

PALEFACES -

SOME COMMENTS ON WHITE ENGLISH

SOUTH AFRICAN POETRY OF THE SEVENTIES

This article has for its subject matter an anthology of English South African poetry of the seventies: 'A World of Their Own' (A.D. Donker, 1976). Its intention, however, is not one of explication except in a negative sense. For the problems posed by the poems in this anthology do not arise out of a difficulty of ideas or linguistic innovation. Not at all. The problem is one of seeking explanations (other than that of an evident lack of genius) for a mediocrity and poetic failure so pervasive that it appears well nigh mystical in its impenetrability.

But this failure has its uses. 'A World of Their Own' is for the most part an extremely 'reasonable', 'humorous' and controlled' body of evidence of the failure of these poets to come to grips with South Africa; and, since poetry is a cultural product, it could also be said to reflect the failure of White English South Africans as a whole to come to grips with their country. The Black poets represented in this anthology also make for a sad story, but lack of space prevents me from dealing with them here. Nevertheless, if only for the above reason, I urge you to read this book. But bearing in mind the following comments. For the seduced are invariably seductive.

The situation of the White English South African Poet (W.E.S.A.P.) is scarcely a happy one. Firstly, he creates a form of communication which has been increasingly displaced by mass media. Secondly, he is restricted by the enforced schizophrenia of apartheid from many areas of experience (cf. the image of the Black presented in these poems: the fact that he is always evoked through those reifications 'houseboy', 'garden-boy' etc., fairly illustrates the consequences of this restriction - the Black is never more than a White label, however ironically manipulated). Thirdly, he lacks a genuine audience for his work - culture is a product of society and not of university faculties.

Moreover, the White English to whom he addresses his work can only make the situation more unhappy. Being generally no more than a dead collection of people it is inevitable that their hunger should be not for poetry, but for those activities - television, most films etc. - which serve to anaesthetize their fear of breaking into a more real existence. And since art only becomes such through a community of people, and since the White English are anything but that, it follows that they can have no art. Their poetry dies because they are not a community who could imbue it with life through adopting it as an important element in their culture. And, finally, the White English poet is further alienated by the characteristic way in which he writes. It is this latter feature which will concern me most in the rest of this article. (But it ought to be mentioned that given impoverished poetry arising out of this impoverished situation, that it is natural that those who want bread and not sack should have to go to European and American poets: this is just as much an attempt to compensate for a local cultural deprivation as it is to evade it.).

It takes little imagination to discover how poets like Mann, Hope, Greig, Gray, Butler, Livingstone and Swift have attempted to cope with this situation. Presumably they know that things are going to hell and that nobody gives too much of a damn about their poetry. They must certainly know that they are poets in chaotic times. Their reaction to this is to keep plugging stoically away at the humane virtues, and to plump for the sanity of social realism. All of which is neatly packaged in carefully crafted verses: a structure.

Despite the necessity of structure and despite its almost obsessive attraction in times of especial insecurity, it is often no more than a disguise for an essential vacuity and an inessential cliché. And thus it is with the above poets. Contentless structures. These are men who are not going to be caught with their pants down...And in this they reveal something of their artistic lineage. It goes back with few umbilical hitches to those small English English poets of the '50's who rejected the Pound/Eliot revolution and settled for Hardy again. The result of this was a gray and humble little poetry, self-conscious, ironic, mature, resolutely avoiding taking a long shot at any significant matter and eschewing any intensity of feeling that might just heighten the blush on their pedestrian versifying. But their ironies, complexities and ambiguities à la Empson, Richards and Leavis merely concealed (or revealed) their defeat; their straitjacket versifying their fear of claiming too much for poetry, of the Drunken Boat. And, consequently: a verse as deep as Ditchwater, suburbia,

Academe.

Most of the W.E.S.A.P.'s have dosed themselves with the above formula for the preservation of civilized decency. And if they do transgress it, it is with big, cold toes well in advance. Irony is the survival kit. In 'Being and Nothingness' Sartre writes: 'In irony a man nihilates what he posits within one and the same act; he leads us to believe in order not to be believed; he affirms to deny and denies to affirm; he creates a positive object but it has no being other than its nothingness' (p.47). And thus Chris Mann in the last two stanzas of 'Concerning Most People', nicely accommodating himself to his defeat:

"Now I find I watch myself,
Perform a pantomime,
In corridors, nodding, courteous,
Grinning gamely all the time.

