

THE ACCOUNTANT'S VISION



Harry Clifton

MARK JARMAN AND DAVID MASON (EDS.), *Rebel Angels: Poets of the New Formalism*. Story Line Press, \$12

Years ago, in a tattered copy of *Best American Stories 1962*, I came across the tale of an American poet on a Fulbright stay in Paris. Below him lived an American girl pestered by a scruffy Beat poet whose attentions only lessened when he was morally and psychologically faced down by the Fulbright man, who then went off with the girl. If he still exists—the Fulbright poet, that is—he would surely feel comfortable in the pages of *Rebel Angels*, with its clearcut conservative notions of Americanness and its Blakean cover illustration of the Good angel (formalism) protecting a young innocent from the Evil Angel (everything else).

From Whitman to Frank O'Hara, an American model exists of an all-inclusive poetry which rafts its way down the white waters of contemporaneity, saying Yes to everything. Europeans associate this strain with what is revolutionary in American poetry, and its opposite, the formal verse of the Yvor Winters school for example, with reaction. *Rebel Angels* tries to turn that on its head. Formalism is presented as revolutionary, in some unclarified American sense of revolution, and pointing to the future. If it is in fact revolutionary, then it seems to me a right-wing revolution trying to get back to a lost, supposedly more secure past, not unlike the Eisenhower era of the Fifties from which our Fulbright poet came.

Who is he/she, this Fulbright poet? From the pages of *Rebel Angels* an identikit picture can be put together, of someone mainly white, Ivy League educated, Europe-travelled, domestic rather than streetwise, favourable to the powers that be, whether academic or business, rather than subversive or marginal, aurally out of touch with language as an evolving idiom, and tending towards minor emotion and private rather than political sentiment. Exceptions, such as some of Marilyn Hacker, or R.S. Gwynn's Sassoon-like laments for friends dead in Vietnam, merely prove the rule, which is one of implicit collaboration with Middle American sterility and wholesomeness.

We are told by the editors that they left out poems that were "merely formal, sound exercises in prosody", but much of what is included is sim-

ply iambic pentameter done in the manner of a Kiplingesque thumper, the rhythmic monotony deadening any content that might otherwise have come through. This is from Dana Gioia: "Dust has a million lives, the heart has one." Notice how "dust" and "the heart" could change places in that line without the essential meaning, or meaninglessness, being affected, since the fake sonority proceeds from the rhythm of the line, not the words. And there are hundreds of such lines in *Rebel Angels*. None of its poets seems to have heard of enjambment, or the playing off of speech against stanza. And the programmatic insistence on perfect rhyme in what is a rhyme-poor language leads everywhere to line-endings like "injustice"/"where the dust is" eating like corrosion into the body of the poem itself. Most poetry in any age, as Mandelstam says, is very bad poetry indeed. Ours tends to be bad through fetishizing social movements, victim-status, psychoanalytic truth or politically corrected emotion. These poems are only unusual in that their badness consists in fetishizing form.

To ask a different question—what are they "about"? Most live out an Eisenhowerian soap opera of mother-daughter, father-son, husband-wife, parent-child polarities, none intense enough to enter the realms excoriated by Lowell, Plath, Rich or Sexton, never felt with enough power to destabilize the domestic equilibrium. Straying outside this magic circle has its dangers—Gwynn's Vietnam, Rafael Campo's Mexico—and its occasional felicities—Emily Grosholz's Europe—but all roads lead back to Middle America and Dana Gioia peeping in at his sleeping daughter:

Then suddenly I felt myself go numb
And though you won't believe that an accountant
Can have a vision, I will tell you mine.

Each of us thinks our own child beautiful
But watching her and marvelling at the sheer
Smoothness of skin without a scar or blemish

I saw beyond my daughter to all children...

Not even the street imagery of Marilyn Hacker can quite dissipate the claustrophobia of that world, but at least it gives a glimpse of another larger and less privileged America in which poets might really have something to apply their formal energies to:

The bar was talk and cruising; in the back
room, we danced: Martha and the Vandellas,
Smokey and the Miracles, while sellers

and buyers changed crisp tens for smoke and smack.
Some came in after work, some after supper,
plumage replenished to meet you knew who.
Behind the bar, Maggie dished up beef stew.
On weekends, you could always find an upper
to speed you to your desk, and drink till four.
Loosened by booze, we drifted on the ripples
of Motown, home in new couples, or triples...

Lowell, Sexton, Plath, Rich—not to mention Bishop or Roethke, or even Berryman. If form and energy are to be conjoined, surely these are the names to be invoked in the introduction, rather than Hecht, Wilbur and J.V. Cunningham? But behind the commitment to form in this anthology is an older, more conservative fear—the fear of elemental forces, political or psychological, that drove and in some cases destroyed that earlier, wilder generation. Dead they all may be, or most of them anyway, but our Fulbright poet lives on, in the pages of *Rebel Angels*. Stability, poetry—who hasn't tried to have it both ways? As this anthology shows for the millionth time, though, the Muse is never fooled.