OXFORD POETRY

Interview

John Ashbery

Reviews

Basil Bunting, Green Poetry, Harry Smart

Poems

Mark Ford, Elizabeth Garrett, David Norbrook, Ian Parks, Kate Thomas, Howard Wright

Bonnefoy Translation Competition

VOLUME VI · NUMBER 2 · WINTER/SPRING 1992 · £1.95

OXFORD POETRY

VOLUME VI NO. 2 WINTER/SPRING 1992

Editor: Mark Wormald
Business Manager: Sarah Dence

Contents

Oxford Poetry is published three times a year.
Editorial and Business Address: Magdalen College, Oxford OX1 4AU.

Oxford Poetry Prices
Single issue: UK £1.95 + 20p postage and packing
(Overseas £1.95 + 50p postage and packing by IMO)
Three issues including postage: UK £6.00
(Overseas £7.50 by IMO)
Back numbers are available from the above address at £1.00 per copy.

Contributions, from any source, are welcomed. Manuscripts cannot be returned unless accompanied by an SAE. Submission deadline for next issue March 31st 1992.

Printed by Will Print, Tel: Oxford 249264.

To the ends of the earth,
The last of the fields of blood.

Smart though is closer to Heaney than to Eliot, but even closer than Heaney, one feels, is Jesus, and this is no bad influence. Smart's religious faith is not a felt absence but a dutiful following of a presence incognito — 'I pick my line by the marks the man left / Who had the best path.' ("Morning Walks" VII). He is a poet who is clearly on the side of the angels, in fact in "A Bowl of Jewels" literally on the side of the angels, observing 'men of glass' bearing 'weapons keener and more terrible / Than any sword to judge the hearts of men.' There is much judgement in *Pierrot* and much mercy, but they are not reconciled. The writer and his poems, and the world and the reader, like the four daughters of God, are not yet met.

The Hollow Men

by David Pascoe

Basil Bunting, ed. Richard Caddel: *Uncollected Poems*. Oxford University Press, 64 pp. £7.99.

Henry Reed, ed. Jon Stallworthy: *Collected Poems*. Oxford University Press, 186 pp. £20.00.

According to a recent monograph, Bunting's career was baulked by Eliot, who found the poetry too imitative of Pound. 'One must be so careful these days,' he would say, in the words of Mme. Sosostris. Of course, modelling oneself too closely on the style of a contemporary may be dangerous, particularly if the world caves in, as it did for Bunting when old Ez began to crack up on Rome radio. In one of the Odes printed in *Uncollected Poems*, Bunting warns 'Beware of imitations'; and certainly, the "Overdrafts" featured here (loose versions of poems by Sa'di, Hafiz, Manucheri, and Horace) live dangerously alongside their originals. Bunting noted with uncharacteristic caution, 'It would be gratuitous to assume that a mistranslation is unintentional'. The generic title of these versions attests to the extent of his borrowing, but on no account show him technically impoverished. Throughout his career, he was famously hard-up, 'accustomed to penury, / filth, disgust and fury' but rarely was he at a loss for words. His long life and his variety of circumstance lie inert behind the fine version of Hadrian's *animula vagula blandula*:

Poor soul! Softy, whisperer,
hanger-on, pesterer, sponge!
Where are you off to now?
Pale and stiff and bare-bummed,
It's not much fun in the end.

Bunting works his translation carefully to fit his own feelings as a geriatric; 'hanger-on' no longer has the power to suggest his marginal membership of a literary circle, but only his tenuous grip on life; 'sponge' may imply that he absorbed others' influences. The question was one which Bunting frequently demanded of himself, as his life

involved considerable change of direction. In Paris he was an assistant to Ford Madox Ford; from there he went to Berlin, the USA, resided in the Canaries and became the skipper of a schooner. His Persian landed him a job as *The Times*' correspondent in Tehran.