That's my life if you want it,
Spontaneous as bread,
Staling as the dryness spreads,
Deep within my head" (p. 106)

And that's that. From catalepsy to catalepsy. The poem negates itself through an irony which can only presuppose a perpetuity of grinning and rhyming. And it misses the very essence of irony, that it is a means of taking into account those contradictions whose denial can only mean a foreshortened vision. But it is only a means. But Mann, as do many of the other poets, never gets out of it at all. Hence the first failure.

And the language itself? Guy Butler 'launches' his 'Farmer' (note, among others, the seaside cliché) in this way:

"The sandstone stoep, festooned with bits of biltong
is the bridge of his liner. From there he pilots
three thousand morgen of good Karoo veld
through sizzling doldrums of drought and stormy good seasons;
barks laconic orders at the 'boys'
who, wringing stained hats in yellow hands,
cringe on the blue gravel deck three feet below him." (p.17)

And this, according to Professor Butler, is poetry! Another example, Chris Hope's 'Hell-Bent with Seminarians':

"The Trans-Natal Express glides through the night
As I grope down the swaying corridor
Into the dining-car's uneasy light
To sit with three young men." (p.77) etc., etc., etc.

Further quotation is unnecessary: the anthology is shot through and through with this type of language. And what is its significance? It is the syntax and lexicon of the bourgeois: cool, level-headed, dust-dead, carefully cleaned of those imponderables, myth, symbol - the language of the clerk with a briefcase. It is that everyday,

'ordinary' language which expresses an automatized experience of the world. And if only this feature is borne in mind it will provide at least one good reason why (despite all the local colour: dongas, velds and Kruger Park creatures) this poetry is deracinated. The bourgeois, let alone their syntax, have never come to grips with anything. That is what they are all about.

A number of other general features are worth mention. A surprising number of these poems take the form of a narrative, they tell a story. Why? One among many obvious reasons is the security of realism, of the story. Both for the writer and the reader realism is the most easily comprehended and, hence, least unnerving genre. Along with this type of pandering to complacency, goes an astute emphasis on the phenomenal world: gin, tea-times - all the paraphernalia of White middle-class life. Presumably this concentration on the actual is to root the poems in 'reality', in 'society'. But since this actuality is so much a matter of facades (gin, tea, etc.) the effect of invoking it is actually to uproot the poems: they become contaminated through their hackneyed use of cliché. The phenomenal merely provides the security of cliché as does the narrative structures which contain them.

Moreover, the satirizing of White English South Africa through irony (Greig, Mann and Hope are the main exponents) invariably fails, and not simply through the contradictions inherent in the art form of satire itself. Flaubert understood perfectly that if one is to satirize the bourgeois one has to have an exceedingly refined version of their language. For, if not, the writer undercuts the possibility of effective criticism by being subsumed under that which he is satirizing (and this, incidentally, is the fault of Nadine Gordimer's 'The Conservationist'). And thus when Mann writes in 'To My English-Speaking Countrymen':

"Whether you're plump
And stretch the leather of the Rand Club
Waiting for a chauffeur

To take us from the wine,
Or, skinnier, queue for the bus
That brings us to suburban meat
Respectability rules the day."(p.109) etc.,etc.,etc.

He is not, as André Brink maintains in his back-slapping cant in the introduction to this anthology, flaying 'respectability' through 'respectable verses'; no, this bourgeois language is merely consoling the reader with the knowledge that Mann is a bourgeois like himself.

(In general one would think that separation, division and alienation would be themes literally haunting the work of these poets. But, no.

These aspects are to be found in the language itself. It could be argued that the very mode of their poetry is a form of apartheid.)

Another significant feature is the absence of any poetry on the Afrikaner. It seems that there is an implicit assumption that the English are in the same camp as them. Presumably because of a common guilt and complexion - although the English prefer to have 'conscience' instead of guilt. But a few lines from Mayakovsky may very well prove to be apposite:

"And only
God
above
indeed
knew they
were creatures
of a different breed"

However that may be, however the Afrikaner as such is not named and however much he is a spectral presence behind the mumbo-jumbo of the more political poems, he is never dealt with specifically. And in one poem on the Afrikaner nation, Douglas Livingstone's 'The Heritage' (p.104), there is 'a search for myths' (perhaps because the truth is too obvious) which would explain the rapid transformation of the Afrikaner from trekker to bureaucrat; there is no suggestion that the true source of bemusement might be the fact that he has changed so little despite his changing circumstances. But that's all. Otherwise there is only some vague talk about 'White South Africans'.

