



POETRY COMMENT

In this issue, rather than attempting a survey of recent books, I have chosen to foreground three particularly impressive collections which would each have merited a full review on its own.

It takes a brave poet to use a phrase from one of Wordsworth's best poems as a title for a collection and then to print, as one of five 'Forewords' to the collection, to print 24 lines by Blake, thus inviting a particularly high standard of comparison. But Dinah Livingstone has never been lacking in poetic courage and, even if one can't (not surprisingly) claim that the poems in *The Vision Splendid* (Katabasis, 10 St. Martin's Close, London NW1 0HR. 65pp.; £7.95) are on a par with the best work of either of those two great poets, it can – and should – be said that the connections are by no means altogether inappropriate. Indeed, given that the other 'Forewords' to *The Vision Splendid* come from St. Mark's Gospel, Edmund Spenser and William Morris and that one poem ('Epic') echoes the manner and metre of *Piers Plowman*, Livingstone's place in line of descent from (within might be better) the English visionary tradition is abundantly clear (a sense reinforced by Milton's presence as a shaping force at more than one point in the collection. Livingstone's mode is often celebratory, but never facetiously so. Celebration is earned, as Spring Joy is earned by Winter Pain; it is earned by the proper kind of waiting:

It pierces or it scorches
...
the sharp pain of seeing
someone you love suffer
grief, or harsh ,
bitter disappointment,
when you can do
nothing about it,
say nothing to change it,

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and even feeling all that hurt
yourself, not sleeping,
makes it no better.
In the dead of winter
you can only wait.
(‘Sorrow’)

The reward of the waiting can be great:

How welcome this March sun is
Warming my winter body.

The wind has dropped. I lizard
on a wooden bench where lake laps,
water birds glide at ease
and quack a bit, background
noise detracting nothing from a
bonus, peaceful, lazing afternoon.

Only the quick nip
of a less simple neediness.
(‘Longed-For Warmth’)

How marvellously vivid is the use of the noun lizard as a verb in this poem!

Time and again Livingstone articulates powerfully her sense of the human place as “speaking animals / belonging to that one economy” of the universe), the poet’s job to listen to all that declares “I am”:

Their being is their own,
not ours to impose.
What we can do as speaking animals
belonging to that one economy
is listen, suffer them in their thisness,
then give them a human voice
with a place in our poetry.
(‘What Do You Mean?’)

Acts of listening produce poems:

A sturdy walnut tree stands at my window,
whose clean-cut, day-lit, lingual leaves

wave at me speakingly:
Up, lump. Come undumb
Yourself and me.

(‘What the Welsh Walnut Tree Said’)

The acts of listening and observation are intrinsically recognitions of relationship, as in ‘Birds on the Balcony’:

Intent on your own lives
what is it that makes you
not just entertaining but so lovable?
We are strangers but kindred
belonging together on Earth.

Livingstone is not the kind of celebratory poet (any more than Blake was) who omits such human creations as cities from her hymning. Her London (again there is an obvious connection with Blake) is “a mean city” and yet a vision of possibility. A place characterised by “child poverty increasing, inflation / Sure Start schemes fold quietly” and also a place full of love and creativity. A

City of voices
thronging the air over centuries,
Rainsborough, Winstanley, Milton, Blake,

....

city of 300 languages and more,
from Poland, Lithuania, Portugal,
Turkey, Egypt, Libya, Ethiopia,
Somalia, India, Japan, Iraq
Brazil, Peru. Almost anywhere.

...

Inexhaustible utopian vision,
Epic of Christ the Universal Humanity,
myth and metaphor of incarnation.
Word embodied, God become human
Raised above the thrones and dominations,
principalities and powers,
above the idols of silver and gold.

(A placard in St. Paul’s churchyard:

REGULATE BANKS.)

(‘No Mean City’)

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For all this, and for all the satirical power of 'Toads', the inversion of the tone of celebration, one of the most remarkable things in this fine, ambitious collection is Livingstone's ability to locate both the here and now and the visionary in a single arc of movement

From stardust, to simple life, to sex and difference,
then evolution led by love and death,
an altered ape on Earth one day
learned language, longing for so much,
addressed deities, dreamed of paradise.

...

[Christ] spreads his spirit spurting tongues of fire,
working its wonders, the word that burns.
Voice of the victims, the invisible who pay,
of the resolute against wrongs, rising again.

...

Bridegroom and bride are brought to bed,
swooning sweetness of secret bliss.
Primrose and Parliament Hill, St. Pancras International,
she shines as a city of social joys[.]

(‘Epic’)