

Francis Berry, *Collected Poems*

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Francis Berry (1915-) has published his *Collected Poems*. The collection includes almost all the former publications since 1933 which are: *Gospel of Fire* (1933); *Snake in the Moon* (1936); *The Iron Christ* (1938); *Fall of a Tower* (1941); *Murdoch and Other Poems* (1948); *Morant Bay and Other Poems* (1961); *Ghosts of Greenland* (1966); *From the Red Fort* (1984).

Berry's poems are supported by his theory of poetry. He is an outstanding poetic critic and a scholar of English Literature who is capable of explaining his poetics in scholastic terms of phonetics based on both keen insight of English and its sounds and objective knowledge. Great poets possess naturally keen sensitivity and insight into the language and its sounds and are able to realize them in their actual works; Shakespeare is the best example. They are usually unable to express their poetics but through their actual works. Conversely, therefore, if we read them with sufficient phonetic and linguistic knowledge, their phonetic and linguistic features are readily perceived.

Francis Berry is, on the contrary, a very rare case (parallel probably to Hopkins who wrote his poetics in letters and notebooks) in that he has published his poetics in books. *His Poetry and the Physical Voice* (1962) and *Poets' Grammar* (1958) are particularly important in this sense. These books are the manifestation of his scholastic predilection which acquired for him chairs of English Literature at both Sheffield and London.

Skimming through the *Collected Poems*, one is immediately impressed with the versatility and variety of subject matter; it ranges from modern technological devices like the sky rocket and photograph to people like G. Wilson Knight and William Empson through nature (who cannot be a nature poet as English, though), historical events, legends, fantasies and others. This diversity is a clear reflection of our age of rapid progress and the expansion of modern industry and society controlled by it. Berry's attitude towards his subject matter is on the whole Christian in both the strict and broad sense of the word; his personality warm and passionate.

Yet Berry's style is unmistakably and dramatically both Elizabethan and medieval. He has been fighting for and championing the power of his mother tongue. This is the mainstream and soul of English poetry. No doubt his language lacks the smoothness and softness of the language of modern and contemporary English poetry. He has even

ignored the regularity of poetic style. He is most unique as an English poet in that he writes almost no sonnets. This is perhaps because he felt from the beginning that his overwhelming, overflowing passion and power could not be regulated by and confined in such a limited and regular form or in any other conventional form. What he has been fighting to bring forth are poems whose one word, one expression, one line is worth a whole sonnet. His painful struggle began early; already in one of his first poems we find lines like:

Its kicks and wrenching struggles pain, --
"I must be free," this demon cries,
"New blood which must be red, red-flowing,
streaming swift and red:
And flesh,
Sun-saturated: and
Calm nerves, not twisted, still, not restless
with potentiality and yet unable to
Obtain; . . . ("April Pain")

Both his diction and forms has their genesis in this one of the earliest pieces.

His rugged diction and irregular forms are deep-rooted in the phonetic and linguistic reality that language is essentially speech in sound. Articulated speech embraces all and every essential quality of the language which writing could never keep nor reproduce. Indeed, "poetry is speech framed to be heard".

Also the origin and tradition of poetry is oral. The mainstream came to enjoy its golden time in the Elizabethan age. It declined suddenly in the Victorian age with the drastic social change due to the industrial revolution. The spread of education and cheap printed books came as serious drawbacks to the tradition; lovers of poetry came to rely more on their eyes than ears. This weakening trend continued into the present century despite the resistance and efforts by not a small number of poets.

Poets are by nature "oral-conscious" people. The vital question is *how much* are they conscious and *how* they can realize their consciousness in poetry. Language is oral in essence and origin and the poet is oral as long as he composes poetry in language. This alone could never distinguish the poet from ordinary people. I am writing this review in English which has sound but this is not a poem. There are millions of lines written which conform to poetic rules but they are not necessarily poetry. Many of them may be "prose fantastically written to rules."

When we come across lines like:

Womb are wonderful, the one that wrought
Young Jesus, those that wrought the first white whales
That ever whispered on the sunset foam,
As starset, or the broad hush of noon; or him,
The striped hyena, howling in a wilderness,
we could actually hear the original *w*-sound now mute in a few of the words in them.
One feels as if the *w* of medieval age has come alive!

