

Strollers / John Cassidy

The two of them walk under the frayed flowers
Of park almond trees while their child and dog
Trot and wander along the verges.

He watches a point six yards ahead on the ground
With a deliberate fixity as if his eyes
Were headlamps. He does not speak.

Her neck stretches and twists and never
Rests. She is questioning, jabbing at him,
Moving like a vigilant long-billed snipe.

Her voice flings splinters of ice across a smooth
Evening. The sun hurries to get down
Behind long shadows. The air stirs, cooler.

John Drew on John Cassidy

There could be no more appropriate occasion than a symposium to resurrect a Romantic notion of poetry at least as old as Plato, and older—as old as Orpheus and the Orient.

When Plutarch argues a poem will have power to move us if it is consonant with the doctrines of Plato and Pythagoras, I take it he is especially referring to the doctrine pithily summarized by Archytas: “He who knows universals properly will also have a clear perception of the nature of particulars.” Put that way, visionary experience sounds remarkably dull; Plutarch himself suggests what it’s all about much more vividly when he has Timarchus, a Hellenistic Lopsang Rampa, enter the Cave of Trophonius, his soul ascend through the parted sutures of his skull and see in the heavens the astral islands of the blest.

In this particular experience, everything, or at least a very great deal, has been made known to Timarchus. Likewise, a poem finds its true self when, ostensibly about some one thing, it leaves the reader with the impression that everything, or much, has been made known through it. For a brief moment the decent human voice, however local the subject of its discourse, speaks not only with the tongue of men but of angels and has love—and is, in a word, divine.

At its most intense that moment cannot be apprehended even in the writing of the poem. A poet can only hold out in prospect the hope that a word, an image, an idea will prove to be the proper incantation, the mantra capable of evoking the immanent deity. Wainwright’s fine poem “Thomas

Müntzer” offers an example close at hand where that visionary power exists, successfully evoked, it appears, by the choice of a subject who was himself a visionary.

The choice of subject again plays a part in the success of John Cassidy’s poem “The Dancing Man.” In Hellenistic times (which I don’t seem to be able to get away from!) it was said that a sophist could not more eloquently disclose the philosophy of Pythagoras than did the dancer Memphis in the gestures of his mime. Cassidy’s itinerant dancer, though a more homely (U.S. homey) figure, displays a similar power in his ability to draw the whole world together around him and set everybody dancing in such a way that the daemonic powers within, involuntarily revealed for the first time, can never again lie hidden.

The attraction of such a figure for the poet is obvious. Cassidy’s poem ends:

. . . nothing is ever the same
After the visit of a Dancing Man.
Meet him if you can.

The poet, of course, cannot expect his reader to meet the Dancing Man in his poetry if he has not himself first met him in the writing of it. All too often any poet finds himself saddled instead with those other itinerants referred to in “The Dancing Man”—the pedlar and the knife-grinder.

The pedlar is not to be met with anywhere in Cassidy’s poetry; I think perhaps the knife-grinder is. Consider “Strollers.” The knife is sharp in this poem, the precision surgical. I like particularly the image of the man’s eyes fixed like headlamps to the ground six yards ahead. The words are exact, the poem cleanly executed. Yet I do believe that, in one of those decisive moments Cartier-Bresson talks about, a photographer could equally well capture the emotional state of the strollers. The same might be said of several of Cassidy’s nicely-detailed portraits of city life; perhaps even of that splendid factory of his which heads north into the night like a ship.

If I seem to be complaining, what am I complaining about? This: rightly or wrongly, I don’t believe poetry, according to my antiquated Romantic definition of it, should be subject to competition from photography, being far less tied to the visual image, to what’s out there. So much more as a matter of course can we dissolve the fixities of waking experience into the more substantial rearrangements of dream and contemplative trance. More easily, too, can our medium accommodate itself to that powerful vision which, should it come, is akin to the state of dreamless sleep:

I saw Eternity the other night
Like a great Ring of pure and endless Light.

John Cassidy's "Hill Mist" is informed with this power. I cannot conceive of a good photo-essay doing the same sort of thing. Mist, like the Dancing Man, is one of those images which, because the perception of reality is intrinsic to it, is especially suited to the evocation of the hidden powers. I hate to paraphrase this poem and urge those who have not done so to read it in *Stand*, Vol. 15, No. 4.

A man is caught out on a hillside when a mist suddenly descends:

The sheep cries were echoless,
unclear . . .

He keeps his head, careful not to trust to nature but to man:

. . . Never
follow a river, follow
a wall . . .

Ultimately the man finds a wall:

It was as it always is.

He comes down off the hillside into the valley, out of the mist into the sunlight

. . . like
an awakening . . .

The man's heart contains both river and wall; up on the hillside he has resisted the call of the river, he has kept his head and now, in speaking to the men down below, he can summarize his experience in a single laconic word.

