

REVIEW:

*Lennart Bruce, OBSERVATIONS (Kayak Press, 1968)
prints by George Hitchcock.*

*Robert Peterson, WONDERING WHERE YOU ARE
(Kayak Press) Drawings by Walt Kublman.*

THERE OUGHT TO BE SOME WAY OF INFORMING THE LARGER public that modern poetry is written in contemporary, accessible language every bit as readable as that used for belt line novels which are consumed in thousands of copies. By now practically everyone literate agrees that our culture is in a parlous state, that technology and cosmic selfishness are destroying the planet and turning men into monsters. Not often enough is it pointed out that poetry is one of the chief weapons against this imminent doom. If we could put across this simple fact, we might create lobbies on congress to enact laws injecting real poetry into the school system. Concerned citizens would erect billboards at the entrances and exits of cities on which poems could be displayed. A really determined audience could push for regulations in mass media providing that all advertising time and political time be matched by equal poetry time. Even religious institutions could be infiltrated and poetry substituted for the banal prose of pious exhortation. Similarly an enlightened president could be induced to establish a national poetry day. For all this to happen, all we need to do is raise the standard of *Poetry Power*.

The present burgeoning of American poetry is, in my opinion, connected indirectly with the revolt of the young. Even though it is not a part of the actual program of rebellious college students or war resisters, instinctively young people of sensitivity feel poetry is the appropriate expression for their reactions to the society they live in. The proliferation of little mimeographed sheets and the popularity of poetry readings are certainly symptomatic.

There are numerous ways in which poetry fights the crystallization of man and these bring us to two poets here discussed. One method is the exploration of perception, the opening up of individual vision, showing the potential variety of human experience. A second direction consists of creating new worlds, manufacturing astonishment, standing experience on its head. Lennart Bruce is a practitioner of the first approach mentioned and Robert Peterson finds enrichment in surrealism.

Of course all categories are of limited use; what I am stressing is that fact that even if poetry won't immediately bring about the revolution, living with it can do more for us than a daily dose of vitamin C.

Lennart Bruce has a way of exploiting the visual that amounts to a rediscovery of sensation. For instance,

at random
I draw four straight lines
across or on top of
or rather through
each other
they come out
an insect from above
with four legs & two wings
or an eight pointed star.
Which did I draw?

This use of alternating possibilities lead into a sense of strange of the perceptual world. A poem about swimming begins

my head on the surface of the water
looking at the mountain

and ends

there lies an absurd
tangle of seaweed
swaying in its place.

Distortion of vision often occurs, small objects appear with a curious

sharpness "black paths of a fingerprint brightly lit by an instantaneous sun," "chip of wood/shines yellow by my foot, or images are endowed with a certain unexplained magic," "seashells pass at unknown speed" and "talking to a curtain/bulging from a window."

A sound, half-heard, a flicker of light, movement not wholly identified, these are some of the elements with which Bruce creates a sense of alienation. There is a certain limitation in all of this. Granted that he comes through as an imaginative and interesting individual, his poetry might contain a larger universe if he could move out of the sphere of himself and open up the dimensions of man as a social being. As it stands, however, his work expresses a version of the contemporary plight and as such is a worthwhile statement.

Robert Peterson writes more than one kind of poem. For instance the simply imagistic treatment as in "Evening Poem" has a kind of Chinese elegance — the worm on the leaf, the cats, the pine tree. Again in an urban poem like "Chinatown" the juxtaposition of images chaos and desperation. Or there is the simple and very human humor of the poet in the dentist's chair, paralyzed by novocaine eyeing the nurse lecherously. Indeed humor is one of Peterson's great virtues.

I've done nothing for weeks
but discuss politics
and comb the cat.

'Are you wearing Danish shoes?' inquires the young man.
I am trying to photograph, in color, a Mexican beetle.

The humor also succeeds in "Athens as Margaret Rutherford" in which three or four words, "Homer," "Acropolis," fluted and cylindrical somehow equate the actress with the immutability of Greek classicism. And it's not so farfetched; there is something classical in Rutherford's personification of British middle class assurance, truly fluted and cylindrical.

In Part III Peterson embarks on a method which is very much his own. It is surrealistic in the sense that it consists of a controlled series of non-sequiturs which come as a pleasant shock and somehow convey poetic wisdom.

Blessed be children
who look into the ears of horses
& know everything, may be forgotten
& men receiving happy thoughts
in tubs and elevators.

Or again

Beware of prophets of bewilderment
for their beards are complex . . .

This is far from automatic writing but the intellectual shaping is subtle. Just a touch of the rein on the horse's neck; the slightest forcing and the life goes out of the images.

An excellent sentiment to end on is

And poets, I was told, can't be told
how to think, what to feel or vice versa and have lots
of trouble. So that's what I became.

So there we have it. And, to stave off anomie, I suggest taking
a poem by Lennart Bruce or Robert Peterson every four hours.

— H. R. HAYS