NEW PROMISE

A Review of FIRST POEMS, by Chris Mann (Bateleur Press, 1977)

by Colin Gardner

I

The chief impression that **First Poems** makes upon me is of a very particular personality and sensibility – humane, observant, critical, full of feeling, unpretentious, and (in all the best senses of the word, and none of the many bad ones) thoroughly South African. One of the things that might give one some hope for the immediate future of this country (but I'm not sure that anything really can) is the voice, the presence, of someone like Chris Mann. His poems are not only, indeed not mainly, about "politics", but there is of course no harm in that: the creation and reconstitution of a land that has been partly or largely ruined by the nightmare-visions of ideologists cannot be achieved by political means alone – though the political means are crucial, and there is nothing in these poems that attempts to deny this.

II

The poems are divided into three groups. The first group, which makes up about a quarter of the volume, consists of Love Poems.

A number of these poems (there are seventeen in all) are intense and beautiful evocations of the joy of a contented love-relationship. At times, as perhaps happens in all such relationships, love becomes a religion; in this case, it is the religion of a man who is otherwise an unbeliever:

> So don't be alarmed if I do
> call you holy, and don't suppose
> I want you to be anyone
> but your own purely human self.
>
> It's only a way of saying
> that if anything's sacred, it's love. ("Love and Holiness")

In these poems Mann is in his own way – and in his own time and place – articulating responses and awarenesses rather like those which we associate with such great love-poets as Donne and Robert Graves. He is not of course (yet?) in their "class"; but he is no mere follower either.

There is nothing claustrophobic about the intimacy of the poems. The energy of the love seems constantly to flow over into and in fact to regenerate the context in which the love exists:

> Something huger than we know
> breathes through lovers together. ("Dimly")

In some poems the love is associated with specific places:

> but I can still recall
> the coke and petrol-station town
> beneath a pall
>
> of township smoke,
> which lay behind the grey-green mountains
> where you woke.
>
> The sky was clear,
> sunlight splashed across the peaks,
> and the air
> where we stopped
> flooded through my head as I climbed out.
> ("Two Words of Wisdom")

Anyone who has motored in South Africa must respond to the vividness of that; and yet it's no mere snapshot – precise and natural details are held within a delicate rhythm and purpose.

When a place is evoked in one of these love-poems, it is seldom mere backdrop or "landscape": in the passage that I have quoted, for example, the "pall/of township smoke" is not insignificant. And in several of the poems the full weight of South African society begins to be felt. This is especially true of "Love and Fear", which I shall quote in full:

> If the detention of quiet friends,
> and the rapid gagging of those
> who continue saying what they feel,
> is why you cannot sleep tonight,
>
> well, it would be wrong to pretend
> my own composure's very deep,
> and that I haven't heard a pack
> of rabid mongrels at the gate.
>
> But does that mean we cannot love?
> Come, let's keep anxiety in its place,
> and build ourselves a sunned garden
> to meet and roam in when apart.
>
> I wouldn't trust our resistance
> if it didn't begin from there. ("Two Words of Wisdom")

That seems to me a deeply civilized utterance. It manages to bring together a number of strikingly different feelings and contexts within a single statement that is both brief and unforced. Moreover it illuminates and vivifies simply the truth that one kind of love produces another, and that moral strength is likely to grow out of emotional security. The poem may also serve to suggest why Mann opened his volume with these pieces: love, a necessity for all human beings, is unusually important in a land of violence and alienation.

Not all of the love-poems are celebrations of harmony. There are disagreements, fears of unfaithfulness, problems of sexuality. And eventually the particular relationship that has been created (and one can have little doubt that it is based on a love in real life) comes to an end: "To –, Returning Overseas", deeply felt and formal, is perhaps the major poem in the sequence.

