

Each Singing What Belongs To Him

TARA BERGIN

W.D.Snodgrass, *Not for Specialists: New and Selected Poems*,
The Waywiser Press, £10.99, ISBN 9781904130352;

Stanley Moss, *Rejoicing: New and Collected Poems*, Anvil,
£14.95, ISBN 9780856464171;

Wyatt Prunty, *The Lover's Guide to Trapping*, The John Hopkins University
Press, £12.50, ISBN 9780801892790 / 0801892791

At a reading in Atlanta in May 2008, W.D. Snodgrass – who died in January 2009 – introduced himself as an ‘unconfessional’ poet. He was removing himself from the category into which he had been placed fifty years ago by M.L. Rosenthal, in his article ‘Poetry as Confession’. Snodgrass explained: “One, I am an atheist; two, I’m not writing some bedroom memoir; three, I’m not saying I’ve done anything wrong.” Although he rejected the term ‘confessional’, *Not for Specialists: New and Selected Poems* serves as an important illustration of Snodgrass’s place in the development of self-revelatory poetry.

Postwar guilt and the loss of his daughter through divorce caused the poet’s breakdown, gave him writer’s block and led him to psychoanalysis. But these things also became the subjects of his most famous poems, ‘Heart’s Needle’ and ‘After Experience Taught Me...’, the writing of which became part of his recovery. The poems remain vivid, especially ‘After Experience Taught Me...’ in which Snodgrass punctuates a lesson from his combat instructor, who taught him how to blind and then kill a man with his bare hands, with words from the philosopher Spinoza. In his *New Poems*, Snodgrass returns to military imagery, but it is his heart, “poor drummer”, that must now march in time (‘Pacemaker’). These new poems also continue to speak in a very personal voice, and the book closes with a tender, final ‘Invitation’ to the poet’s wife. In 1960, Snodgrass won the Pulitzer Prize for *Heart’s Needle*, but as he recalls, it cost Louis Untermeyer his job as Pulitzer judge: the poems were considered too private. Snodgrass went on to receive many awards and

honours but remained wary, admitting: “I am not particularly pointed toward winning.” His poetry’s success probably lay in such an attitude, and this selection illustrates how he repeatedly defended his approach to poetry, insisting: “There is a loveliness exists, / Preserves us, not for specialists” (‘April Inventory’).

Another substantial publication from America this year is *Rejoicing: New and Collected Poems* by Stanley Moss. By choosing to arrange the book in reverse chronological order, Stanley Moss has done what John Cheever once wished he could: “It would please me,” wrote Cheever in 1978, “if the order in which these stories are published had been reversed and if I appeared first as an elderly man [...]” For Moss, the decision works very well, because his most recent poem becomes the opening and title poem ‘Rejoicing’, a title that captures what is central to this book. In it, the speaker swims in a sea that is both God and God’s womb; God is “wilderness” and “cold” but also happiness and freedom, “without commandments”. Such a merging of God and man into the femaleness of nature recalls not only Whitman (with whom Moss begins his poem ‘Subway Token’ about September 11), but also the English poet Ted Hughes. In another poem, ‘Listening to Water,’ Moss directly references Hughes’s ‘How Water Began to Play,’ responding to Hughes’s lines “Water wanted to live / It went to the sun it came weeping back”, with the much more positive: “Water wanted to live. / It went to the sun, / came back laughing.”

Moss is editor and publisher of Sheep Meadow Press, a non-profit press with a special focus on international poets, and his involvement with translation is very interesting, because this volume highlights his celebration of, and ability with, language: in particular his ability to return a given word to its literal origin while at the same time making it new and revelatory to the reader. He does this expertly again and again, for example in ‘EI Sol’, ‘Peace’, or the difficult, emotional poem ‘The Miscarriage’. Lawrence said that Whitman was the first to destroy the moral conception that the soul is superior to the flesh. Stanley Moss continues his tradition in a collection that shows a poet who delights in the elements of things:

The man who never prays
accepts that the wheat field in summer
kneels in prayer when the wind blows across it (‘The Blanket’)

Wyatt Prunty's new collection *The Lover's Guide to Trapping* is a slimmer volume, but no less valuable. The poems, which strike a fascinating balance between simplicity and intricacy, are as Prunty says in the long poem 'Parks', "sometimes easy, sometimes not". They deal with simple subjects (a mole, a man, a childhood memory), but do so with lines that often play out in an unexpected, complex way, appearing unfinished yet proving on re-reading to contain a carefully crafted meaning. In 'Circus', stillness is "the last remove":

Deeper than landscape and untouched
By any hand, poised counterweight
And unexpended force, the botched
Arc of the final acrobat

The book opens with a mole tunnelling through the rich dark earth, making patterns like letters. Surfacing, the mole is "Quizzical as the flashbulb blind". This marks a recurring theme with Prunty: a journey made through darkness into light, driven by the "unnamed will". In 'Lincoln's Tunnel', one of the more obviously autobiographical pieces, the poet sits in a cab, stuck in traffic in the tunnel under the Hudson. First remembering his own youth by the rivers of the South, the poem ends with the cars moving up into the daylight: "Outward now, as from the mystery of intent / To be the mystery of an unnamed will, / As light is blindness in the afterflash / Of waiting for the light to come again."

Prunty presents the core significance of his subject-matter in a subtle way, so that the reader comes upon it slowly and with satisfaction. Perhaps the best example of this is the final poem, 'An Early Guide to Trapping', which by a simple trick of titles, nudges us towards understanding his point. Because of this, and his gentle but skilful use of rhythm and rhyme, Prunty is like his 'House Wren': "It was a small, plain bird," he writes in that poem, "I heard it sing two things at once."

Tara Bergin is studying for the PhD on Ted Hughes's translation of János Pilinsky. She has published poetry in *Poetry Review*, *Poetry London* and *Modern Poetry in Translation*.