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JOHN HOLLOWAY

## New Lines in English Poetry

TO THE READER of contemporary verse in England, the almost simultaneous appearance of these three books<sup>1</sup> is a very convenient thing. It serves as a landmark, and the line of poetic movement along which that landmark stands is now hard to miss. "Movement" in fact is just what, over the last three years, this line has come to be called. These three poets are not the only runners: Mr. Kingsley Amis, Mr. John Wain, Mr. Enright and Miss Elizabeth Jennings have already published books of verse (slim volumes by private presses chiefly) along the line too; novels by the first three of these make easily the best-known part (though I think a very distinct part) of the trend; and Mr. Davie's *Purity of Diction in English Verse* is a notable critical contribution. Certainly, the Movement writers toe no rigid party line. Even the three poets under review here diverge a good deal. But: the distinctive group of writers, writing activity over a broad front, critical re-thinking that serves it (and in fact also personal acquaintanceships which lie, one knows, behind it)—to fail, still, to see that something is happening is simply to reveal lack of interest: which is not to pre-judge the value of the "Movement," nor to assert that nothing else is happening.

These three books of verse thus have an interest beyond themselves, a representative interest; because of this, it is worth while, as a preliminary, to note two of the standing conditions which lie behind them. The first emerges if we remember the great post-Eliot paradox of English poetical development: that the *avant-garde*, even while acclaiming him, were in the 1930s producing a public, political Romanticism (for such it was: Auden's "Hearing of harvests rotting in the valleys," Spender thinking "continually of those who were truly great," Day Lewis writing "Do not desire again a Phoenix hour"); and in the 1940s, a private, Dylan Thomas-inspired, Id-Romanticism: Mr. Barker, Mr. Gascoyne and others. But Mr. Davie belongs to a whole generation for which Eliot's verse, his critical writing, Richards, "close reading," and Donne, are poetry's norms. This is the point at which the discussion now starts. To write creatively is to proceed from it.

There is also another factor: less tangible, but probably vital. The poetry of the 1930s may have been left-wing, but it was profoundly upper-class. It reads "you" not "we" (Auden's "On you our interests

<sup>1</sup> BRIDES OF REASON, by *Donald Davie*. Fantasy Press. 6s. THE LESS RECEIVED, by *Philip Larkin*. The Marvell Press. 6s. POEMS, by *Robert Conquest*. Macmillan & Co. Ltd. 10s.6d.

are set/ Your sorrows we shall not forget") like Victorian "Hymns for Working Men." Its chief poets learnt at public (i.e. great upper-class private) schools and taught at preparatory schools. Behind it, at varying degrees of only half-discredited remoteness, stood literary Bohemia or Bloomsbury or the literary country-house weekend—the world to which, though deeply alien to it, Lawrence virtually had to gravitate because it *was* the literary world of his time. The recent social revolution, gentle though real, in England, has changed this. The typical "Movement" writer's childhood background appears to be lower middle-class and suburban (often staunchly non-conformist, often in the industrial or semi-industrial Midlands or North of England). The crucial point is, that he is on the whole staying there. If he is teaching, it is not in an upper-class preparatory school, but in a "red-brick" provincial university. The automatic decanting process into upper-class England has been interrupted. Perhaps it is no longer wanted. If true, this is important: we are witnessing the end of something which has been established ever since the death of Keats and Hazlitt.

These, admittedly, are somewhat long shots. They appear slightly less long when one opens Mr. Davie's book, finds that its first poem is called "Among Artisans' Houses," and discovers that this is no idealistic call across a gap, to the Other Chaps, on a 1930s loud-hailer; but a quiet, respectful noticing, from right close up or even inside, of the exact good and bad in what the 1930s barely had at all—a settled prosperous working-class:

*it is  
An outcome of the civil sense,  
Its small and mean utilities;  
A civilization, in its way,  
Its rudiments, or its decay.*

This first poem of the book well displays Mr. Davie's own background (though he didn't grow up in Plymouth, where it is set), and his concern for the moral realities of conduct, and the unruffled, dry, yet intent regard which he turns on his subject. It deploys, however, only a part of the technical resources in which he can embody his distinctive cast of mind. These include a control of local structure which is executive to a cool yet telling wit:

