

We are very pleased to include in this issue poems by James Kirkup. Looking at them I found myself making some comparisons between poetry now and issues dividing and uniting poets in the immediate post-war period when Kirkup first appeared in *Stand*. Are today's 'mainstream', 'experimental', 'sound' and 'text' poems parts of a continuum or are they essentially different? Are they using criteria of success similar to those in the '40s and '50s or are they new? Might any, or all, need to announce their positions on 'relevance'? Should we all declare allegiance to commitment and personal, social or political links on the one hand or to technical and systematised language manipulation on the other? Given the many acknowledged threats since 1945 from Global Warming, the Credit Crunch, disease and famine – not to mention devastating and continuous wars – where does poetry stand?

The first of James Kirkup's poems to appear in *Stand* were in the 'Second Issue' in 1952. By this date he was 32 and already well known. His second volume from Oxford University Press, *A Correct Compassion and other poems*, appeared in the same year. It was also the year that marked the end of his two-year Fellowship at Leeds University as the UK's first 'poet in residence'. *A Correct Compassion* is dedicated to Peter Gregory, who, with Bonamy Dobrée, T S Eliot, Herbert Read and Henry Moore, had organised the Gregory Fellowships. Eric Gregory, known as Peter by his friends, ran a publishing and printing business and funded

the Fellowships. He seemed to Kirkup an admirable patron whose 'disinterested honesty' allowed him to promote poetry and poets, not for political, social or business ends, but to support 'we who sow what only love may reap'. Kirkup wrote the dedication, 'To a Patron', in Leeds in December 1951. It amounts to a fascinating manifesto.

Kirkup, born in 1918, had lived through the Second World War conscious of his beliefs as poet, Conscientious Objector and pacifist. Surely, the 1950s would have been a time for acute political awareness, for commitment, for action to ensure that 'never again...' However, many writers shared Kirkup's decision to put writing first. Indeed, the human necessity for an unfettered poetry able to set its own aims and criteria for success had often been articulated by poets in wartime including some on active service.

Jon Silkin must have been pondering these issues in 1952 when writing his editorial for *Stand's* 'Second Issue'. He was 22. On the one hand he saw some post-war poets and editors emphasising 'concentration on technique' to the exclusion of a healthy relationship between writer and reader. On the other hand, he saw that 'the poetry with a "story" is as valid a form for this approach as any' to rebuild the relationship. The existence of a 'story' was also the key to success 'as poetry'. Indeed, he saw concentration on technique as a way of precluding the 'best poems' from recognition. Using identifiable stories ('...not narrative poetry, exactly'), enabled the poet to '...stiffen the poem for us into something crystalline, adamant...The story becomes the means and the end; it is a progress, but it is also an arrival. It is the single interpretation of a multitude of events'.

How far did Kirkup's poems in the 'Second Issue' exemplify such thinking? 'The Hauntings and the Haunted' has a special combination of clear empirical base, 'The park railings.../ Through which a screaming host / Of birds completely plunges', and personal narrative relevance, 'My shadow flickers on...', and general inclusiveness:

Such ghosts are hope, and love, and trust,
That haunt still, because they must,
The ghosts their going makes of us.

There are qualities here which are hard to place and to hear correctly. Where are the big themes of the early '50s – austerity Britain, the Cold War, Korea, the first H Bombs, the Berlin blockade, the re-election of Churchill, and the awful aftermath of war in Europe and the Holocaust? In some ways Kirkup is staying within his own narrative limits. Visions are fleeting or accidental; self-assignment to a big role in the baggage-train of war and peace were to be low key. Indeed, the notion that a poet could take his position as inheritor or prophet in the symbolism of history was to a large extent taken for granted, written and read 'on trust'. Common readers and common writers had all been through 'ten years' destruction throughout the world and the cold war of these more recent years' so their force could be spoken of without demands or protestation. 'The Caged Bird in Springtime' and 'Ship in Fog' both use the image of a bird, trapped or lost, (in ways that Silkin was to do in his first books). Kirkup adopts a casual tone that is nicely anti-Romantic in action, compelling but un-clogged in sentence structure:

But how absurd!
I have never flown in my life,
And I do not know
What flying means, though I have heard,
Of course, something about it.

(from 'The Caged Bird in Springtime')

Birds smash and flutter
Through one dark
Wall into the other.

The smothering sirens bark and boom.
No drifting berg must enter
The one door of this unleaveable room.

(from 'Ship in Fog')

Was this the sort of poetry that had the best of both worlds, narrative *and* crystallisation? I would suggest that it was. Interestingly, Kirkup was to develop special qualities of poetry that is a progress and also an arrival through his work as translator, dramatist and tireless promoter of Japanese poetry in English. And these are qualities we welcome in his poems in this issue. I intend to continue the debate about technique and (versus?) 'relevance' in future issues and welcome your views.

Jon Glover

Our recent dialogue with James Kirkup has not only related to poetry for *Stand* but to our on-going interest in 'communities of writing', especially the pre-Creative Writing course interactions between poets, publications and universities. During the course of the Leeds Poetry 1950-1980 research project, I had a fascinating correspondence with James Kirkup regarding his time in Leeds as Gregory Fellow in Poetry and contact with other poets who had held the Gregory Fellowship. He recalled sometimes crossing paths with Silkin touting *Stand* in West End bookshops (as many did), and on one or two occasions being entrusted to assist in their distribution. Then, as now, he admired Silkin's work, both as a poet and as an 'inspired and revolutionary editor.'

In November 1959, during Silkin's own time as Gregory Fellow in Poetry, a debate in the pages of student magazine, *Poetry and Audience* (*P&A*), was sparked by the publication of Kirkup's poem 'Gay Boys'. This was not the first of Kirkup's poems to be published in *P&A*. He describes the freedom of the moment as two young men dance 'quietly together in a corner':

Neither guilt nor passion moves them, neither do they think
Of happiness, a concept unnecessary to enjoyment.
Untroubled creatures of the spirit's jungle.
They neither smile nor weep, but turn their open masks
To look no further than the moment and each other,
Mirroring the long cool record's easy play.
(from 'Gay Boys')

Only two years after the publication of the Wolfenden Report, the editorial decision to publish Kirkup's poem was seen by some

amongst the student body as controversial. Two weeks after the poem's publication, *P&A* published a letter berating the editor's moral decadence in his refusal to recognise the social vice in this 'celebration of homosexual affection'.

Silkin himself had no editorial jurisdiction over the magazine - Gregory Fellows in Poetry were closely associated with *P&A* from its inception, but editorial decisions were made by a student editorial team, then headed by Tony Harrison. Silkin, however, was compelled to respond, and 'Live together at Leeds', in which he condemned the notion that homosexuality could be eradicated through censorship, was published the following week. Silkin was then accused by the unhappy students of being 'once again ... a rebel against orthodoxy and a champion of the oppressed'. Rather than seeing himself as a rebel, however, Silkin saw his compassion, and his stand against lack of understanding, as a sign of his orthodoxy.

Further information about this research can be found on the University of Leeds website:
www.leeds.ac.uk/library/spcoll/leedspoetry

Kathryn Jenner

Sources: James Kirkup, 'Gay Boys', *Poetry and Audience*, 7:5 (November 1959); Letter to the Editor, *Poetry and Audience*, 7:7 (27 November 1959); Jon Silkin, 'Live together at Leeds', *Poetry and Audience*, 7:8 (4 December 1959); Letters to the Editor, *Poetry and Audience*, 7:11 (22 January 1960).