IN DEFENCE OF POESIE

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Perhaps poetry has always been in need of defence; certainly Shelley's *Defence of Poetry* and Sir Phillip Sidney's *Defence of Poesie* would both suggest this. And one suspects that perhaps even Homer had to justify his obsessions to his contemporaries. The post-romantic misconception of poetry is of an effete and previous pastime for pallid and phthisic youths, a view which is hardly compatible with the biographies of many of its practitioners. Sidney dying in battle at Zutphen, the revolutionary Milton working for Cromwell, Byron dying at Missolonghi during his fight for an independent Greece, Wilfred Owen fighting and dying in the First World War, and Auden and MacNeice joining the Spanish Civil War. The modern charges against poetry are that it is obscure, oblique, contracted and irrelevant. The only necessary refutation of these indictments is that they constitute poetry's essence, its beauty and its importance. To appreciate the power and the depth of poetry one need only read the brilliant dissection by William Empson, at the beginning of his *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, of the tightly packed layers of meaning in Shakespeare's sonnet line, "Bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang."

Poetry is packaged mainly in anthologies. Books of all sizes, whose purpose is to provide a well-balanced diet, often in one specialist gourmet taste, partly pre-digested and arranged into convenient bite-sized chunks for easy adsorption and digestion. But if one sometimes objects to the form, the nutritive value is usually not in doubt. Probably the first real book of poetry which many of us have owned is the *Oxford Book of English Verse* in the venerable edition of 'Q', Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, of course. This catholic compendium, from the early 13th century 'Sumer is icumen in' through to the poems of the First War, can hardly fail to satisfy almost everyone at some point. But it is nevertheless a sufficiently bulky volume to keep it confined primarily to the library shelf or the bedside table. By contrast the five volumes of *English Verse* published by the Oxford University Press, in their now sadly defunct hardback *World's Classics* series, are eminently portable, (as also is their *Book of Narrative Verse*). Volume II (*Campion to the Ballads*) accompanied me on an Italian ski-ing holiday, where it slipped readily into a pocket of a ski-jacket, and provided the ideal complement and companion for long solitary up-hill rides in chair-lift or gondola, through idyllically beautiful Alpine scenery, in bright sunshine and crisp air, and where solitude allowed the luxury of declaiming aloud when one so wished. It was thus that I discovered the almost gnomic simplicity of a tiny poem by Sir Henry Wotton, which anticipated by some four centuries the finding of Murray Parkes of an increased mortality amongst the recently bereaved, *Upon the death of Sir Albert Morton's Wife*

He first deceased; she for a little tried
To live without him: liked it not, and died.

Poetry not only comes in all shapes and sizes, but also in all lengths. The long poems in English can provide an unparalleled literary experience, whereby one sees deep into the mind of man. Once more, travelling provides the ideal opportunity. I still relish the memory of the two and a half days spent travelling by train from Palermo to London, during which I devoured Wordsworth's *The Prelude* (in its much superior 1805 edition). This poem provides perhaps the most sustained piece of autobiographical self-analysis prior to the Freudian revolution. Ironically the poem was published only at the end of Wordsworth's life since he conceived it as only, literally, a prelude to a far more extensive, and never completed, work.

Indubitably the greatest poem in the English Language is Milton's *Paradise Lost*, but to a modern poetic layman in a secular age when Christian hagiography and classical mythology are little known, it is perhaps also the most difficult poem. Fortunately modern scholarship has provided an edition which can rectify the reader's deficits in Alastair Fowler's edition for the *Longman Annotated English Poets*. Here the 10,565 lines of the poem are spread out in excellent typography across 606 pages — about 17 lines per page. The rest of each page is packed with detailed notes which allow full appreciation of the breadth and depth of the work. A poem like *Paradise Lost*, and indeed a poet like Milton, cannot be appreciated in isolation by the study of a single work. One of the most important, scholarly and readable biographies of Milton is that of the Marxist historian, Christopher Hill, whose *Milton and the English Revolution* provides the perfect antidote to many traditional misconceptions of the role of the poet, whilst avoiding many of the puerile generalisations of which "The Left" is easily capable. Milton is shown to be both more of a radical, and also more of a puritan than is generally recognised; the antithesis is clearly shown in his libertarian tract on divorce where he could write that "to grind in the mill of an undelighted and servile copulation must be the only forced work of a Christian marriage".