But to overdraw is also to exaggerate, and Bunting always liked to camp it up, even as a member of the Society of friends. He was gaoled on several occasions: in 1918 as a Quaker C.O., then for various offences committed in Paris and Genoa under the influence. Apparently, he once bit a policeman; perhaps this was why Yeats described him to Lady Gregory as 'one of Ezra's more savage disciples'. But the brutality of his living was necessary since he grew up in an era in which the rhythms of daily life were constantly undermined by threats from below. He had to compensate. A poem written during one of his stays at Rappallo rants against economics, as Pound might have encouraged in discussion at the 'Ezuversity', but the scabrous tone modulates to describe a typical Northumbrian pit tragedy, an underground flood:

> In a squat cavern a
> naked man on his
> knees with a
> pickaxe rips a nugget from the coalface.
>
> Four lads
> led the pownies
> a mile and a half through rising water,
> lampless because the stife
> asphyxiates lamps,
> by old galleries to the North Shaft.
> The water rose.
> The others
> came five months later when it was pumped out
> and were buried by public subscription.
> (The widows were provided for.)

This catches the notoriously dangerous work below ground, as well as the life at the pit-head. The verb 'came' is suitably non-committal as a way of describing the corpses' journey upwards and outwards, so that the condition of the decayed bodies does not need to be laid out; the parentheses, like the public subscription, are designed to contain the hardship of the wives, but cannot spare them from grief. The men die

but they are kept alive by the use of 'stife', a Northern dialect word for a sulphurous vapour, and 'pownies', Northumbrian for pit-pony. Another poem describes the experience of underground immurement:

> Those who lie with Loki's daughter,
> jawbones laid to her stiff cheek,
> hear rocks stir above the goaf;
> but a land swaddled in light? Listen, make out
> lightfall singing on a wall mottled grey
> and the wall growls, tossing light,
> prow in tide, boulder in a foss.
> A man shrivels in many days, eyes thirst for night
> to scour and shammy the sky
> thick with dust and breath.

Bunting's approach involves ripping linguistic nuggets from a coal-face. The crucial word here is 'goaf'. *OED2* does not feel confident enough to venture a definition, but according to Wright's *English Dialect Dictionary, a* nineteenth century glossary of Northumbrian terms identifies it as the space in a cola-face cleared of rubble. Loki's daughter is Hel and the underworld is familiar mythological territory, but what makes this vision so terrifying is the claustrophobia. The first eight lines cannot escape from the labial consonant, insistent, and urgent but unheard after the sound of 'shrivels' fades. The eyes are trapped and look for ways out, working to find a 'lightfall' before night falls finally. The vision is clear in the final detail of a trapped miner desperate to wash himself, waiting to die of asphyxiation.

Bunting asks: "Why should I discipline myself to verse / Blasting everyday occurrences / With a false flavour of longevity?' That blasting is both an anger directed at the explosion of certain myths, as well as the wish to rescue those forgotten underground, resurrecting them through their dying languages. The great strength of *Briggflatts* was its eye for linguistic detail as it moved into the uniquely regional intimacy:

> The fells reek of her hearth's scent,
> her girdle is greased with lard;
> Hunger is stayed on her settle, lust in her bed

This astonishing aubade moves beyond the erotic, to dramatize a domestic scene. The key term is 'girdle' which might be a corset, draw-

ing in the idea of 'stay' to imply strait lacing over a full belly; or anatomically, it may be the woman's erogenous zone, 'greased with lard' to suggest her arousal. But in parts of Northern England 'a girdle' is a circular iron plate placed directly over a fire, on which food is cooked. The equation of sex and sustenance is simplified; different aspects of the same urge, the only difference being where such things take place. Such poetry takes risks, the same risks that Bunting did in his career, for it knows what there is to lose. The shape of his life, reshaped in *Briggflatts*, displays a constant need for the danger of exile, but he concludes:'ridiculous the waste sad time / Stretching before and after.' Living dangerously blinded him to true needs and appetites: that of locale, and of local effects.

