

THE DUGOUTS/OUR BLUE ANGEL
for L.Z. & A.V.

The lines of this new poem are everything
like not seeing the ghost in the field, again.

I have an obscure, provocative French
bicycle, and accidents. I have new pink

skin on my knees, again. In the poplars
the spikes of the catkins twirl

like the spokes of a wheel, like the tassels
on the breasts of a girl who

travels this ellipse which in its trajectory
disputes the lines of my new poem

which is nothing. Though, the sum
of its distances from two fixed points

is arousing and familiar like the joy
of seeing the ghost in the field, again.

On Norman Dubie's Poems

Jon Anderson

I read poems, most immediately & personally, on two levels. The first is empathetic; I'm fascinated with what James Agee calls "the mystery and weight and dignity" of other lives. Every poem, no matter how mannered, is a human voice which longs for company. Here, poems gather around sentences which are personal revelation and books around those poems which are most authentic. I like some poems & many books on this basis: that, ultimately, their style & content are imbued with the poet's character. Like every experience that alters me, they are intimate.

But a second sensibility enters here: the ultimate variety & boredom of response to other lives asks that I respect the poet's professionalism. This aesthetic judgment is the more personal one. I want a poem to be a serious entertainment;

I want its language to dignify (or occasionally intensify) a perception; I want a poem to confront its subject & writer as directly as possible (image & metaphor often only suspend this confrontation); I want a poem to reveal a complex emotional intelligence. Putting these two immediate perceptions together, I want a poem to both reveal & transcend the poet's character.

Many of these poems moved me on the first level, that of their authenticity, but Norman's, as a group, moved me most on the second.

First, though, these poems brought me to a rereading of *Alehouse Sonnets*, which was a delight. Most first books are critically described as "promising," though occasionally (Stevens, Ashbery) they may represent the purest, most musical expression of the poet. Norman's is an exception: it has all the mannered intelligence of experience. I was infrequently moved on first reading the *Sonnets*, but they've kept yielding: this time I was taken with their shyness, not coy or withdrawn, but respectful. Only Hazlitt is fully invited; this time I followed him and was, in the best sense, charmed, especially by the high humor of the "Sonnets from the Portsmouth Geese" and the surprising warmth of the last four poems.

Like the *Sonnets*, these poems are steady in voice and have little preciousness of image or diction. These new poems, however, transcend charm. They're poems of confrontation. Each follows a circular pattern, which is inexorable & fatalistic. I'm constantly put in new locations, but almost every surprise seems, in retrospect, inevitable. There's a quality of language which is specific, relentless & personal. The images & rhetoric have no easy softness about them; if they're formal, it's almost without mannerism. I think of Breughel paintings, which are crisp & clean, hard-edge in feeling, and (though Norman's poems only approach this) monumental in draftsmanship. Perhaps I think of Breughel because "Northwind" & "Africa" place their horrors in such a formal landscape.

"The Dugouts" violates many of Norman's strengths, & I like it least. Its associations are neither arbitrary nor inevitable enough, and it's sometimes precious: "and accidents." At best, it could be like a kaleidoscope whose arrangements of colored glass were "arousing and familiar," patterns which would shift, yet remain framed & equal in area, like "the sum of its distance between two fixed points." If I agree to step beyond the poem to its germinal perception, I'm carried; but I'm not led fully to that agreement. It reminds me of some of Stevens ("The Pleasures of Merely Circulating"), but where Stevens can succeed as ellipse, Norman's sensibility is of confrontation, not idea; his form can't purely describe itself. Nevertheless, as a description of poetic process, the poem is freeing & intelligent, and it retains much of its absolutely essential freshness on rereading. Finally, its only failure, for me, is in the lines from "the tassels" to "nothing"; perhaps the magical qualities of process are too specifically defined there, particularly since the title (and her central position in the poem) places emphasis on the girl, the poem's least imaginative figure.

If I'm hardest on this poem, it's because I'm potentially most taken with it. I want it to be more purely Platonic or coy; those lines where the mixture is most plain dispel the magic.