Such a poem touches on a very great part of our lives, that is, assuming struggle and fear and joy to be a constant part of them. It is interesting that the narrator of "Hill Mist" puts his trust in the human to find a way out. Possibly Cassidy himself has the same level view about how a poem is written; be that as it may, it is in a poem where the human being has had to struggle with elemental forces up on the hillside that Cassidy has produced a work where the quiet human voice assumes a prophetic authority and the mist, far from obscuring vision, is made an agent of it.

I will belabour this reading of Cassidy just long enough to say that a selection of his poetry is available in *Faber Poetry Introduction 3*. The selection has much the range I have suggested above. "Corporal Karuna," the story of the smartest man in an East African regiment absconding (a story almost identical to one I know of in East Kent), reveals the sense of humour evident also in "Factory at Nightfall." In a poem called "Pennines,"

about a man who goes cross-country over the hills rather than follow the circumambulations of the valleys, in "Bulb Field," about a field set so close to the edge of a cliff that a man working there can suddenly be frightened, a foot away, by space, and in "Quince," which serves to illustrate the old poetic truth that ripeness is all, the reader is made to sense from the outset that he must read for something more than description. Very early on it is clear the poems are rising.

As such, these poems stand (in the canon!) between "Scorpion" and "An Attitude of Mind." In "Scorpion" two soldiers, making themselves feel at home in a tent in the jungle, are interrupted by a scorpion. They kill it and as they flick it outside they see

. . . its territory, briefly,
The hard wide sand and the unfamiliar stars.

In this poem the reader needs to get to the final line, fine as that is, before the whole is put into perspective, its meaning made explicit. Early on the lines are simply descriptive and therefore low-key. In "An Attitude of Mind," on the other hand, a poem about a boy who, in the Black Hole of a barn, massacres parent starlings and then leaves their fledglings to starve, the lines are charged from the very first. Like "Hill Mist," the poem is sustained throughout, its power implicit from beginning to end. Why this should be is difficult to pinpoint; were I to quote an early line from "An Attitude of Mind" it would appear no less descriptive than one from "Scorpion." It is simply that if a poem is going to be massive in its import each line, in the context of the whole, knows it and somehow indicates it right from the start.

I don't wish to be mistaken. I enjoy "Scorpion"—and "Corporal Karuna." But they do not open up my very existence as do "An Attitude of Mind" and "Hill Mist." If poetry is to have the power to affect all that is shoddy and corrupt and insidious in life, every poem must be capable of creating that revolution in the heart without which, as Shelley has said, the revolution in the streets will prove abortive. Many poets write as well as John Cassidy at his worst. At his worst, he writes well; but at his best, we march.

John Cassidy Replies

My poems often begin (I suppose this to be a common experience) with an attempt to register an observation or experience which seems worth preserving for its own sake. Description entails examination, and eventually the significance (for me) which must have been implicit is uncovered. Resonances released by single words, images and rhythms begin to harmon-

ise, and the relationship of the parts is developed in the shaping of the whole. But the poem remains a process of discovery.

It may be that the description does not always take off, or takes off too late. John Drew finds this so of "Intruder," saved, he thinks, by its last line. If pushed to defend the poem, I might allude to a sense of enclosure, protective and cosy, given by the tent walls and the sociability, which exists to be disturbed into awareness of the outside, hostile, environment. In this and other poems about unnerving encounters, it is the feeling of settled, social ordinariness that, I think, must first establish itself before the shock of disruption can be felt.

I agree that poetry should work on a wider spectrum than photography—though to have one's work compared to Cartier-Bresson's is by no means discouraging. Eliot's lonely cab-horse that steams and stamps would make an eloquent photograph, but his fog that curled once about the house and fell asleep is so much more. This probably illustrates the kind of difference to which Drew is drawing attention. I wonder a little in passing, though, whether a photograph would quite convey the chilling of a summer evening and the slight sense of menace in an overheard quarrel, or make an equation of these two things.

I think it was Tom Stoppard who said that for him the satisfaction in writing plays was that he could argue with himself. Poetry also, in its different way, is a means of saying two (or more) things at once. I find such tensions stimulating—the usefulness of rational behaviour and tradition set against the instinctive pull of freedom in "Hill Mist," the conflict between the two "attitudes of mind" in the poem about killing starlings. Drew is generous to these two poems, as he is to "The Dancing Man," another poem about intrusion.

I am inclined to accept his suggestion that my approach to the writing of poetry is level-headed, limiting though that is; but I am not sure that my poems would be written if there were no conflict between level-headedness and disturbance. Even in "Factory at Nightfall" there is competition between the attractions of cooperative endeavour and of lonely individualism.

I should be pleased if the particularity in the better poems could occasionally produce the impression "that much has been made known through it." I am grateful to John Drew for suggesting that it does.

Poem for a Cambridge Platonist / John Drew

King's, Trinity, the Backs and meadows behind the house;
Autumn, including the mushrooms, crab-apples and blackberries
Keats forgot to mention; Intellect at a premium:
Jude's dream made manifest. But literature is conceptual: