

creation seems to me Colin in *Absent Friends*: a character who is so well-meaning in his sickly unctuous sentimentality that he carries laughter to the borderline of disgust (two characters in the play get a fit of hysteria just by listening to his cant). And this is obviously far beyond the traditional boundaries of farce.

In fact it would be enough to modify the angle of vision—or perhaps to alter the style of production and acting—in order to obtain plays which would emerge as dolorous examples of human failure, though enlivened by a rich array of humorous remarks. Almost every character in Ayckbourn's plays is a victim of circumstances, or of his own ineptitude, and he or she always deserves a moment of self-revelation with gentle unobtrusive pathos. Here is Norman talking to bitchy Sarah: "Are you happy then?" Sarah: "Yes—mostly. Occasionally. Now and then. I don't know. I don't have time to think about it" (*Living Together*, I, 1). Her kind down-trodden husband, Reg: "But when I sit here in this house and listen to the quiet. You know, I wonder why I left. I had my own room here, you know. All my books, my own desk, a shelf for my hobbies. . . . I'd make these balsa wood aeroplanes. Dozens of them. Very satisfying. Mind you, they never flew. Soon as I launched them—crack. . . . But it didn't really matter. It was a hell of a bore winding them up" (*Table Manners*, I, 1). Reg's

sister, Annie: "[We talk] about super exciting things like does the kitchen ceiling need another coat, and distemper . . . and foot and mouth. Then I pot Mother and retire to bed—alone—itching" (*Table Manners*, I, 1). Marion complaining about her past beauty: "How could anything be so cruel? How could anything be so unutterably cruel?" (*Absurd Person Singular*, Act III). And the examples could be multiplied.

ALL THIS IS QUITE at variance with the remarks by a well-known critic who once described Ayckbourn in a *Dictionary of Contemporary Dramatists* as a pure farceur: "His sole aim is to make us laugh. His plays contain no message, offer no profound vision of the universe, tell us nothing about how to live our lives." Leaving aside the profound vision, my opinion happens to be exactly the opposite. In *Mother Figure*, the first sketch of *Confusions*, a woman has lived for so long alone with her children that she even talks to her neighbours as if they were infants. Her conversation is full of choccy bics, smack the botty, toothypegs, lovely choccy and Mr Poddle. In the adult context I found each word from this baby language terrifying. For reasons which I could not quite fathom the audience was rolling with laughter.

Selective Silence

New Poetry—By JAMES FENTON

"SEBASTIAN BARKER is the son of George Barker", says the blurb of *On the Rocks*:¹ "his mother is Elizabeth Smart, author of *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept*. It is with this formidable parentage that he has had to wrestle to extract his own poetry." A slightly apologetic note here, don't you think? And perhaps not out of place, when one sees what emerges from the struggle. Mr Barker offers us a modern *Modern Love*. It is really quite gripping. The story is believable, the mood clear. One can see exactly what the first person of the sonnets is on about:

Fuck² the gossip. F—the backstabbing. F—the Contumelious, pusillanimous, parasitic, spitting, confidante.

¹ *On the Rocks*. By SEBASTIAN BARKER. Martin Brian & O'Keeffe, £2.00.

² Hereafter in this poem we print the word (repeated 16 times) with a dash, in order to relieve the monotony.—ED. NOTE.

F—the broken windows, the dripping gutters. F—the Bills, the future, the holes in my socks, the elephant Crashing around in my memory. F—the odour Of forgiveness, the nice little boy philosophy. And f—that nice little boy you picked up in the bar Down by the river. F—him. F—him. And f—the private eye On our public adoration. F—the lot of them. And f—those friends, the ones who helped to screw us With soft chat to the very joists of heaven. F—alcohol. F—cigarettes. And f—the smell of hashish. F—everything in fact. In fact, f— Me, you cunt. Yes me. If you're in luck.

What Mr Barker lacks, if I may venture a little mild criticism, is the subtlety of the man at the country house party, who woke to a stinking hangover and the terrible recollection that he had bet a fellow guest that he would say "arseholes" three times to his hostess at breakfast. The opportunity arose as he was helping himself from the hotplate. "Ah, soles!" he exclaimed. "They

are soles, aren't they? Are soles in season?" True poetry requires a similar resourcefulness—a creative indirectness of approach. This quality appears to have eluded Mr Barker, and when he writes, in sonnet XXVI, "Who in hell cares I scribble out my heart in verse?/ Not the lousiest motherfucker who stomps his meat in the kitchen", one is horribly tempted to agree.

Who in hell cares about so much contemporary poetry? The authors, certainly, and there seems to be no shortage of publishers. What one wonders is: who are the readers? Who, for instance, will be rushing out to buy the latest enormous Arts Council anthology, *New Poetry 3*, edited by Alan Brownjohn and Maureen Duffy?³ Austerely but unattractively produced, the whole book exudes worthiness from every pore. These poems are not usually very bad, but nor are there any surprises. It is precisely the sort of anthology one would expect from an arts council: safe.

And it reminds one how very institutionalised the writing of poetry has become. Each age of course has had its prevalent forms, but I should say that it is about time that we gave our ones a little rest. By prevalent forms, I mean the sort of short lyric, well made and ready for the slim volume, in which this anthology abounds. One gets the feeling one has read them all before—and one has. There is the I-once-had-a-very-interesting-relative-who-is-now-dead poem, the I-have-just-had-a-significant-experience-in-the-kitchen poem, the I-and-thou poem. This is how the last kind works:

*In the first line I say something about you.
By the second line it is time to turn to me.
And now it would be appropriate to give some
background detail—
Such as a few remarks about the weather.*

*Pausing to take a new stanza for emphasis
I introduce a couple of general thoughts about us
Before winding the whole thing up with
A significant image.*

This kind of poem was pioneered by *the Review*, and it is time for a moratorium. In a way the form is deliberately hermetic—we have very little opportunity of penetrating either the I or the Thou, and are asked to take too much on trust. Believe me, the poem says, this is something important. Then, before we have had time to make up our minds, the thing is over.

The slim volume has often been attacked in the

past, but not, I think, for the best reason, which is that it lures the poet into a habit of production (one slim vol. every four years or so counts as good progress), an evenness of tone and uniformity of approach. Reliability is too much prized—you can count on old Bloggs to go on churning it out. But of course this notion—that regular movement of the poetic bowels is healthy—is extremely recent, and not beyond question. Think of the poets of the 18th century. The reputation of many rests on a mere handful of works; but we do not find this odd or regrettable, and nor did their contemporaries. Why should we then create such a fuss about the "poetic silence" of this or that poet of today? A man may be capable of writing no more than two good poems. Let him then keep quiet. *Aut tace aut loquere meliora silentio.*

HAPPY IS THE POET who has something else to do, something else which relieves him of this futile pressure to produce. Happy, for instance, Kingsley Amis, who after writing no poems for a couple of years suddenly comes up with the 200-liner, "A Reunion", printed in the P.E.N. anthology, *New Poems 1977-78*.⁴ It takes a great deal of invisible skill with a fairly strict form to reproduce a conversational tone so specific—the invisible skill we admire in Amis's stable-mate Larkin. At the conclusion of this description of a reunion of old soldiers, Amis speaks of the "small kinds and degrees of love" that remain the basis of such gatherings:

*So, when one of us had his leave stopped,
Was awarded a dose of the clap
Or an extra guard, or was dropped
Up to his ears in the crap,
Or felt bloody browned off,
He never got left on his own;
The others had muscle enough
To see that he soldiered on.*

*Disbandment has come to us
As it comes to all who grow old;
Demobilised now, we face
What we face when we first enrolled.
Stand still in the middle rank!
See you show them a touch of pride—
Left-right, left-right, bags of swank—
On the one-man pass-out parade.*

Happy, then, the sad Mr Amis. Happy too the editor of the P.E.N. anthology, Gavin Ewart. Here is a man who achieved a precocious fame in the '30s, and then went "silent." For the last decade or so he has been immensely productive in a way which very much goes against the contemporary grain. Here he is with his anthology, a pamphlet (*The First Eleven*)⁵, and a collection (*Or Where a Young Penguin Lies*

³ *New Poetry 3*. Edited by ALAN BROWNJOHN and MAUREEN DUFFY. Arts Council of Great Britain (distributed by Carcanet Press), £4.00, paper £2.25.

⁴ *New Poems 1977-78*. Edited by GAVIN EWART. Hutchinson, £4.95.

⁵ *The First Eleven*. By GAVIN EWART. Poet and Printer (30 Grimsdyke Road, Hatch End, Middlesex), 60p.

*Screaming*⁶). The anthology is good—far more varied and unusual than the Arts Council effort. The pamphlet is really nicely produced. The collection is excellent.

A particularly attractive quality of Mr Ewart is his inventiveness, his genuine experimentalism. Much of the time he is out to amuse—with crack-pot inventions like the “Semantic Limerick According to Doctor Johnson’s Dictionary (Edition of 1765)”:

There existed a person, not a woman or a boy, being in the first part of life, not old, of St. John's, who wished to — the large water-fowl, that have a long and very straight neck, and are very white, excepting when they are young (their legs and feet being black, as are their bills, which are like that of a goafe, but something rounder, and a little hooked at the lower ends, the two fides below their eyes being black and fhining like ebony).