It was not much fun in the end for Henry Reed, either. Jon Stallworthy's excellent introduction to the *Collected Poems* shows the poet's last years characterised by failing eyesight, alcoholism, and a staple diet of Complan. Reed's poetry reflects a life played safely in the quest for perfection, and the lessons for survival instilled during a basic training stay and shape his work. It is the subject of his sequence, *Lessons of the War*, whose most famous poem, "The Naming of Parts", indicates 'the safety-catch, which is always released / With an easy flick of the thumb'. His poetry, although full of ease, never dares to take that catch off; indeed, it is happiest when taking off its betters, as one might with the lads in the Naafi. To this extent, Eliot was his R.S.M. In 1941, his famous parody, "Chard Whitlow", captured the nervousness of the later "Quartets". But once he had mastered it, he continued to recall the Possum's voice at just the wrong times: 'We cannot learn to forget as sometimes we learn to remember'. Indeed, for Reed this was the problem. The final line of "The Place and the Person" staunchly affirms that 'These are my images' but the affirmation turns into a plea, for the preceding 166 lines belong unmistakeably to Eliot's wartime sequence. Similarly, the hesitancy of 'Well that, for an answer, is what we might call / Moderately satisfactory' ("Judging Distances") is lifted directly from "Journey of the Magi": 'it was (you may say) satisfactory'; or, then again, it might be a way of re-putting and refuting a line in "East Coker II". Either way, the echo is, in the words of Eliot, 'not very satisfactory'. If Eliot directly hampered Bunting, then the indirections resulting from his influence wrote off Reed's chances as an original writer.

The best poem in this finely edited volume is "The Auction Sale" (broadcast on *The Third Programme*), which shows the young man persona of "The Naming of Parts" living dangerously, bidding for the

sake of an *objet d'art*. But he fails miserably, the final lines showing him in tears, as the picture is carried away by someone else. The interest of the poem lies in the collision between the Italianate description of the artwork, and the flatness of the narration. As in the case of Pound, only Italy allowed him to live, or at least, to see the possibilities of letting his own visual imagination go. His translations of Giacomo Leopardi will stand as his finest work, but even here there is a need to call on others, and Hardy in particular. (For most of his life, Reed planned a biography of the writer). At least one writer was, in turn, seduced by Reed's Italophilia: Day-Lewis, ever impressionable, dedicated his derivative collection *An Italian Visit* (1943) to him.

Reed was all too glumly aware of his pathological cautiousness and wrote in 1940:

> the only words of mine that I know could be believed
> Need a future way of utterance which could only be achieved
>
> If another language were mine, or another idiom or art
> Would form in my mouth and stifle my used up-words at the start,
>
> If I could seize from the future a sentence in which I was free
> From the falsified recollection, the remembered falsity.

Falsification was a danger that Bunting's unbelievably impacted lines never faced, since his language allowed him to live through his memories; whereas Reed's inability to give voice to his recollections, to stabilize them and make them his own, was the result of a temperamental incapacity to be wary of imitations.

Notes on Contributors

Mara Bergman is an editor of children's books. She was featured in Faber's *Hard Lines 3*.

Caroline Blyth is a Senior English Scholar at the Queen's College.

Charlotte Clutterbuck lives in New South Wales.

Eugene Dubnov was born in Russia and now lives in London.

Rebecca Elson was born in Canada and lives in Cambridge. She works as an astronomer.

Mark Ford is a former editor of *Oxford Poetry*. His first collection, *Landlocked*, is due from Chatto and Windus in February.

Elizabeth Garrett's first full-length collection, *The Rule of Three*, was a runner up in the Southern Arts Literature Prize for 1991.

Vona Groarke lives and works in Dublin. Her work has appeared widely.

Michael Henry has just brought out his second book, *Panto Sphinx*, with Enitharmon Press.

Alan Hester's poems have been printed widely. He lives in Reading.

John Hughes was born in Belfast in 1962. *Negotiations With The Chill Wind*, his second collection, has just appeared from Bloodaxe.

Stan Jacoby lives in Red Hook, New York.

Nigel Jarrett, from Newport in Gwent, has had poems in several magazines.

Peter Ben Jones is an information scientist living in Shrewsbury. His work has appeared in Britain and America.

Tim Love is a computer programmer at Cambridge University. His work has been published widely.

David Norbrook's anthology of Renaissance Verse is published by Penguin this year.

David Pascoe teaches English at Oriel College.

Ian Sansom has recently begun research on W.H.Auden. He is a graduate of Cambridge University.

David Santer lives in Devon, where he works part time for the National Trust. His poetry has appeared in various magazines.

Michael Thomas has worked in Canada and now lives in Malvern.

Susan Wicks's first collection, *Singing Underwater*, is due out from Faber next September.

Christiania Whitehead was featured in Bloodaxe's *Young Women Poets*. She is working on medieval English literature.

David Wilson is the London editor of *Poetry Australia*.