

BATELEUR POETS

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Reviewed by Peter Strauss

This volume contains generous collections by four different poets at a bargain price. The contents are so varied that there is no alternative but to discuss each poet separately.

Robert Greig

It's possible, no, easy to miss his strength at a first reading or hearing. The voice is such a quiet one, and unassuming—yet gradually it insists, insinuates; it keeps you on its wave-length so as to insist on its say; it steadies itself to seriousness underneath its wit (in the confidence of the surprises it has yet to spring); then suddenly it dissolves at the end, declenches into a throw-away tone, so that at last it's the poem's point you are left with and not the voice or him. It's important to remember that such modesty implies a voice all the same—that there is authority under all that retiring stratagem—that Robert Greig, lucky man, has developed a poetic voice which is at the same time the blueprint for a poem's ground plan.

Robert Greig's world is undercut with mythical dangers: everything that the poem describes exists by miracle from moment to moment. All his wit and cleverness, all his satire and irony, go to suggest that the ground under your feet may be pulled away at any moment, that the most fundamental realities need not be, could vanish, contain pitfalls. Every familiar fact (like the art of walking) is called into question, accompanied with its own negation; it defines itself against its own absence. This gives the simplest things the aspect of the totally new and fresh. This highly strenuous viewpoint is Greig's poetic stance: to regard the world, in the smallest detail, as something to be put together from scratch, with nothing taken for granted.

This, I feel, is really what **Against Nature** is about. It starts with an extremely beautiful stanza. What is being put into question here is the secure identity of the self:

Do not stroll in gardens
or greenhouses or gaze too closely
at flowers. You will feel the mound
of earth in your stomach heave
out of the walls of your skin.
your fingers will curl like tendrils,
your hair turn green and seek the wind
if you stroll in gardens or greenhouses,
or lose yourself in a flower's scent.

The poem is disappointing, for it peters out with an old moral:

Change yourself to neutral steel
that flame and grass and water fear,
change yourself to shiny steel—
you'll never die or live.

Greig also deals with the obsessive South-African-poets'—problem, more specifically the White suburban bourgeois liberal problem that Lionel Abrahams attacks directly with a bad poem called **The Whiteman Blues**. We shall meet it again. It is that sense of unreality that is endemic to us, naturally disturbing to a poet: that sense of **numbing** through unreality, of waiting passive and narcotised for an inevitable but unpredictable blow to fall. Usually this subject bores me, but the problem is dealt with magnificently in the title poem **Talking Bull**, in which the speaker takes a friend for an air flip over the Cape Flats. I think the poem is so good because the man it deals with is shown as active and so human—and this precise sense of humanness makes us feel good. The image of pilotage suggests a degree of control that the pilot is actually engaged in, even though he must know that the control can never be complete. "I know the gulf of nothing, below" would suggest the old cliché of the White man's total alienation, were it not that this gulf of nothing is actually alive with the pockets and mushrooms of air rising from the township-pocked plain below:

Rather that bleak hide below
of a tied-down bull, bucking the plane
with hot exhalations, mounding how far
into distance I do not know.

The 'reality' of the earth still reaches the poet in spite of the ghostly sense given by the plane's shadow that is, in flight, separated from him. The explicit connection of this separation with apartheid is well managed—it is never more than a fancy—it grows organically out of the poem—and it comes as enough of a surprise to be striking in its logic. It's a fine and unpretentiously honest poem.

Mike Kirkwood

From this collection may be gleaned a fair idea of how this poet has developed and changed. Skip the first two poems and you come to the earliest layer: poems that move in memory of pentameters magnificent, drunk on the romance and heroics of the colonial situation, but clear-headed and clear-eyed and thoughtful too. Then come the poems about his father's last illness and death: **Old Salt** to **A City Doctor**—the first two poems of the collection, dealing with his West Indian childhood, belong to this period too, and **Root Gatherers** prefigures it technically. Finally we get the most recent period, mainly poems in the last three pages, varied, difficult to characterise at this stage—a period of experimentation.

If one of Robert Greig's virtues was the apparent self-effacement of his voice, we find the opposite phenomenon in Kirkwood, at any rate in the early poems of his collection.