*For such a theme (atrocities) you find  
My style, you say, too neat and self-possessed,  
I ought to show a more disordered mind.*

Such a cool opening to a poem hints that the author holds better cards than he plays. What Eliot (and Donne) have helped with here is not dramatic intensity or rich complexity of texture, but a precise sense of tone. Dr. Leavis's essay on "The Line of Wit" suggests itself as a background document; and here is a salient difference with the

poets of the 1930s. Even when the language of their poems was that of common speech, its *stance* was not: it was often enough a prophet's, a bardic stance. Moreover, one or two of Mr. Davie's best poems, thinking their way through metaphor with a surgical exactness, take the reader unawares with genuine energy and intensity. Take "Poem as Abstract" (which owes a little, one must concede, to Spender's "The Pylons"):

*A poem is less an orange than a grid;  
It hoists a charge; it does not ooze a juice.  
It has no rind, being entirely hard.*

—and the poet is no tree, but rather, a sculptured abstract

*caging such serenity of stress  
As boughs, or fruit that breaks them, cannot learn.*

Certainly, Mr. Davie's range in this book is a very limited one. By the time he has done, the reader finds he has had enough of these neat quatrains or tercets with their one well placed point, telling yet deflating. Several of the poems ("An English Revenant," "Woodpigeons at Raheny") hint that the author has too. After all, a Movement (as Newman said) is a thing that moves: recent work by Mr. Davie in magazines in Britain suggests that he is coming to use his fine intelligence and meticulous control in the service of a wider range of experience and a freer and more direct kind of treatment.

I put Mr. Davie first, because in his book the new equipment of the "Movement" shows in sharp, small, restricted focus. Mr. Larkin's work, less austere, impressive, is much more relaxed, eupeptic, and immediately endearing. He is less interested in moral, more in factual subtleties (like the psychological effects of time as it passes, for example); but the background is much the same. For Mr. Davie's "our Black Country," Mr. Larkin has industrial midland Coventry, "where my childhood was unspent." Mr. Larkin, too, has a turn of phrase that embodies a dry wit and a distinctive tone, but it is not dry and severe—when he is "Looking Into A Young Lady's Photograph Album" and sees her

*In pigtails, clutching a reluctant cat,  
Or furred yourself, a sweet girl-graduate*

the lines show a neat "invention" in its old sense (a finding of the relevant, revealing idea), and a felicity of rhyme and tone which are strong enough to take charge of meaning (see what happens to "sweet"). This, though, is one of the lightest poems in the book. The most ambitious, "Church Going" (which seems to me to be a truly outstanding and topical poem), has the same easy control over a varied tone, and can move without disrupting its texture through exact

thought and passing self-deprecation to a sincere plainness which borders upon genuine solemnity:

*A serious house on serious earth it is,  
In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,  
Are recognized, and robed as destinies.  
And that much never can be obsolete,  
Since someone will forever be surprising  
A hunger in himself to be more serious,  
And gravitating with it to this ground,  
Which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in  
If only that so many dead lie round.*

It is worth while to notice exactly how words like "compulsions," "robed," "surprising" or "proper" affect this verse: certainly, they do so by creating not a rich meaning through association, so much as a tone, through supple modulation, which inspires in the reader confidence and respect as well as emotion.

Mr. Robert Conquest, though he looks like becoming the *doyen* of the "Movement," is not quite a typical member of it. His background does not seem to be Midland or non-conformist or suburban, and extensive travel (as a foreign office civil servant) in the Balkans and elsewhere give his verse a quite distinctive variety and exotic colour. Indeed, from the hints in his poems, his life seems to have been a little like that of the 1930s literary generation: which may be why his "young ladies" create a more glamorous and (in every sense) disturbing impression than Mr. Larkin's, and why sometimes he allows phrases to enter his verse ("delectable smooth thighs," "brilliant nights"), which Mr. Davie would have ejected from his, supposing they could have entered even his mind, with the tongs. Moreover—let us tot up the whole debit side at once—just occasionally, Mr. Conquest parodies himself:

*The apparatus of paradise  
Is here, is made their own.  
Roses and dragonflies  
Glow on water or lawn.*

Even to call a poem "A Level of Abstraction," even to give it as last line "Love is a general word," will not place or chasten this. But I now turn with alacrity to the good qualities of *The Colour of Doubt*, for they are important enough to make it easily the richest and most exciting of these three books. In the first place, while Mr. Davie's technical range is very, and Mr. Larkin's fairly, narrow—Mr. Conquest's extends from the opening lines of "A Woman Poet":

*The superficial graces go,  
And yet such grace remains  
About that bare iambic flow*

*Although the syntax strains  
To a tense symmetry, and so  
Remotely entertains  
The thundering percussion*

to the dry, rhythm-created wit of "Poem for Julian Symons":

*like all images, this ash-born wine  
Is no reliable or fruitful start  
For anyone attempting to define  
The problems of art*

to the kind of verse for which Mr. Conquest is truly outstanding. What kind is this? It is a combination of two things. First, the best poems in this book take shape under an intellectual control just as scrupulous as Mr. Davie's; but while his arguments often start afresh with each stanza, Mr. Conquest's are far more sustained and flexible, and resolve themselves only as the poem draws to its close. Second, is what really makes the first possible. Instead of Mr. Davie's images, taken as a rule intellectually, for a single respect of relevance, Mr. Conquest's verse draws on a rich stream (whether from the Balkans, modern pictorial art, modern science, or his conception of space travel) which flows with brilliant sensuous amplitude. The first stanza of "Guided Missiles Experimental Range" well fits his own verse:

*a wealth below the level of the eye;  
Out of a black, an almost violet sky  
Abundance flowers into points of light.*

This is the abundance of sensuous life filling out the arguments; which run, at the measured steady pace of complete control, through Mr. Conquest's poems. It is connected, too, with another thing. Mr. Davie and Mr. Conquest both have several poems about poetry-making: the recurrent concern, with the measure of agreement between the two poets, being one further indication of the existence of a new trend. But while Mr. Davie approaches the problem as one of the poem and its style, for Mr. Conquest it takes on the more massive contour of the complete relation of poem to writer:

*word and image, the whole outer song  
Can only live as surface to the strong  
Thrust of the poet's whole self and language . . .*

—and occasionally, when that strong thrust drives fully through it, Conquest's verse rises sheer out of the slightly ambivalent "Movement" tone, to the measured, confident richness of a poet who knows his own full power, resource and sincerity. A notable, because from its subject surprising, example of this is "The Landing in Deucalion." Here is the end of the poem, the whole of which is a subtle examination of why this imagined landing on Mars is a fit subject for verse:

*For as they reach that unknown vegetation  
 Their thirst is given satisfaction greater  
 Than ever found but when great arts result;  
 Not just new detail or a changed equation  
 But freshly flaming into all the senses  
 And from the full field of the whole gestalt.*

*And so I sing them now, as others later.*

The provenance of these poets, so far as they have one, is clear enough. Mr. Larkin's verse reminds one, occasionally, of Robert Graves. Mr. Conquest's science, and occasionally his diction, may have a little—Mr. Davie's style certainly has a great deal—to do with Empson. (Mr. John Wain has recently stated, in an article in the *London Magazine*, that he consciously based his own verse on Empson's.) It seems to be only a handful of Empson's poems which are relevant: not the early bewildering scientific cryptograms, but those like "Aubade" and "Reflections from Anita Loos" and "Missing Dates" and "Reflection from Rochester" which come towards the end of his active period as a poet. Other poets associated with the Movement owe something to Muir. But the essential fact is plain. It is the outsiders of the 1930s who exercise the formative influence on these writers; and they do so because within (partly, indeed, *through*) the limitations of an exact and formal technique, their work had a certain radical honesty and directness which meant that it contributed to the poet's perennial task: how to achieve a unique speech that still has a massive tap-root in the inexhaustible soil of common speech. To achieve this continuity over distance is the poetic problem. If the "Movement" is to produce—or, I think I might say, has already produced—verse of distinction, it will be because, in outlook or technique (two sides of the one coin) it has found, to this recurrent problem, one more solution.