

NEW POETRY

1. Photographs of Bushmen

Peter Strauss . . . Bateleur Press 1974

by Pauline Fletcher

This is Peter Strauss's first published collection of poems, and it is extremely slender. But the quality is unmistakable. The blurb tells us that he "was for the first time seriously hooked by poetry when he stumbled on T.S. Eliot's poems at high school". This might lead one to expect yet another collection of neo-Eliotic poems by a Sensitive Young Man. Fortunately Mr Strauss is very much his own man, though one can detect certain influences in his work. I would suggest that his poetic ancestry should be traced through Ted Hughes back to D. H. Lawrence, rather than to Eliot.

The poem that seems to show that ancestry most clearly is **The Tortoise**, a poem of real quality worth quoting in full because it also shows that the affinity with Lawrence and Hughes is far from being imitation and it illustrates something of Mr Strauss's special preoccupations.

The Tortoise

He sought longevity; vegetarian
He cut pale leaves of clover with bony gums
On the hill-side. Having mastered this art,
Found he could feed on invisible influences
In the atmosphere, scent-essences and ghosts.
His membraned nose sucked in the pure ice,
Greyish-blue tinted, aetherized, of mountain air.
Like a fish winter-bound
Hibernated, bloodless.

Next turned to imitate the life of stones.
Brilliant impurities in his clay
Rose streaking to the surface and were combed
To consistent sheens. On the sea's bed
Became inured to pressure, that laid rings
On him, flake pressed down upon flake.
Or in temporary release, uplifted,
Things outside this world, the seven stars,
Aurora borealis, imprinted
Blue flickering strands on his charmed loins.
Learnt to be composite, humped with embedded stones,
Petrified wood, animal skeleton, sand.

Was rock. Only, always,
At the base of his throat,
Like a bubble in purple lava
Rolling, horrible,
Without escape, his pulse.

One line (He cut pale leaves of clover with bony gums) is enough to demonstrate Mr Strauss's gift of empathy and his debt to Lawrence. But from that point the poem takes off more in the direction of Ted Hughes with the tortoise undergoing mythical transformations. Like Hughes, Strauss invests his mythical creatures with sensuous reality so that as we track the tortoise through its lives as ice-creature, fish, stone, sea-bed, stars, rock etc., we never quite leave the flesh and blood animal behind. What we are given, in fact, is a double insight into the nature of both tortoise and the creatures or objects it resembles or becomes. It is as though the poet has telescoped the whole evolutionary process and shown us that life is a continuum. There is an underlying reality that is shared by the tortoise and the rock. Stones are not dead matter; they surge and grow with their own life. It is worth stressing at this point that Mr Strauss is not lapsing into vague mysticism. His account of the "life of stones" is geologically accurate.

But the poet is also aware of the irreducible difference between tortoise and stone, so that at the very moment when the tortoise seems to have achieved "longevity" (brilliantly expressed in the terse statement: "Was rock.") we are reminded of its life-blood bubbling away.

I have said that this poem also illustrates something of the poet's special preoccupations. In an introduction to the poems Peter Strauss tells us that for him "poetry—the rhythms and gestures of it—all has to do with the body". I would accept that, on the evidence of these poems, but I would also say that the poet has a special, almost philosophical, concern with transformations, with the potential changes lurking within any particular object or creature.

In **Earth Goddess of Mottled Granite**, for example, the raw stone is potentially "a knuckle-duster or a knife" but it is transformed by the vision, will and craft of the artist into an Earth Goddess, a woman's body which in itself seems to have the further potential for transformation into a phallus. And as with **The Tortoise**, what the poet shows us is not merely a chance, surface similarity, but an expression of some underlying reality. The elemental forces which formed the granite in the first place and which are therefore inherent in its structure or "chemistry", are the same forces which, unlocked by the sculptor, give life and meaning to his Earth Goddess:

Breasts curled by storm, a belly charged
 With lightning muscularity and white,
 A river out of a force-fielded earth
 Of tremors let loose from trance
 To lash out magnetic currents
 Of its course and pulse.