His early verse is reminiscent of heroic pentameters from the time when people had the confidence to write them. Take the book away and your ears are still ringing—and there is no hollowness in the reverberation. “Sweet as honey, sound as a bell”, as the Indian vendor used to say when he was selling plums. Sure proof of an excellent ear.

As for the language, it brags its way on to the page and unfolds itself with a pleasing swagger. At least—I like this: it means the poet can move into the direct expression of powerful emotion—he hasn’t precluded that from the first, in the way of so many poets who limit themselves to irony from the start. Yet there can be no doubt that the poet is taking up a stance that is artificial, however much genuine force there may be to back it up. The reference to Campbell in **Old Big Mouth** is significant, while it also shows Kirkwood’s half-admiring criticism of the heroic stance of this poet, a figure he seems to have found some difficulty in escaping.

The Campbellomania of this period goes with a kind of Durban patriotism that is deeply characteristic of the man. Kirkwood captures, again and again, the atmosphere of Durban: its colonial residue, its richness in legend, the megalomania of its climate and foliage, its sensuousness, its absurdity. Through Durban an element of legend enters into his poetry: the legend of place and person. We begin to be aware of another influence in his poetry—Robert Lowell, heroic too like Campbell, but more self-conscious.

Kirkwood has come close to rejecting his earlier poetry on the grounds that he was, at the time, totally naïve about language. No doubt he refers to the heroic-romantic diction of these poems. But the judgement is fundamentally wrong. The language of the poems is not naïve. It is a language that, with one part of itself, mocks itself as containing some pleasant element of bullshit, like all admiring reminiscence. The admiration is real enough on such trips as **Boers** and **Henry Finn and the Blacksmith of the Grosvenor**, but on such occasions it is well to remember that one is moving in the world of legend, and Kirkwood is always aware of this. Thus if his poetry lacks the obvious attractions of Campbell’s total allegiance to his vaquero-cloaked ego, his poems will always be more interesting than Campbell’s.

There comes a toning-down in the poems on the death of his father. Actually it is not a toning-down, but a sublation of all he has learnt into a new poetic purpose that is given, unforced, and simply itself. Here the Lowellian element of family and geographical legend takes its rightful place in submission to the unpretentious and particular, the personal. One-time stuff!

Not really, but this is what the poet should tell himself, and look around for a new mode of day-to-day existence. This is what Kirkwood is doing in his later poems, not always successfully. But in a poem such as **Now Let’s Sock it to the Schools** a new voice seems to be emerging, a voice that can only be heard as the effect of the whole poem, not at any particular point in it. (Let’s ignore the title, which is a self-conscious disaster). The voice seems possible

only on recognition, after many diastrous particular forays, of an indestructible tradition of poetry, simple in its effect and social function, that the individual poet belongs to even against his will.

The voice has a quality related to Brecht, the subtle master of simple thinking, and so has the poem **Footnote to a Post-Lyrical Poem**. As Kirkwood says of his point in this poem:

(don’t mistake me: I give it you
in reason and not other-wise)

Which is a good attitude to remain with.

Lionel Abrahams

Perhaps I should deal first with the cause of the difficulties and resistances I experienced with this artist, before his vision and passion got through to me.

It is mainly a kind of fussiness. An unnecessary intricacy of movement. One cannot criticise this without registering one’s admiration for an ear and intellect that can manage such intricate complexities. The technique is completely vindicated in a poem like **Machines Taking Over**, which describes the mating dance of a bulldozer and a truck in what sounds like one single sentence, though it is actually several. There are many subjects, however, where the fussiness is tedious, a futile running round in circles. The writer’s puns are a case in point. Often they are witty and intelligent:

Visions and lusts are of one holy piece
and lust can be Godly lustre:

Though even here the pun is retarding, unlike Shakespeare’s puns that are a momentary collision, a sudden meeting of meanings, a flaring explosion within the swift movement of thought. But at times Abrahams’ punning is downright irritating:

In the beginning was the word,
the whorl, the whore, the hole.

This is doodling, the necessary point of departure for the poet feeling his way into words—but it should not find its way into the final draft. In general I find the long poem **Lament**, from which this is taken, an artistic mistake, however important it may be in other ways.