To fashion these expressions and lines requires perpetual effort and passion to exert the power of individual sounds comparable to the paints for the artist. A clear manifestation is a small piece called "M" which begins and ends with an *m*:

M murmur M for Murder or Murther,
For 'Mwamba or 'Mwaumba or Moon,
M for the Milk,... to roam.

With this sensitivity for sound and its auditory effect and with gusto which cannot be governed by poetic form Francis Berry adopted and developed a rare form called *verse-paragraph*, which T. S. Eliot had used. This is ideal for long narrative poems such as *The Iron Christ*, *Morant Bay* and *Murdock*. In fact *The Iron Christ* is a mixture of poetry and prose with irregular verse lines and paragraphs; *Morant Bay* has a greater irregularity; *Murdock*, the least irregular of the three is still so irregular that whose Part I, for example, comprises 9 paragraphs of different lines (presumably as it is not certain if a paragraph may be divided by pages) ranging from twenty one to two lines; the basic metre is iambic pentameter but with a variety. The ruggedness and overwhelming irregularity of Francis Berry makes even the revolutionary style of Hopkins appear smooth and tame.

Not only for style but also for subject matter Berry's choice of verse paragraph is suitable. He uses dramatic stories and composes long narrative poems; he lets his imagination work. His particular strength is his ever sharp hearing and seeing; and in him these two are closely connected. Talking about "Photograph", the poets says, "The seeing was inseparably combined with hearing...."¹ Hence the lines in which the two faculties intimately work together:

A red rose reeling out of view
Red-brick gaiety amid the frenzied baritone
Of London traffic rising to summer advent.

In his pioneering study *Poetry and the Physical Voice*, he admits this in general terms: "I am indeed half persuaded by those who urge that the origin of a poem lies not

in sound but seeing.... as far as the poet is concerned—... what he perceives and the way he does so may be conditioned by his obligation to communicate what he perceives in sound.”²

In one of his best long poems, *Murdock*, his imagination and senses are at their fullest and keenest already at an earlier stage. Under dramatically contrasted circumstances of hot, dry and dangerous wartime Malta and “in a state of great nervous and physical exhaustion...undernourished, sleepless, very stunned by events and so on”³, he suddenly felt “a strong sense of England” or keen desire “O to be in England”. The poem was written almost automatically “and scarcely needed to be revised at all.” What caused this was rain. With a very similar genesis to Yeats’ “The Like Isle of Innisfree”, Berry’s *Murdock*, whose atmosphere is very English and of a “very different kind” from that of Malta, was composed. The “horror story” of the ominous monster brothers in an English country village keeps gripping the reader to the end with many memorable lines; a few of them are:

Clenched, turning, choking, reaching higher Ground,
They grasp the moan, hurl Blows, turn snarling round
For dolorous Blows and straining Sighs,
Reach icy Peaks, are cast on background Skies.

These symbolize Berry’s kinetic style based on strong and strongly pronounced Anglo-Saxon monosyllables (with the gerund form); and here is a delightful contrast between them and the Latin *dolorous*. The perfection of this style is what the poet has been aiming at.

Throughout his long poetic career Francis Berry has been battling against the general linguistic tendency to treat words cheaply. He has been championing the gravity, force, power and dynamism of individual words. This is a sure sign of a great poet. Like Hopkins, and Keats and many other distinguished poets Berry acknowledges the age of Shakespeare as the Golden Age of English poetry. For his poetic language he looks back far beyond the Golden Age in the tradition. It is not without reason that he feels nostalgia for and sympathy with Germanic poetry which includes Anglo-Saxon poetry, when the tradition of narrative poetry existed in its simplest and therefore purest form.

His rugged, powerful long works overwhelm and even baffle enfeebled readers of today who are accustomed to quiet, smooth and soothing light verses. His new *Collected Poems* is his real voice. Towards the very end of the century we are fortunate enough to have its great impact. Without doubt Francis Berry is one of the best and most important poets of this century. He deserves more attention.

¹ G. Wilson Knight, *Neglected Powers: Essays on Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Literature*. London, 1971. p.478.

² P. x.

³ An Interview with Francis Berry conducted by me at his home, Egham, Surry, July 1974.