a party for him after the reading. She has almost malevolently excluded anyone (particularly any 'beautiful, attractive, farouche young women') of interest from her guest-list, and has assembled a formidable combination of unlikely people, including the Vicar of Dunstable, the Calvinist Spiritual Choral Society and all the members of the Poetry Writing Workshop. The horror of the poet hangs in the air. The fourth section ranges through a rather bizarre, almost nightmare-like announcement, the flat tone of which contrasts with the alarming content. The speaker mentions that there will be refreshments available, but the distance to them is out of scale and proportion, and the announcement veers off to imply the poet's criticism that all audiences have had a patent lack of concern through thousands of years of so-called civilisation:

If you turn left, past the Community Building,
And walk for seventeen miles,

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There is tea and little pieces of eraser
Being served in the Gymnasium.
Last week we had a reading by Dante,
And the week before by Sophocles;
A week from tonight, Saint Francis of Assissi will appear
in person...

No-one is probably listening anyway. The fifth section of the poem is simply, and very effectively, the one line:

This has been the poetry reading.

The Canadian poet and teacher, Earle Birney (b.1904), brings us back to the poet's concern with who he is in *A Small Faculty Stag for the Visiting Poet* (Enright, p.40). The pretentious manners and mannerisms of some of the staff are contrasted with the gross insensitivity of others. The Necessary Dean (Birney's capitalisation), and the British Oxonian Canon (who makes risqué quotations that few follow) and the Czech and Hungarian members who talk about the poet across his chest in at least two other languages, make a bizarre and frightening group. The stuffiness of the Librarian, very self-consciously British in his pronunciation, contrasts with the fiendish cleverness of the science faculty members who have just been asking the poet 'unanswerable questions/simultaneously from across the centre-piece.' Birney has a dig at excessive Canadian nationalism, the Physics Department's 'chief cultural exhibit' is a 'very anthropologetical Native Son'. But the

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Visiting Poet, in such shark-infested waters, feels extremely
(and justifiably) uncomfortable:

I am the dead eye of this verbal typhoon
I am the fraudulent word-doctor
stripped to dumbness by their tribal ritual
I am neither civilised nor savage but also Necessary
 grinning
 & stoned
 & desolate.

Simpson's and Birney's poems leave us with a rather disillusioned view of what the poet is and what he can do. Even in the academic world he can hardly expect fair, and certainly not genuinely critical, attention, and he finds himself pushed aside by the aggressive elements in the society.

To finish, it might be interesting to mention briefly two poems which try to look into the future, and two essays which make us think over again what it is that the poem can be. In an age which lives still under the shadow of its own nuclear technology, it is not surprising that there are several poems which envisage a catastrophe and which speculate on what life afterwards, if it exists, might be like. John Heath-Stubbs (b. 1918), from whose *Preliminary Poem* (Enright, p.100) I took the quotation at the head of this essay, has a poem entitled *To a Poet a Thousand Years Hence* (Enright, p. 106). There is a powerful opening (somewhat reminiscent of Yeats's *The*

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Second Coming) in which he imagines some mutant survivor with pink eyes attempting to scan the lines he, the poet, has left, in a nightmarish, post-nuclear-disaster landscape. In the event of future generations avoiding that dreadful fate, Heath-Stubbs still conjures up a '1984' kind of hell of 'some plastic paradise/of pointless gadgets' which they do not realise is Hell, with the future generations attempting to make sense of his lines in their insensitive comfort. But the real question is, 'Does our art of words survive .. Or do computers churn it out?' Heath-Stubbs seems very unsure that the art of words, the poet's language, will survive, and that therefore mankind will be merely another animal again. His second alternative implies a totally technologically controlled state and a corresponding absence of individuality, 'Unless, dear poet, you were born/Like me, a deal behind your time ...'

Richard Wilbur (b. 1921) echoes the same scenario, as an American, in *Advice to a Prophet* (Enright, p. 129). This poem evokes with characteristic sensitivity and economy the very quick of life on this planet as man has come to know and love it. The poet verges on the philosophical when he tries, and fails, to imagine the earth without man:

How should we dream of this place without us?—
The sun mere fire, the leaves untroubled about us,
A stone look on the stone's face? ...

...Ask us, prophet, how we shall call
Our natures forth when that live tongue is all

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Dispelled, that glass obscured or broken

In which we have said the rose of our love and the clean
Horse of our courage, in which beheld
The singing locust of the soul unshelled,
And all we mean or wish to mean.

If these two poems reflect little confidence about the future, they do contain an important and wiry sense of the value of human life, and the importance of language, through poetry, in coming to grips with it. Whatever the future of poetry may be, and in the present moment there seem to be as many possibilities and ideas as there are practitioners, essays like *Notes on a Viking Prow* by Christopher Middleton,⁶ one of the most active and imaginative younger English poets, hardly leave us with the feeling that the neo-Modernist nihilism is likely to obliterate thought. Middleton's prose may be very self-conscious and to some extent artificial, but his concern with the 'figural' value of poetry rather than the subjective confessional elements of it, is forward-looking. Matthew Arnold, in his famous essay on *The Function of Criticism at the Present Time* (1865) makes the point that writers ought not to be too involved in everyday practical or political affairs, that they should be able to step back from them and view them with detachment. This detachment is forced on writers today, but it must not prevent them from living fully, because, as Arnold says:

a poet, for instance, ought to know life and the world before

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dealing with them in poetry; and life and the world being in modern times very complex things, the creation of a modern poet, to be worth much, implies a great critical effort behind it; else it must be a comparatively poor, barren, and short-lived affair.¹

The poems which I have looked at reflect a genuine, intelligent and unyielding concern with the questions Arnold raises. Poetry is very much alive and well, in that it struggles to cope with the complex modern world and the place of language and thought in it. At the risk of quoting one poem too many, I would like to finish with the words of R. S. Thomas in *After Jericho* (Enright, p. 49), a more fitting Epilogue for the 70's than MacNeice's poem was, perhaps, and one which looks with a wary strength towards the future:

There is an aggression of fact
to be resisted successfully
only in verse, that fights language
with its own tools. Smile, poet,
among the ruins of a vocabulary
you blew your trumpet against.
It was a conscript army; your words
every one of them, are volunteers.

Notes

1. See, for example, *The Auden Generation, Literature and Politics in England in the 1930's*, Samuel Hynes, pub. Bodley Head, 1976, esp. Ch. VIII, '1937'.

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2. *British Poetry Since 1970, a Critical Survey*, edited by Peter Jones, and Michael Schmidt, Carcanet Press, Manchester, 1980, p. 55.
3. Op. cit., Jones, Introduction, p. xv.
4. Op. cit., Jones, quoted by Blake Morrison in 'Young Poets in the 1970's', p. 145.
5. In the last chapter of his *Contemporary American Literature, 1945-1972*, (pub. Frederick Ungar, NY, 1973), Ihab Hassan laments the lack of critical attention to the influence of pop lyrics, particularly those of Bob Dylan (b. 1941).
6. Op. cit., Jones, pp. 166 seq..
7. In *Essays in Criticism, First Series*, pub. MacMillan, 1895, p. 6.