But Douglas Livingstone's 'a search for myths' - this is probably the most profound single phrase in this singularly unprofound anthology. It is a commonplace that South Africa is held together by a nexus of peoples dreaming each other. Myths create the practical barriers which in turn create those bridging fantasies which reinforce the myths. But these poets do not delve into the human psyche, the real home of myths. Rather, they simply cough up without comment their manifestations: 'resettlement areas', 'houseboys', etc. Nor do they attempt to delineate the effects of unknowing and the consolation of fantasy that this results in on the human psyche. Neither do they search for myths, nor do they exhibit a searching of the myths. The result, of course, is that the myths continue breeding happily away in the mind.

These poets are committed, though. Engagée. But the force of their commitment is something like this: we would like to inform you that the situation is getting dangerous, portenuous, that while you are at tennis or curing your legs Jackson is honing his panga in the toolshed, that while you are taking tea in your rehabilitated Cape

Cottage some by no means celestial darkest night might home in on you - so beware, the Ides are on the march. It's called being aware. Aware of what? Awareness? One can read the papers for that.

Otherwise their commitment is presumably to Life, the whole polyglot hog of it. And this is all very well. One can, in Zbigniew Herbert's words -

"write of love
and also
once again
in dead earnest
offer to the betrayed world
a rose" ('Five Men') -

precisely because that is also a part of Life. But he ought to have mentioned that only so long as one's offering is a rose is a rose is a rose. For the fact is that, with the exception of Livingstone and Cullinan, these poets can neither write of love nor with love (cf. the 'love' poems of Greig and Gray). And it follows naturally if they are so insipid on this 'eternal', if their commitment is so paltry on this score, they are scarcely going to be convincing when they turn to socio-political themes (cf. Jonker and Breytenbach for a standard of comparison). On linguistic evidence their commitment is effectively to nothing.

It is no incidental fact that these poets should be so concerned with the past in one form or the other. For the past is one of the elements indissolubly linked to any conception of identity. And identity is always a concern of the writer since it provides the framework in terms of which his understanding of things is defined. But the notion of identity causes genuine problems for the W.E.S.A.P. When he finally has to give up asking 'who am I?', and has to settle for 'to whom do I belong, with what do I identify?' - problems.

For, to begin with, he cannot possibly belong to his own kind because they are not a 'kind' at all. The very principle of bourgeois affluence which commandeers the life of the White English prevents a community of English people. Its effect is to make them as independent as possible, particularly from each other. And the proof? Have an English poet address his kind as 'My People' and 'My People' will immediately scurry for their handkerchiefs or wives. The English are 'individuals', not a people. The lost tribe lost because they are not a tribe. And so the residual question: 'where do I come from?' And generally the only honest answer would seem to be 'from my parents, from my grand-parents - it's from them that I derive my identity' (Or, if you don't like them, your lover...I don't know).

And it is this which is the real reason for the veritable

obsession (unobtrusive nevertheless) with the past in the form of relatives: cf. 'Great-Great-Grandmother', 'The Billiard Room', 'The Race', 'Ever Golden', 'Concerning Most People', 'The Wives' Tales', 'My Grandfather's House', 'In My Father's Room' etc. They are the only source of identity. History begins with them and ends with me. Voids over the end of each end (or the Atlantic). Void in me.

And this is genuinely a disturbing phenomenon. But inevitably it is obscured in the above poems. One gets no sense that these poets have ever questioned why they happen to be writing so much about 'Mom' and 'Dad'. And, in all seriousness, unbelonging and the consequent loss of identity it involves is certainly one of the afflictions of the English in South Africa, nor is it without precedent in the twentieth century as a whole (in literature Kafka is the obvious avatar). The English, however, have always evaded this fact through a wadding of dinners and ideas; anything but that radical ultimate, pain itself.

And this is reflected in their poetry too. Neither does it 'wound' nor, to use Berryman's words again, does it 'terrify and comfort'. On the one hand this may simply be an artistic failure; on the other, it would seem to stem from an evasion of experience. For from none of these poets does one get the sense that they have been beggared, like Ingrid Jonker and Breyten Breytenbach, by what they have witnessed. And it is not mere conjecture to say that it is perhaps because of this that no real voice has been wrung from them. Poetry like bread for those trying to live, and not sack for the bourgeois. When Guy Butler writes in one of his usual flat-footed felicities (he is striving to sound humble):

"Come.
The hour is yours,
the invitation open and urgent.
Come." (p.13) etc., etc., etc.

one can rest assured that 'Whoever-Whatever-You-Are' (the title of this poem), 'renewal' 'salvation', 'self-knowledge', etc. is certainly not going to come if this stanza really reflects the intensity of his plea for it. Moreover, one can be certain it won't want to come if it is called 'Whoever-Whatever-You-Are.' And it doesn't. We get a moral instead.