

*New Blackfriars*, our readers may be surprised to learn, actually has a Poetry Editor. I say 'surprised', because in recent years the journal hasn't been conspicuously crammed with heroic couplets or laced with love-lyrics. In the course of my three devoted years as Poetry Editor I have actually got round to publishing two poems, a productivity rate unlikely to gladden the heart of the CBI. Yet it isn't exactly that a Poetry Editor doesn't work; it's rather that what work he does, like an abortionist or abbattoir-attendant, is mainly devoted to the prevention rather than promotion of certain events. The Poetry Editor plays Haldeman to the editor's Nixon—a hatchet-faced functionary grimly encamped at his master's door to shield him from the importunity of besieging poets, suppressing pentameters as Haldeman stamped on politicians. He's like the great painter in Henry James's short story who never quite pulled off anything as crudely empirical as a canvas, or the suavely unobtrusive host whose labour is most present by its absence. Just as certain bishops seem to define their role as sitting firmly on the slightest manifestation of the Spirit, so a Poetry Editor's main function in life seems the assiduous prevention of the publication of poetry. Yearning like a misunderstood cop to be the public's friend, his relationship to potential contributors turns out to be more like that of a Customs officer to his clients, ritually rummaging through their shyly offered baggage for something of value before brusquely packing them off.

Lest this prove to be my first and final appearance as Poetry Editor in *New Blackfriars*, I'd better say something quickly by way of self-defence. For one thing, such negative behaviour is in the nature of being a Poetry Editor. It would be a charitable but naive view of the doormen at the Savoy Hotel to think that they are there only to let people in. Moreover, though we do of course welcome and will publish good poetry, most of the poetry submitted to theological journals warrants instant suppression. It is worth pondering the reasons for this. Religious journals naturally attract religious poetry; and what that generally means at present is a clumsy cross-breed of sentimental devotionism and heavy-handed moralising. In this respect, the arts, as always, are a significant revelation of the life of the church. For what most of the output of amateur Christian poets manifests is the depressing fact that the moral and devotional habits of feeling widespread among Christians are just sufficiently out of touch with what's toughest, richest and shrewdest in the contemporary sensibility to fail to produce fine poetry. And this isn't merely a matter of those pregnant lines spoken by a sparrow into St Francis's ear which load the desk of every Christian Poetry Editor. It's true too, in the main, of the most impressive 'religious' poetry one receives, which almost always betrays some slight strain of unreality, some lack of moral complexity and

faint failure of ironic self-consciousness in the pattern of its responses. One might pose the issue at a different level and say, as Fr. Cornelius Ernst has remarked, that theology has failed to undergo the 'modernist' revolution which generated much of what is most significant in our contemporary arts.

The reason why we have so little outstanding poetry of religious commitment is akin to the reason why we have almost no good poetry of political commitment. Within the withered positivism of late bourgeois society, both religious and political poetry are condemned either to banal explicitness, or to touching a depth of insight which is then not easily embodied in a shrewdly realistic sense of ordinary, immediate experience.

It shouldn't, then, be surprising that we largely lack such poetry, failing as we have done to create the conditions of life which might nurture it. The best of our 'religious' poets—men like Jon Silkin and Michael Hamburger—consciously reject Christian faith (although the fact that both of these writers are Jewish isn't in the least incidental to their artistic excellence). With *Four Quartets* behind us, we know that such rejection isn't essential to the achievement of genuinely religious poetry in our time; but that, suitably for a Poetry Editor, is a sadly negative statement.

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