“Northwind Escarpment” was my favorite on first reading, probably because it’s so emotionally direct. Here Norman’s “relentless” attack is most apparent: the repetition of words & phrases within the poem, with their accumulated deadliness, is particularly strong. It’s one of the few poems I can remember that has a true sense of controlled horror to it, and the control is what makes it work, what keeps it far from hysteria. It succeeds, too, because it personalizes its “social” content, the process of human-induced ecological erosion, without sentimentality. The poem is lean, few adjectives, a stark, simple imagery. I believe the experience of it in all its insistence.

More personally, the poem strikes me at another level too, and again it’s as much a product of the skeletal relentlessness of its style as of content. Like Hitchcock’s films, its control leads me inward to a confrontation of character at a place where it’s resolute, empty of every vestige of humanity except a single obsessive will that takes the world as unalterable fact. Maybe that stuffing of “sawdust and wire” toward which the poem circles inward reminds me of the skeleton, which outlasts appetite & intellectual passion. If this reading of the poem is primarily personal, it still evolves from the objective, fatalistic directness of language & strategy: the formal strength of the poem is such that it transcends its immediate content.

“Africa” is finally my favorite of this group; like “Northwind” it’s personal & necessary, and like “The Dugouts” it’s magical. While it retains Norman’s unique, intelligent strategies, it is also so rich & sensuous that it transcends Norman’s usual control. I’m at a loss to talk intellectually about it; I have to guess at many of its aspects. It seems to be a fever poem, taking place primarily in a complex subconscious which is far more engaging than the removed, simplified aspects of the unconscious we usually find in “deep image” poetry. It has its heart of darkness, an Africa within the psyche, that’s beyond my rationalizations. The poem controls my responses to it far beyond my ability to articulate those responses. If this is a culmination of Norman’s control & articulateness, with that newer faith in pure movement insinuated by “The Dugouts,” only further poems of Norman’s will make this landscape familiar enough to be charted.

Norman Dubie’s Response

Ford Maddox Ford said poetry is an ironic sanctuary. Poetry is also a “legal fiction,” which is the assumption that ownership of land continues into the earth beneath and into the air above. These three poems established their inscrutable little friaries all over the north of some bad time in my life. They sprawl and admit villains. I haven’t much to say about them. They have things in common. “The Dugouts” and “Northwind Escarpment” share very distinct formal considerations. “Northwind Escarpment” and “Africa” are poems for my daughter and involve my being separated from her as the consequence of a divorce. I think Jon’s correct, “Africa” is a fever poem; I can only say that I wrote the first line after seeing Fellini’s *La Strada*. The poem is about capturing a breath

and holding it, being increased by it; it's about things physical that are enlarged in repair of an emotion. "Northwind Escarpment" has its own ecology as Jon suggests; it worries in the presence of the extinction of an experience, it loses things when it has so little to lose, it's the taxidermist's melody. Jon's opposition to "The Dugouts/ Our Blue Angel" is fair, but the topless dancer in the poem *was* meant to be the least imaginative figure of the poem. She doesn't want to be looked at, she's the poem's only reality, very couth and premeditated, bumping and ranging in high seriousness.

Now, it's not easy to make some statement about my poetry. I'm pleased that the *Alehouse Sonnets* begin to yield for Jon. I've forgotten them. My second book, *The Illustrations*, is radically unlike the *Alehouse Sonnets*. I now want a poem that is large, 50 lines or better, I want the poem to cross its own intentions twice in each stanza and I want the stanzas to be irregular. I care very deeply about making good sentences; the subject and predicate raised and clear. I want objects and the dramatic monologue as a chosen profession. I adore obscurity if it says, "Listen. This is none of your business." I adore clarity. Right now I want to write some love poems. When I stopped writing the *Alehouse Sonnets* I stopped writing. When I stopping writing *The Illustrations* I continued to write. I like my second book and it's a good parent or guardian.