

REVIEW: GREGORY ORR, *BURNING THE EMPTY
NESTS* (Harper & Row, 1973)

A NUMBER OF REVIEWERS HAVE RECENTLY TAKEN BROAD swipes at what they call "neo-surrealism" in contemporary poetry. Most notable for its inability to make distinctions was Jasha Kessler's review in the February, 1973 issue of *Poetry*, where Kessler made the usual cliched claims that the poetry was "too easy" or "too arbitrary" and then chose a mediocre volume to reinforce his claim. Others have claimed that neo-surrealist poetry is too subjective, as though the poetry were private merely because it depended on the image rather than the intellect to convey experience. Obviously these critics have not read much of Gregory Orr's work, because the first impression one has in reading *Burning the Empty Nests* is its concern for craft, for the rightness of the image, for the wholeness of the poem. And to call Greg a neo-surrealist does not really do justice to his work: while he makes use of the "fantastic" image, and is concerned with the dream life or the relation between conscious and unconscious life, his poems always have a very visual and deceptively simple physical reality to them, even if they could not be objectively "true." All of which means that Greg has correctly perceived that a poem is not simply a photograph or reproduction of objective reality. Or, as Blake once said, "Where man is not nature is barren."

Thematically Greg's poems are about transformations: from emptiness to fullness ("Hollow tree of the body, you are filled/with all the hands that ever touched you."), from loss to discovery (from Darkness surrounds the dead tree . . . to "A moth lands on the toe of my boot./Picking it up I discover a map on its wings.") from darkness to light, from then to now, from the forming of the self to its constant dissolution:

Again we dismantle the motorcycle.
In your arms you rock the black egg of the gastank.
A beak like golden pliers tears at the thin metal.
Another you is released into the universe.

from "Poem to the Mother"

One concern recurs throughout: the irrevocability of process, of the process of time consuming everything, including the past, as in "Dead leaves nest in the crown and the word/'yesterday' is like a pile of bones." Or in the poem, "The Room," which I quote in its entirety:

With crayons and pieces of paper, I enter the empty room.
I sat on the floor and drew pictures all day.
One day I held a picture against the bare wall:
it was a window. Climbing through,

I stood in a sloping field
at dusk. As I began walking, night settled.
Far ahead in the valley, I saw the lights
of a village, and always at my back I felt
the white room swallowing what was passed.

Or, in "The Wooden Dancer":

She wears a necklace of light.
Each bead is a deserted room
you enter: bare lightbulb, a white
glove on the table. You walk to the window
and stare out at the snowfields.
A flock of sparrows is eating your footprints.

But Greg Orr does not simply mourn the passage of time as a degenerative act; he sees time (and everything that goes with it) as offering regenerative possibilities as well, as in the beautiful poem, "The Meadow":

I sit in the grass as the moon rises.
While deer file out of the woods,
tossing their antlers like branches in a storm.
They leap, their hooves striking sparks on stones.
The whole field burns.
I stand in its center. The flames die.

I am a tower of ashes.
Only my eyes remain, two pebbles,
two moons sifting through clouds of warm ash.

“The Meadow” raises another of Greg’s concerns in relation to the irrevocability of time, and that is how only the poetic process itself (or as it was called in the nineteenth century, the “imagination”) can approach the experience of death. In one of Greg’s most moving poems, “The Doll,” the narrator speaks of the imaginative transformations which occur but are beyond the narrator’s control:

I carry you in a glass jar.
Your face is porcelain
except for the bullet hole
like a black mole on your cheek.
I want to make you whole again,
but you are growing smaller.
It is almost too late.
When I touch you my fingers
leave dark smudges on your skin.
Each day you are growing
smaller and more intense
like a drop of acid on my palm;
moth ball, snowflake,
dead child.

I do have a few minor reservations about the book. Greg’s work has obviously been influenced by the most important “deep imagists” of our time, Bly, Strand, and St. Gerard (although what poet under forty has not?) and a few of his very short poems will suffer from poetic formula, or he will use the almost clichéd surreal images of the moon, the stone, the bones, or fields once too often. And in his ambitious last section, “The Adventures of the Stone,” while a few of the poems are very fine indeed (like “A Stone’s Poem of Pain” and a couple of the Vampire Poems), the idea of the stone and the wound as invulnerability and vulnerability is a little too obvious and too directly translatable into concepts and near-allegory without making the reader share the experience that led up those concepts. In the end these reservations disappear in the face of dozens of powerful poems, poems which engage our emotions and intellect

simultaneously, which create a tension between freedom and control that make reading Greg's work both pleasurable and painful (in an instructive way).

Ultimately one discovers mystery as the source of experience, joy and pain in Greg Orr's poems. And this mystery is a fascination with (yes, I'll say it) the subjective or personal aspect of experience; but I mean that word personal in the best possible way, a concern for oneself, one's relation to others, and a concern for the inexplicable changes we must go through in our lives. And at the center of these changes is the image, because the image evokes while the idea explains. And the eccentricity of his images help reinforce his vision of mystery (not obscurity, because the images are amazingly simple), because poems, like dreams, are analogs for experience, not experience itself. And the way we must render experience cannot be too literally tied to what we perceive to be "feelings." Fortunately our emotions are much too complex to be dealt with so easily.

Finally, because Greg's work has been praised by numbers of famous men (Bly, Strand, Merwin, Kunitz, Hall, et al), I have not said what is most amazing about the book: for a first book there is rarely a moment of uncertainty in craft or self-indulgence; in short, for a first book, this is a remarkable and mature collection. So while most poets in their first books only hope for "promise" in what is to come, Greg Orr has already delivered a good part of that promise.

— IRA SADOFF