The less leisurely pace of twentieth century life has produced few really long poems. Two of the best, by a poet (and former Lecturer at Bedford College) who seems to be continually under-rated, are Louis MacNeice's *Autumn Journal* and *Autumn Sequel*, whose writing spans the Second World War, and reflects the profound change in world view between 1938 and 1953, both in one man and in a whole society. Portions of the poems are reprinted in anthologies, but reading the entire works justifies sufficiently the outlay on the *Collected Poems*.

As an introduction to more recent poetry, D. J. Enright's *Oxford Book of Contemporary Verse, 1945-1980* is clearly a key volume. Enright is also the author of one of the wittiest and sophisticated recent volumes of poems, *A Faust Book*, which is a re-telling of the Faust legend with multiple allusions to Goethe and Marlowe, and sideways swipes at many of our current obsessions, including the much-discussed structuralism.

My most exciting recent acquisition is the *Oxford Book of English Verse in Translation*, a sensitively chosen birthday present which has opened up vast new vistas. In this book all the translations are of the great poets of other languages by the great poets of the English language. The task of translation is fraught with difficulty — Shelley likened it to putting a violet into a crucible and hoping to distill a thing of equal beauty — a task that has been surveyed with characteristic thoroughness, and equally characteristic heaviness and opacity of prose, by the multilingual George Steiner in his *After Babel*. The Oxford Anthology, by means of multiple cross-referencing between different versions of the same poem (for instance Chapman, Dryden, Pope and Tennyson's versions of a portion of the *Iliad*) allows one to appreciate the problems and the genius of the solutions. The book also reveals neglected areas of English verse. The translations of Ovid by Christopher Marlowe, and of Theocritus' account of Daphnis and Chloris by Dryden reveal an explicit eroticism which is totally unsuspected in such a dry-looking volume. The poems from the American Indian languages of Navajo, Chippewa and Pawnee reveal some of the briefest of fragments which have finely wrought elegance, as does the poetry of the orient — (in Frances Pensmore's translation) of a Japanese "haiku":

"Whenever I pause —
The Noise
Of the village."

Poetry need not only be exhilarating and beautiful, it can also be hateful. The discovery in a second-hand book shop of *The Sonnets of Lord Alfred Douglas* (the associate of Oscar Wilde) revealed that beneath the veneer of high culture and beautiful artistic form, can lurk overt anti-semitism (in the sonnet sequence *In Excelsis*, Written in

Wormwood Scrubs Prison, 1924') and explicit Fascism (in *The Old Soldier* of 1941 and 1942).

Poetry may also be witty, particularly when it is parodying other poets. T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, probably the single greatest twentieth century poem, used extensive quotation, allusion and parody of earlier poets. In passing, I cannot fail to mention the pleasure to be gained from a close study of Valerie Eliot's relatively recent publication of a facsimile and transcription of the manuscript of this poem. For thus may one appreciate the tremendous influence of Ezra Pound in trimming and editing the poem, tempering Eliot's excesses, and shaping the final work, at a fraction of its original length. Recently a parody of the opening lines of the poem *The Burial of the Dead* appeared anonymously on a philosophy department noticeboard in Bedford College. Within a day or two it had been removed, the barbs presumably having produced an irritation in the overly sensitive skin of a fellow member of staff. Fortunately I had taken a copy, and the piece seems worth repeating in full, with grateful thanks to the anonymous academic graffitist, whosoever it may be.

The Burial of the Living

These are the cruellest months, breeding
Essays out of dead lands, mixing
Memory and desire, quoting
Dull books with little aim.
Ignorance's huge hand covering
Earth in footnotes, feeding
the small minds of idle lives.
Exams' results will surprise us coming over the
Regentzparkesee
With a shower of pain; we'll faint in the colonnade
While others go with public funds
Smoking dope in the park.
Bin gar keine Frau, Stamm' aus Chelsea (Sieg Heil).
And when we were undergraduates
My tutor, he took me to bed,
And I was frightened. He said
"Mmm . . . mmm, hold on tight, my child . . . ". And
down he went.
In college, there you enjoy real life;
We drink most of the night, and
Go to parties and lectures the rest of the time. □