All this is a pity because of all the poets in this volume Abrahams seems the most visionary. If Durban is Mike Kirkwood’s territory, Lionel Abrahams possesses Johannesburg, even in his sense of not possessing it. Jo’burg is genuinely visionary for him. One poem (**Citizen Dice**) conceives the city as a gambler who rolls the people out into the streets like dice. **Birds About Johannesburg** is a poem I should like to consider more specially.

Some lithographs of birds by Georges Braque are brought to Johannesburg. The poet sees them and as a result the city looks new and different to him. The forms of birds are now interwoven with the city and the high veld. The process is astonishingly similar to that of Georges Braque’s studio interiors (oils, not lithographs) where the shape of a bird has strangely found its way in among the bric-a-brac of

an artist's studio and interacts with the forms of the objects there (including a bicycle). The effect is of some hidden reality, some hidden aspect of the familiar scene, now being revealed.

Recently I received a little insight into this visionary world that seems open to Abrahams in an unusual degree. I had been reading Marcuse on Hegel about the way human relations enter, through labour, into things; and as I came out of the lavatory I suddenly had a sense of the walls on either side of me as being men. Not one person per wall, of course, but the walls had the presence of human beings. Pursuing the sensation, I could feel the walls as the building-process of the house that I had witnessed: unplastered red brick with scaffolding and men before it seemed super-imposed on my white-washed passage walls. This experience was ultimately impossible to maintain because I couldn't square the vision with the space I was in. So I imagined the scene as a fresco on the wall, and with that the authenticity of my experience was gone. It could only remain while it was unstable and in a state of flux, one thing changing into another and then changing back again, transitions and half-transitions.

It seems to me likely that such insights reveal a part of our experience that is continuous though unconscious, and that forms a large part of our sense of the world's wealth. Abrahams seems to set himself the task of conveying this world that clings invisibly to things—I sometimes wish he would hand over the key to it directly, be boldly lyrical rather than mix in his lyricism with prose experience—for his gift tends towards a kind of lyrical abstraction, as in the second and third lines of the following quotation:

The city, insistent, knows its own newness.
Square into virgin depths of the birdspace
new shafts corridor daily upward,

Such power of abstraction is a creative gift, a gift of creation by destruction, by dismantling and stripping to the bone. But Abrahams tends to explain too much, and thus to dissipate the intensity. I keep thinking of those Braque paintings; where the bird is just *there* in the room, and no explanations given. I should like to have seen the poem as what it has almost become, a series of short poems each powerfully abstracted within its frame—like Braque's series on birds, to return to him. I'd like to see Abrahams' poetic language abstracted towards the essential in the manner of Mallarme and Paul Celan. Then another aspect of his poetry would spring to life: the movement from the traditional technique of simile and metaphor to the modern one of metamorphosis: the capturing of an image in the process of meaning-revealing change.

Georges Braque describes the process:

No object can be tied down to any one sort or reality; a stone may be part of a wall, a piece of sculpture, a lethal weapon, a pebble on a beach, or anything else you like, just as this file in my hand can be metamorphosed into a shoe-horn or a spoon, according to the way in which I use it. The first time this phenomenon struck me was in the trenches during the First World War when my batman turned a bucket into a brazier by poking a few holes in it with his bayonet and filling it with coke. For me this commonplace incident had a poetic significance: I began

to see things in a new way. Everything, I realised, is subject to metamorphosis; everything changes according to circumstances. So when you ask me whether a particular form in one of my paintings depicts a woman's head, a fish, a vase, a bird, or all four at once, I can't give you a categorical answer, for this 'metamorphic' confusion is fundamental to what I am out to express."

An instance from **Birds About Johannesburg** will clarify the process (the "it" in the first line is a building that has been demolished)—

Its doorway no longer invites the leap
of those sculpted buck at the opposite fountain.

What is a sculpture? Is it one thing? Does it move? At one moment we see the buck as natural, inviting images of the wild; then again they are a construction, participating in a human architecture. And what is more the buck now leap towards a doorway that has gone; in what sense does that doorway, because of the buck's leap, still exist? The lines, in a way typical of this poet, evoke the many-layered reality that springs into life when man, the symbol-maker, introduces his constructions into nature.

