

Surely there has always been a vital association between the ways in which poets and painters have discovered and re-discovered the human form, particularly at a time of conflict and recovery. Jon Silkin published prints by Josef Herman and Euan Uglow in the 1950s, a painful and difficult time to represent our most basic forms. *Stand* has recorded the shapes of the body in love, conflict and death ever since. In this issue we re-assert the link between the visual and the verbal to offer a context for those shapes. We are therefore delighted to include poems by the late Peter Redgrove and his widow Penelope Shuttle as well as Paula Rego's painting *The Assumption* and a poem by Michael Heller which is inspired by it.

I

A regular contributor to *Poetry and Audience* and *Stand* along with Penelope Shuttle, Peter Redgrove was the sixth Gregory Fellow in poetry at the University of Leeds. The Fellowships were conceived at a time of war and they succeeded in encouraging the practical arts of poetry, painting and sculpture in a University when such schemes were virtually unknown in England. Now, sixty years since the fall of Berlin, the newspapers and the BBC seek out witnesses – from the Holocaust and Hitler's last days – and they sound, as they are, aged. How could they represent their experience to a young listener? How could they talk about it now? What

are the terms of representation and memory for us, mediating between those voices that I heard last week and the pictures I first saw years ago? To what do we appeal as the yardstick of what we are or look like now? Science, myth or history? Peter Redgrove studied natural sciences at Cambridge where he knew and worked with many poets, including Ted Hughes. There he founded *Delta* magazine with Philip Hobsbaum and others, and also took part in early meetings of poets who, later in London, metamorphosed into the Group. (Hobsbaum's extraordinary influence as a catalyst for new talent went on to Belfast and then to Glasgow.)

Looking back, the early 50s seem strange, hard to re-construct in the imagination, though we can now see how they were uniquely influential: so many people, so many young artists, had to sit down and think about the role of the individual in society with the most appalling lessons of history only recently lived out in their childhoods. The human body had been subjected to torture and destruction. Natural landscapes and cities were still scarred by bombing. The sense of agonising change to the most basic patterns of 'realist' perception threatened both literary and visual arts. What was it to be 'realistic' in the 1950s? James Hyman has written an important account of 'the battle for realism' in painting in post-war England.¹ The struggle for responsible creation was perhaps similar in poetry. What did it mean to be a realist after war had changed so much? Did the threat of another war, or the Bomb, require some alignment of poetry, painting, and political action?

1 James Hyman, *The Battle for Realism: Figurative Art During the Cold War, 1945–1960* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).

Was simply *being* an artist enough to sustain social freedom and democracy? What was a *true* picture of an insane world? For Redgrove (and so many other poets of the time), along with 'starting a magazine', the message was broadly political; it meant being subversive and questioning. It was political in the sense that he sought an alternative source of inner consciousness, an alternative view of the body and its sexuality. He brought a scientist's training as well as an extraordinary sense of personal feeling to his poetry.

In some ways, the validation of bodily transformations, of sexual fluidity and a merging with the Earth/earth was shocking to those who first heard him read 'Mr Waterman' in the 60s. Would this ban the Bomb or end the war in Vietnam? Some critics felt frustrated by the lack of an apparent narrative, a story that could be transferred and matched to the ordinary world. But, working closely with Penelope Shuttle, he stuck to a poetry in which the most important reality came from 'joining' rather than 'standing back', from the experience of the absurd rather than an academic fight with words. It is strange to compare and contrast Redgrove's 'The Idea of Entropy at Maenporth Beach' (1972) with Jon Silkin's 'Entropy at Hartburn' (1976). Redgrove is joyous at the dissolution, real and implicit: 'Drenched in the mud, pure white rejoiced, / From this collision were new colours born, / And in their slithering passage to the sea / The shrugged-up riches of deep darkness sang.' Silkin's reaction to the Universe running down is cold, puzzled and isolated: 'Not a thing to comfort us. The holly's fruit / taps at the church's stained glass / where solstice clenches its day, // and small energies out-thorn, the profusion / of winter

at mid-night.' Both start from the scientific word 'entropy', and both place the voice, celebrating or sorrowful, at the centre of discovering what the body becomes in a world still inviting discovery.

