

A Note on the Poetry of G. F. Dutton

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The modernists, those innovators of epic ellipses, almost did their successors out of a job. Their formal developments seemed terminal, one-way progressions to be achieved, then discontinued. In the United States the new techniques were taken on with exhilaration, but in Britain existing positions were defended more strongly. Apart from simple imitators, who usually missed the point in any case, those who have actually taken modernism as a genuine beginning have been few and far between.

This is understandable. Ezra Pound developed metrical technique and allusion in a dazzling fashion, but overall formal organization and control did not keep pace. Eliot himself shifted from the early concentrations and cinematic cuts to a discursive style of philosophical meditation, and then to the social niceties and equivocations of the verse plays. Modernism appeared as an interlude, bracketed away from the mainstream. So it comes about that Philip Larkin's poetry enacts a continuous, insistent closure against modernism, and is in that act seen to be fully aware of the experimentation it refuses. Similarly, Jon Silkin sees a wrong direction, and goes back to the work of Isaac Rosenberg to start again. Basil Bunting's *Briggflats* is a rare reconciliation of England to modernism. Meanwhile Christopher Middleton, eager to set out from the most exciting starting-points on offer, ends up in the U.S.A. his reputation in Britain absurdly small.

The result of this in modern poets has often been indirection and a profound unsureness in relation to form. At its most defensive, this unsureness registers as minimalism – not the pared perfections of an Ungaretti, celebrating the fundamentals left in times of war or grief, but a chic neutrality, disdaining involvement. Walter Pater's isolate, exotic moments, drenched in light (the ones that drip *The Renaissance* to its conclusions) still tick out their separations in a glum aestheticism.

This is, of course, not the whole story. And lately a style of exhausted urbanity has begun to find its way between the most various of covers. It is evidently the product of much hard work and great respect for the craft. Still, if no risks are taken in poetry, it withers in its own forms, pining despite the polished adjectives it lives amongst. We find ourselves reading exceptions.

The poetry of Geoffrey Dutton¹ is clean as a whistle. It has no furniture to carry, and chats to no-one. In his chosen Scottish Highlands he is free from the pressing exigencies of literary fash-

ion. He has a living which is, in any case, exempt from the need to be affable in literary matters. He is also blessed with an unforgiving locale, which he could probably not ignore even if he wished to. The Scotland of his work is an inclusive one:

for Donald Street Caithness Kintyre –
whatever Scotland's underneath
this Christmastide –
Butt of Lewis Barra Head
Barvas where her brothers died

black stone of Cowdenbeath

white towers of East Kilbride

but the various identities never slide into a spurious nationalism. Distances are maintained here, out of respect, and in deference to the urgencies of survival. There is no wish to bully for sympathy's sake, or to break inside where you are unwelcome, simply to prove the point of understanding. The inhabitants of those new, deathly Scottish estates are as quick and elusive as the animals on the hills:

not clever
to look for dawn
under the arc lamps.
night estates
on pavements emptied to brilliance.
not clever under that light
to fix and pity
so streetwhite a child so late
so hurrying his echoes
stumble into
almost sobs but not
yet sobs. for in this
ambuscade of glare and shutters
grief's as blinded as delight
so fierce tonight
outstares the dawn and suchlike matters.

The sparseness of that language has a lot to do with the generically laconic Scots. But it is also an achieved excellence.

From inside, the city appears merely as a surrounding. From the hills, it can still be seen as a fortress, bitterly achieved. It is also, of course, a threat. To achieve any sense of topography, which is to say any sense of history, you must either go outside the city, or deep into its past. This is something modernism tended to lose. Its sense of perspective was temporal, a concertina of ex-

cellent moments. Its spatial sense was foreshortened, where it wasn't actually defunct. There is an immense loss involved here. The line between domesticity and the untamed, between the food we munch and the slaughter required to bring it before us, is a fudged one for most of us. But we ignore that alternating line at our peril. For these transactions, and the manner of them, measure our humanity and its new shapes as surely as the more overt political decisions we make. Our notion of care itself is troublesome:

birds present the problem
in its most immediate form

pipe-legs, feathers
whisper of breath

cocked eye and beak.
underneath,

a puffed throat,
imminence of note

unbearable. dismiss them.
they can whistle

elsewhere. birds
are a quick urge

of greed and seasons.
for these reasons

deserve respect.
tamed, are abject

flutterers to be despised.
I cannot understand

why I am pleased
when they feed from my hand.

Every crossing of the boundaries, whatever its motives, is a form of trespass.

It is a problem of course. One man half-rooted on his Scottish hills, keeping a scrupulous eye on his preys and theirs, growing his rare plants among the unpredictable ravages and fertilities of the Highlands. What relation has this anyway to the upheavals and holocausts this century is groaning through? Modernism's massive attempt to incorporate history as myth and pointer within its texts

leans immediately to the cosmopolitan, the polyglot, the allusive style. Yet we should not become too clever about our notion of allusion. Dutton's poetry alludes to hills and valleys which, read properly, speak of struggle and destruction in nature and in the speaking natures that we call historical. Even that early form, the struggle of the men in their fences keeping predators out, this is not finished with yet. And the cities insist on their presence as forcibly as climate and disease. They are resisted only for the boundaries they would demolish, and for their easy way with words. There is a lesson here surely:

they keep their distance
although I planted them
from slug, vole, the particular malice
of climbing mice,
the slash of pheasant.
not to mention the deer
beyond the wire,
in rut for the rust.

flowers, flowers,
from Oregon, from the Himalayas,
bored with my bad soil
reward my toil
sparsely, are lost
in deprecating leaves.
my summer is what it achieves.
were it not for the frost,
rocks, teeth, rasping tongue,
the living virulence I live among
I would throw down
spade and pen,
cry off this slapped rump of a mountain.
go back to earnest discussion.
take a room in town.

No-one living in one of those rooms in town, but still capable of looking through the window from time to time, should miss *camp one*.

1 *camp one* by G. F. Dutton is published by Macdonald, Midlothian.