III

The second group of poems, which makes up most of the remainder of the volume, is called "Poems of Place". In these pieces we find the further development of several of the themes which were set in motion in the "Love Poems", and the introduction of a number of new themes. The title of this section is explained by the fact that all of the poems are in one sense or another about South

Africa and its varied inhabitants – descriptions and comments and meditations and re-creations.
In many of the poems there is an acute sense of a very special place – as for example in "Cookhouse Station":

> If you ever pass through Cookhouse Station
> make certain you see what is there,
> not just the long neat platform beneath the escarpment,
> and the red buckets
> and the red-and-white booms,
> but the beetle as well
> which sings like a tireless lover
> high in the gum-tree all the hot day.
>
> And whether your stay is short,
> and whether your companions
> beg you to turn from the compartment window
> does not matter, only make certain you see
> the rags of the beggarman's coat
> before you choose to sit again.
>
> And though there might be no passengers
> waiting in little heaps of luggage
> when you look, make certain you see
> the migrant workers with their blankets
> as well as the smiling policeman,
> the veiled widow as well as the girl
> the trainee-soldiers whistle at, otherwise
> you have not passed that way at all.
>
> And if it is a midday in December
> with a light so fierce
> all the shapes of things quiver
> and mingle, make certain you see
> the shades of those who once lived there,
> squatting in the cool of the blue-gum tree,
> at ease in the fellowship of the afterdeath.
> And if you ever pass through Cookhouse Station
> make certain you greet these men well, otherwise
> you have not passed that way at all.

I find this a moving poem. Its chief feature is what one can only call **piety** – a firmly-rooted reverence for place and creatures and people, and not only living people but "the shades who once lived there". And a person who is incapable of this piety, and of the perceptiveness and sympathy which must accompany it, is pictured as simply not properly alive, not able to see.and to journey: "otherwise/you have not passed that way at all". The details are an important part of the meaning – indeed in a sense they **are** the meaning: the singing beetle, the beggarman's coat, the migrant workers with their blankets, and so on.
Perhaps the most obviously successful poems in the whole group are several of those dealing directly (as "Cookhouse Station" does) with specific places or with located experiences: "Gansbaai", Zastron", "Ploughing", "Evening near Kwanzimela", "Music and More than Music", "The Prospect from Botha's Hill on Good Friday". These poems adopt a variety of approaches and employ a number of different techniques. One poem, in fact, is written almost in the manner of Dylan Thomas:

> In the muddy warm water
> of the Great Brak River
> as naked as the fish that whizz in air,
> I sploshed and hummed
> and the river swum me
> halfway to heaven on a reapripe day.
> ("Gone Swimming")

The "shades" appear in several poems. They are the brooding benevolent ever-present spirits of our ancestors, from whom we can learn not only the value of life and of place but the ways in which human beings may come to understand themselves and to accept one another:

> May Dingane,
> the Somersets, and Piet Retief
>
> and all of you who have found peace,
> keep reminding
> us your children of your unity;
>
> embrace us in the permanence
> of a friendship
> we need not wait for death to find . . .

It is the constant suggestion of historical and geographical (as well as socio-political) perspectives which gives Mann's poems their overall unity and strength.

In a short review one cannot do justice to the considerable richness of mode and of theme (or sub-theme) within these pieces. There are poems about animals and birds, and poems of "natural religion":

> The blossom of a tree
> sways a mantis quieter
> than incense swathes a fugue.
>
> The children place the benches
> beneath a raftering fig,
> the bread is offered up among
>
> the scents of a dawn
> more red and gold and resolute
> than a eucharist, censer-swung.
>
> The children place the benches
> beneath a raftering fig,
> the bread is offered up among
> the towering cloud cathedrals.

There are almost philosophical meditations, such as "Between Calm Contemplation and Action". There are poems that are wholly or partly satirical, like "Tea for the Joburg Lady Visiting Plet". And some of the pieces are quite specifically political, though never "merely political" – for example, "The Detainee":

> Hers was no physical beating:
> with subtlety and great patience
> her captors fingered out her thoughts,
> then battered them with ridicule,
> until all she was and stood for
> seemed cringing, shabby, and wrong.
>
> And hers is no quick recovery:
> bewildered by the sudden freedom,
> mistrusting the kindness of friends,
> she cannot shed a fright which brings
> a gap in every laugh she tries,
> and devils crashing through her sleep.
>
> A sunflower in the dusts of May,
> its green and yellow summerhead
> drooping scorched and sootily,
> husks up a thousand times itself
> in seed, whose oils and ripeness
> are hers and always hers.

In almost all of these poems (one or two of them seem to me not quite to work) – and, in a different way, in the ballads, the "Poems to be said aloud", which make up the final section of the volume – one is aware (as I began by saying) of a humane, imaginative, utterly South African presence: a man who loves and believes in and wishes to bring together the various emotions and prides and humanities and histories of our tragic and lovely land. □