Jon Glover

II

Woman's body, oppressed, resistant, and often strangely exultant, inhabits the paintings of Paula Rego. Hailed recently by Robert Hughes as 'the best painter of women's experience alive today', Rego's profoundly disconcerting work explores what Germaine Greer has referred to as 'the tension between external conformity and internal revolt'. One of her most famous images, 'The Policeman's Daughter', captures well this uncanny combination. Here, in typically bold blocks of colour, the young girl referred to in the title occupies the left side of the canvas, apparently carrying out a menial (or devoted) service for her father: polishing one of his black leather knee-high boots. Her downward gaze is focused intently on her task. Her right arm bends with force to effect a polish; her left, most provocatively, is thrust into the boot itself. Her left foot pushes forward with the muscular tension of the act. She is caught in a bright shaft of sunlight from an open window to her right. At the margin of the shadow and this light, in the bottom right of the picture, a black cat stands upright on its back legs, its face illuminated as it stares outside into the brilliant blue. It is at once an image of the drudgery of women's work and of transcendence. The girl's alter ego, the cat in its literal and metaphorical liminality, points up both the nature of enforced

Jon Glover/John Whale

labour and the possibilities of transfiguration. Similarly, woman's body, angular and cramped in work, here effects its own kind of transgressive occupation of the symbol of male power.

In other sequences of paintings, Rego has deliberately focused on the equation between women and animals, most daringly perhaps in the 'Dog Woman' series of 1994. Here, in a picture in pastel entitled 'Bride', she portrays a woman who stares at us mournfully, perhaps aggressively. She is dressed, appropriately enough, in her bridal gown, but she lies awkwardly, knees raised, back arching and uncomfortably supported against what seems to be a cushion. Her veil spreads out onto the floor on either side of her to give the muted appearance of a pair of diaphanous wings. Her feet, in typical Rego style, are rough and bare, like those of an animal. The image captures an uneasy combination of woman as working animal and ethereal spirit. Is she flying? admiring herself in the mirror of our gaze? or trapped in a ritual which mocks her status? She seems caught between physical reality and metaphysical mysteries.

Rego's work frequently employs this mixture of grim realism and the fantasy of metamorphosis in paintings which are always embedded in narrative: the narrative of women's lives in her native Portugal; in folklore; in fairytale; and in novelistic fictions. Her figurative art and her skill as a print-maker have lent themselves to collaborations with a host of other stories, most recently a series of creative illustrations to *Jane Eyre*. In all these, Rego's rendering of the human figure retains its uncanniness. Since she returned to the figurative in the early eighties (after a period of surreal collages in the sixties) her women have been significantly stylised – their

bodies often shortened and compressed into forms which fend off traditional notions of feminine beauty and which conjure, but never simply fall into, the grotesque. There's a compression of the body here which is attentive to the particular oppressions of society and history and which opens itself up to the magical and transformative capacity of the imagination and the unconscious. In the painting which adorns the front cover of this issue of *Stand*, *The Assumption*, we have just such a possibility: Mary totters backwards with the ecstasy and shock at the burden of her maternal role, almost touching the feathery wings of her pensive son who sits strangely illuminated in her shadow, his right hand reaching back towards her skirts. It is difficult to fathom the relationship between these two strangely human figures who face in opposite directions. In her daring re-interpretation of the sacred Rego offers her own characteristic portrait of the mystery and the corporeality of our humanity.

John Whale

This issue also features prizewinning poems from *Stand's* last poetry competition by Alison Trower, Graham Mort, Jean Symons, Tony Roberts, Stevie Krayner, Ann Leahy, Michael Mott and Richard MacSween.