Etcetera. At other times he can write at the opposite extreme, as in “The Gentle Sex”, a cold and convincing exploration of the brutality of Ulster life. There are faults—in almost every poem there are faults, such as rich rhymes or whole lines which seem to have been put in for the sake of the form—but I have to say that I like Mr Ewart’s faults as much as his virtues. There is no sense that the stuff is being churned out. Rather, there is a hyperactive talent that *must write*. An enviable gift.

Kit Wright’s first collection, *The Bear Looked Over the Mountain*,⁷ well produced by the Salamander imprint, has a certain similarity to Mr Ewart’s. Mr Wright has a good line in musical rhythm and unusual form. He is very much the entertainer—one can see that these poems would go down well at readings, some of them perhaps better at readings than on the cold page, where their oddness is after a while unsatisfactory. There are lyrics, too, of a more conventional kind:

*What were you going to say
On the path above the sea
When we stared down at the bay
And suddenly
The film of the bright day
Snapped at the end of a reel,
Wind turned on its heel
And water ran away?*

A poem in a single sentence, something of an I-Thou poem, relying entirely on the happy image of the film at the end of the reel. It is further evidence of the continuing influence of Hardy, the modern English poet’s favourite poet (in the P.E.N. anthology Douglas Dunn has a piece of pure Hardy).

⁶ Or *Where A Young Penguin Lies Screaming*. By GAVIN EWART. Gollancz, £3.20.

⁷ *The Bear Looked Over the Mountain*. By KIT WRIGHT. Salamander Press, £3.95, paper £2.25.

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AS FOR THE MODERN IRISH POET, the reason that there are so many of them, and that they are all rather good, is that they are all dying to be better than Seamus Heaney. Ireland is a rather small place. Mr Heaney is a rather large man, but not so large that the others feel there is nothing left for them to do. On the contrary, they are all yearning to push him off his perch. Ireland is absolutely crammed full with poetic subjects—it has a real countryside still, it has a real war, it has its history and its poetic tradition. So—why not get stuck in?

And here comes Frank Ormsby with a Poetry Book Society choice, *A Store of Candles*.⁸ Country life:

*Suddenly, above the hedge, a head
Moving at speed. It dips
And rises, further up the lane becomes
A flying bust, and at the next gap
Takes final form:
The District Nurse on a bicycle.*

The gradual revelation here is rather like the gradual revelation of Mr Ormsby's gifts throughout this book—through glimpses, ironic and beautiful. Mr Ormsby's house:

*Look in the dark alcove under the stairs:
A paintbrush steeped in turpentine, its hairs
softening for use; rat-poison in a jar;
bent spoons for prising lids; a spare fire-bar;
the shaft of a broom; a tyre; assorted nails;
a store of candles for when the light fails.*

Then there is Mr Ormsby's childhood, his discovery of sex through reading Havelock Ellis, his mother's collection of ornaments in her council house, his own difficult relationship with his mother:

*Discarded woman, shame is turning me
To wish you mornings, and a folding night
Whose dreams are gentle, sight enough to see
This late guest bowed with winter offerings
Who turns his face into your going light.*

We are introduced to Mr Ormsby's bachelor uncle, in a perfect little I-once-had-an-interesting-relative poem, "An Uncle Remembered." The uncle comes to the Ormsby wedding, gets drunk, is agreeable, and leaves by train, asking that the first boy be named after him. The uncle is not exactly killed off for our benefit, but the manner of his departure, and the title of the poem, does suggest that this is the last we will see of him. Later we move house with Mr Ormsby, and observe his lack of privacy the first time he makes love in the new establishment. By the end of the book, we are familiar with most of the Ormsby

⁸ *A Store of Candles*. By FRANK ORMSBY. Oxford University Press, £1.95.

family, excepting, oddly, young Mrs Ormsby; we close it with a pleasant sense of having read the perfect slim volume. Watch out, Mr Heaney.

ANNE STEVENSON KICKS OFF in *Enough of Green*⁹ with "To be a Poet." It seems to me, as it seemed to Eliot, that there is something inherently wrong with the ambition to be a poet, as opposed to the ambition to write poems. Certainly there is something wrong with this advice:

*You must always be alone.
But don't beg a soup-scrap of charity
or bird-crumbs of tolerance.
Shift for yourself.
As furniture heaves off your life
And you'll love your deliverance.*

There follows a stanza advising against giving in to loneliness, restlessness, memory and remorse. Then:

*Refuse them. Stay faithful to Silence, just
Silence, sliding between that breath
and now this breath, severing the tick*

⁹ *Enough of Green*. By ANNE STEVENSON. Oxford University Press, £2.25.

¹⁰ *City Hedges*. By ADRIAN HENRI. Jonathan Cape, £1.25.