One could trace this theme through most of the poems in the collection. The women collecting Tsama melons are transformed under the poet's gaze into "an ostrich, a hen, a buck" and finally dissolve into magic lantern silhouettes. In the strangely moving little poem "The Boy with the Lungs of a Bird" the boy has the potential to become a bird. The euphorbias "are cattle of other planets", children become owls under the London street-lamps, and minotaurs and satyrs hover between man and beast. In some cases the transformations are more significant than in others, but all reveal the poet's ability to see beneath surfaces. Even in the comparatively simple poem **Bushman Woman eats a Tsama Melon** he can suddenly delight and surprise us by revealing that the dried and wrinkled mask of the bushman is not the expression of privation but of the "fat energies of greed".

The ability to delight and surprise is surely the hallmark of real poetry, and Mr Strauss has different and subtle ways of achieving this end. He can do it by shifts of tone within a single poem, as in **Earth Goddess of Mottled Granite** which opens with the casual, conversational lines:

We might at any rate try to remember
 The man's directness.

The poet then develops a central section that is both powerfully sensuous and intellectually tough, after which his tone becomes quietly subdued once more as he directs our attention away from the demonic power of the carving to the humble exigencies of the artist's craft.

Mr Strauss can also delight us by the boldness of an idea. I could give many examples but shall have to content myself with one from **He Compares Her to a Statuette** where the bow image gives the taut perfection, the strenuous restfulness of the woman:

You manufacture a bow of your body
 and there out there you spindle, and are
 somehow at peace

As an idea this is inseparable from its poetic expression, and it seems a pity that a poet capable of writing such lines should give us the somewhat portentous prosiness of this:

It is a fact about human existence
 That we know the other's body
 Largely through deformations
 Largely through clothes.

Does one detect the lecturer's tone here? A quibble on my part perhaps, but possibly a danger signal. One does not object to the poetry of ideas, in which, to quote a highly successful line from the same poem, "lines thin to a few linear ideas". Some of the later poems of Wallace Stevens, for example, have that kind of austere, refined beauty. But, along with Keats, one may object to the poetry of ideas when it loses subtlety and has "a palpable design upon us".

This very seldom happens in Mr Strauss's poetry, and I should like to end on a positive note by drawing attention to the very fine and powerful poem, **Minotauromachy: A Picture by Picasso**. Here the brutal, clumsy, anguished figure of the minotaur is enclosed as though in a frame by the contrasting figures of the two girls, whose pure Fra Angelesque simplicity imparts a poignancy to the blundering, lustful minotaur, for whom they have a strange sympathy.

Minotauromachy: A Picture by Picasso

Two girls like doves
 are sitting in the window.
 It is evening.

Outside

the retinue of the minotaur goes by.
 His hoofs clatter on the cobbles.
 He lifts his head as always
 and he groans. He moans and bellows.
 The blood in his chest chokes him;
 not a sinew in his body
 but is a whip-lash and a cord:
 so muscle-tied. It is not enough
 the disembowelling of the horse,
 the rickety horse of old age,
 the apocalypse—
 not enough. Not enough
 the violation of the female matador,
 the dancer,
 her peace in ecstasy of death-like sleep
 and the slender breasts parted with a shawl
 Did you make this, Minotaur?

Not enough. He stumbles
 and clatters on the cobbles, his one arm
 stretched out in front of his lust-blind eyes,
 and he groans. O Minotaur, o Minotaur,
 what song do you sing?
 The man escapes up the ladder;
 the little girl with the flowers and the candle,
 the miniature statue of liberty
 is cannon-fodder. Only
 the girls like doves in a window
 hear your song.
 Hear the whole of your song.

There is no hint of the lecturer here. Instead, the poet has set up two opposite and complementary poles, girls and minotaur, between which the meaning of the poem arcs.

The transformation theme takes an intriguing and complex form here. The Minotaur yearns either for the attainment or destruction of his human aspect in the form of the remote, beautiful girls, while the girls, for all their innocence echo the desire of an earlier Cretan maiden for union with a bull, from which union sprang the Minotaur.

Poems such as this one have a haunting quality and lead one to hope that it will not be long before we see more of Peter Strauss's work. □