

## Editorial

It is a strange business handing over truths to the next generation. And just as strange trying to identify the truths one wants to hear from someone older and who has seen much more than one ever will oneself. Perhaps, to be a poet always involves placing oneself in this situation – who are you listening to and what are you hearing; to whom are you speaking and what will they hear in what you have said? In 1973, as part of his *Northern House* project, Jon Silkin gave me books and typescripts by Emanuel Litvinoff from which to choose a limited number of poems for a new pamphlet. I was also to write an introduction. It was, in a very practical way, an act of 'handing poetry on'.

*Notes for a Survivor* became my first real task as an editor. At that time I had not yet met Litvinoff and I do not recall whether I wrote to him to ask whether he had any guidance for what I might say or whether there were any poems he would especially like to be included. Doubtless, I asked Silkin for help although what I think happened was that, in making me Litvinoff's 'editor' he was offering me a 'gift' – it was for me to read, understand and choose again for the future. It was for me to ask the questions that seemed important; it was not for him to tell me what they might be. At the same time, I read *Journey through a Small Planet*, Litvinoff's memories of his Whitechapel childhood, education and voyage into work also published in 1973. He was born in the First World War, grew up in poverty and left school at 14. The Jewish community provided very close contact with people of all

ages – the food, smells, textures, clothes, weight and skin of parents, siblings and friends were all shared. The rooms were small, the tenements crowded. Work of different sorts for men and women brought money – sometimes – and social identity. In many ways, the East End life was more akin to that of Jewish communities in cities of Eastern Europe than to the rest of London.

As a record of life *Journey* had all the qualities of great literary realism. The sense of 'felt experience', the closely observed detail, the realisation that this was a world of inevitable poverty seen from the inside – it was home – and yet it was perpetually surprising which gave the book a wonderful air of discovery. Both for Litvinoff, and for the reader, living with surprise was to prove a gift.

But how did this technical mastery of realism relate to the poems I was reading and choosing? In 1973 it seemed an odd mixture. Some of the poems were written in a mode of vision, hope, assertion and regret that was particular to wartime and the years just after:

Here is another shore, and the sea calm:  
the bird of darkness who hovered  
night-long above our prow, gone.  
Now dawn seeps up the estuary.  
The veiled river lies unwreathed of sleep,  
marsh-grasses, mud flats, naked now of dark,  
surprise the land-starved eye. Punished by storm,  
our gaunt exhausted ship rides anchor,  
awaiting a convalescent tide.

Jon Glover

What country have we found,  
we who are outcasts,  
foreign in every harbour, strange in none,  
wanderers of the cold prodigious seas,  
our compass set to the magnetic pole of God?  
What country have we found?

(from 'The Dead Sea')

This was so different from

It was the summer we became orphans, my three brothers and I. The news had come at last, eight years after my father had gone back to Russia in the company of other reluctant Jews faced with the alternative of dying on the Western Front or serving in the army of the Tsar. Soon after they arrived the Bolsheviks stormed the Winter Palace and gusts of that revolution blew with Siberian bleakness through our East End tenement. Now and then letters came begging for warm clothes, food, pictures of the family. We were taken one day to a studio, where we all held hands and stared in petrified alarm at the man crouching behind a black cloth. My father may have died with that photograph in his breast pocket, but no one will ever know because his letters stopped coming.

(from 'Call Me Uncle Solly', *Journey Through a Small Planet*)

Obviously, they were not written at the same time. But now, looking back, it seems far more reasonable to see the two

approaches as complementary, and importantly so. The real forces of life and death that stirred together the most intimate and individual experiences with the most enormous issues of human conflict and destiny are perhaps only validated in culture through first-hand involvement with the extreme.

Recently, I came across in Jon Silkin's papers (held in Special Collections in the University of Leeds) another example of this process of 'handing over' in a way which linked Emanuel Litvinoff to one of Silkin's most precisely observed yet historically vast poems, 'The Coldness'. The poem, started in 1960 after a visit to York, explores the persecution of the Jews there in 1190:

In 1960, I made a visit to York. I remember three things. The coldness of the minster; the coldness of the response from Rowntree to advertise in *Stand*, and the superiority with which they informed me that only mass media would do. My final memory is of the swans on the river and of this church (which I think may have been pulled down now) resting against a printing works.

He wrote the first draft on the train back to Leeds. But it covered only what is now the first section of the poem as published. He took the third draft to

my friend Emanuel Litvinoff. As an avowed Jew, I trust(ed) his reactions. He liked the poem but his single but persuasive comment was that its movement, both in meaning and dramatic possibility lacked a further section.



(letter from Silkin to the University Librarian, B S Page donating drafts of 'The Coldness' to the library, 1964)

It is, of course, one of his most memorable poems. But how fascinating to see the creative process in action – his observation and reaction is melded with the reactions of another writer who hinted that the particular should be placed into a wider European perspective, both geographical and historical. And this is one of many examples from this time of how a rather special form of a historicised landscape became both a cause and subject of poetry. And how particular events became enriched through their relationship with the context so inevitably informed by the Holocaust.

The process of handing on continued and continues through *Stand* and other journals dedicated to poetry. Here is Jeffrey Wainwright, in an interview with Helen Tookey published in *PNR (Poetry Nation Review)* 182:

Crucially [in the 1960s] I was influenced ...through the writings and personal contact with Jon Silkin, Ken Smith and Geoffrey Hill among many others. Three indicative texts to illustrate this would be Silkin's 'The Coldness', about the Jewish pogrom in York in 1190, Smith's 'The Pity', a dramatic monologue derived from a phrase by Mao-tse-Tung, and Hill's 'Funeral Music' whose scenario is the Wars of the Roses.

('A Kind of Mud-Wrestling': A Conversation with Jeffrey Wainwright, *PNR* 182 July – August 2008)

Wainwright goes on to explain how his familiarity with this poetry, and familiarity with its writers, offered a sort of political energy in his historical vision:

I was never a very convincing Marxist but what I put in [Thomas] Münzer's mouth is the Marxist idea of historical materialism as making sense of everything, though I hope the ambivalence about that comes through the cadence too.

Silkin, through the influence of Emanuel Litvinoff, felt able to see 'The Coldness' as 'a bit of a protest'. I would like to think that *Stand* offers some continuity with this process of contact with the writing and writers of a wider world. Emanuel Litvinoff is 93. Tony Rudolf and I visited him recently in Bloomsbury and talked with him, his wife Mary and his son Aaron. It was an exciting and wonderful meeting. He was surrounded by books including his own novels and poems and books by his friends and relatives. Behind him, and very visible, was a shelf of *Stand*s. Aaron remembered that they had always had that prominent place. Litvinoff contributed to *Stand* first in issue 9 in 1954 and he has been an important influence ever since. *Journey Through a Small Planet* is a very welcome addition to Penguin Classics.

Jon Glover