*from the tock on the alarm clock,
measuring the absence of else.
And the presence, the privilege.*

This is muddled bosh. Whenever people talk of silence in art one knows they are about to take leave of their better judgment. And what is the absence of else? what the presence? what the privilege? What indeed? Anne Stevenson's poems are generally much clearer than this, but they are often too slack—little more than notes for a poem:

*Ebb day, full tide.
Yellowhammers whistling in fullblown bushes.
Scent of wet cypresses, lavender, roses.
Dying storm, veiled like a bride.*

And sometimes, as in

*Reach Mallaig and discover
Heaven is real*

she sounds as if she is writing for the Highlands and Islands Development Board.

Still, better this than Adrian Henri's *City Hedges*¹⁰ with its poem in memory of Ulrike Meinhof, a work for which the flabby Henri should be awarded the Order of the Red Hot Knitting Needle Shoved up the Nostril:

*Urban Guerilla
you burst into me*

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*machinegunned
the old poems
stationed at the door
for just a contingency
made off
with my heart
in a getaway car*

blah blah blah. Ending:

*as the masked militiamen
burst*

*into the room
wonder
if I'll miss you.*

The convenient metaphor of the old poems, rather than people, at the door is symptomatic of Mr Henri's denatured, facile, dishonest political outlook. Avoid this volume like the plague.

Laurel—or Brussels Sprouts?

On E. B. White—By D. J. ENRIGHT

THERE ARE TIMES when one finds oneself engaged in championing an author, and maybe finding it hard to do effectively, even while one is aware of the comical gratuitousness of the exercise. This, alas, looks like being one of those times.

Dorothy Lobrano Guth remarks in her introduction to E. B. White's collected letters¹—which constitute a virtual autobiography—that, like White's essays, stories, novels and poems, they are "good company." This is the handshake of death at a time when the aim of writing is commonly reckoned to be the giving of (increasingly tedious) offence. "Good company"! Who on earth wants to keep that? Moreover, White is most widely known for his essays. *Essays!* As White says in the foreword to a new self-selected volume of essays,² compared with the novelist, the poet and the playwright, the essayist is a second-class citizen. You do not win the Nobel Prize by writing essays, least of all essays which are not always free from humour. "The world likes humour, but it treats it patronizingly. It decorates its serious artists with laurel, and its wags with Brussels sprouts." Nor does it help (even though you are only 29 at the time) if

you make such admissions as "I discovered a long time ago that writing of the small things of the day, the trivial matters of the heart, the inconsequential but near things of this living, was the only kind of creative work which I could accomplish with any sincerity or grace."

True, practically anything can set White off. More accurately, he has the sort of mind which snaps up precisely the trifles that can set it off. Writing to Thurber in 1938, he mentions a scrap of conversation he overheard between two men on the street. "So she had the whole fucking bedroom suite sawed up and put together again." From that he passes to an advertisement for a record of the sound of a piano being smashed by a man with an axe—"the sort of thing that you ought to have in your home, for rainy days when the mood is on you." How much water had to flow over the American dam—the Pilgrims . . . Valley Forge . . . Emerson and transcendentalism . . . Shiloh . . . Verdun—before the disc came along that we have all been waiting for! "The Instrument of the Immortals, getting it in the teeth from a Keen Kutter. . . ."

Some writers seem to hate language the way an axe hates a piano. Not so White, who went on to revise William Strunk Jr's *The Elements of Style* (also no Nobel Prize winner).³ Words fascinate him endlessly. (As did almost, it must be admitted, chickens.) In a *New Yorker* inter-office memo, he complains about the transmutation of "fresh" into "afresh":

An afresh starter is likely to be a person who wants to get agoing. He doesn't just want to get going, he wants to get agoing. An afresh starter is also likely to be a person who feels acold when he steps out of the tub. Some of my best friends lie abed and run amuck, but they do *not* start afresh. Never do.

However, if he is obliged to adjust to the new situation, then the characters in his stories will

¹ *Letters of E. B. White*. Collected and edited by DOROTHY LOBRANO GUTH. Harper & Row, \$15.00.

² *Essays of E. B. White*. Harper & Row, \$12.50.

³ In a note in the new *Essays* to the 1957 piece on Strunk which inspired Macmillan Company to commission his revision, White writes: "Strunk was a fundamentalist; he believed in right and wrong, and so, in the main, do I. Unless someone is willing to entertain notions of superiority, the English language disintegrates, just as a home disintegrates unless someone in the family sets standards of good taste, good conduct, and simple justice." Not that White is pedantic. Elsewhere he has told of the newspaper editor who changed a man's reported cry on recognising his wife's body in the morgue—"My God, it's her!"—to "My God, it's she!"