Walter Saunders

Like the pop artists, he mixes the banal and the mythical and turns one into the other. His technical-stylistic virtuosity is amazing, and he uses this skill not to develop a constant idiom of his own, but to spread out a collage of styles like a hand of cards or a peacock fan. He can get something going in almost no space at all—flash an image in a couple of words. The overall structure of the poem often seems very relaxed. But perhaps the relaxedness is part of the charm of the game. Saunders has a real humour of his own, predominantly visual, and his fantasy moves like a highly-coloured dream. I liked **Vrystaat!** and **Mephisto** in particular, and the poems would be good performed. They seem ready for the stage like surrealist opera.

Having said which, I can't say that I go for the 'serious' poems, notably **Terrorist** and **Anastasia**. Saunders has designs on the reader. He is going to get through and hurt him at whatever cost. It is the old 'modern' theory, surely a bore by now, yet still so beloved in particular of the flash stacycrowd, the theory that you have failed unless you perceptibly get past your audience's guard—in other words we are dealing with the aesthetics of shock. According to one theory of Freud's, the organism's guard against the shock of stimuli is consciousness. So to stab the reader really hard, the threshold of his consciousness must first be lowered. Saunders works by lulling the reader with his smooth and glossy pop-art surface, and then introduces images of pain and violence. The intensity, not to say blatancy, of the pain cannot be denied. It would not help to say it is sentimental, crude etc. The whole aim is that there should be no way of putting the pain in its place. So poetry is no longer something that struggles to bring things into proportion but is considered powerful to the extent that it throws things out of proportion, makes things unmanageable, and discards the measuringrod of man.

But this is not the whole of the story; there is good reason behind Walter Saunders's method. In modern life, dangers

tend to come in the form of shock—bombs and motorcars—one might even say that modern life is lived in an expectance of shock (which is not the same as being guarded against it); the end result is a state of apprehensive numbness. We all know the image of the operating theatre—the peaceful, drugged whiteness in which there lurks a knife. It is another of those images that have become a bore. Saunders doesn't use it. But the image gives the general set-up. The emotion that it expresses is panic—and panic must be about the most useless emotion there is.

Bunuel showed, in *The Discrete Charm of the Bourgeoisie*, that a technique analogous to Saunders's could be used to define the consciousness of the bourgeois class: leading hot-house lives, but with the sense of terrible lives being

lived elsewhere, and lived for them, on their behalf, so that at any moment the terror might break into their own lives—hence numbness and apprehension. And all four poets show an awareness of this flabbily-lived tension in South African suburbia. Walter Saunders gives it some sharpness. He is an accurate instrument all right—I just don't see that his method does anyone any good. In fact, I don't think these 'serious' poems are serious at all—they, too, are games: the slightly hysterical games of an effete class.

Whereas when Saunders plays games for fun, he plays them for real: and I wouldn't say either that they are lacking in profundity, but never mind that . . .

CARNIVAL!

THE GRAMMAR OF INTIMIDATION

A glance at Church-State Relationships

by EDGAR BROOKES

South Africa, which somewhat ostentatiously claims to be a Christian country, and which certainly welcomes white immigration, places very effective restrictions on the immigration of white ministers of religion. The practice is to give such ministers a temporary residence permit, which requires to be renewed after a relatively short period. The simple refusal to do this has the effect of deportation. The minister has to go. There is no one to whom he may appeal. No more effective method could have been devised for intimidating young clergy, and even for encouraging their Church authorities to warn them to be quiet and inoffensive, for fear of losing them.

No one can say how many able men have been restrained from expressing their views by this ingenious method, but it is possible to gather certain statistics about the non-renewal of permits. Over the years 1965–1972 conservative figures, excluding formal deportations, show that thirty-two ministers of religion failed to secure renewal of their temporary residence permits. Of these twelve were Anglicans, seven Roman Catholics, six Lutherans, four Methodists and three Congregationalists. Needless to say the Dutch Reformed Churches, which do not import their ministers from overseas, are not hit by this particular device. The country of origin of these ministers is usually Britain, but quite a few come from Germany and from the United States of America.

The Anglican Church has suffered particularly severely. Five Bishops (Reeves of Johannesburg, Crowther of Kimberley and Kuruman, Mize, Winter and Wood of Damaraland) have either been deported or had their entrance permits withdrawn. If Bill Burnett had been born



Daryl Nero