

TRAILING AMBIGUITIES

GEORGE BOWERING, *Delayed Mercy and Other Poems*. Coach House, \$12.50.

THIS BOOK IS loosely divided into two sections: the first, "Delayed Mercy" (about two-thirds of the total), is composed of poems addressed to a variety of writers — Herman Melville, H. D., and Hubert Aquin among many others. The second section, which comprises "Section Two," "Irritable Reaching," and "The Pope's Pennies," is about family, memory, and writing, and is mostly short rhyming lyrics. Says Bowering of the poems in the book: "I wrote these lines at 3am, when your brain is too tired to keep the unexpected pictures out; when 'Late night poems / and children should be in bed.'" This statement represents both the good and the bad that has resulted. Unfortunately, the bad must get first attention, since there are more unsuccessful poems in this book than there are successful ones.

Almost all the poems in the book seem to be intensely private musings on subjects that are only hinted at or vaguely alluded to. They do not allow the reader within their secrets, within their worlds. Here is a section from "It's Another Miracle (fr bp Nichol)":

I wear a second shirt & call it a jacket.
People remark on the beautiful birds,
they are sticht on the back. Cats cant get
them.
My own back
has been itchy for a week. I dont say this
for the rime (dont say 'rime' in a rime),
all right, but it's the immediate fact,
my itching back.

And here is a section from "Mirrors Show":

Mirror show up empty, windows turn black,
and mannequins stand in couples back to
back;
ripples rise in ponds unbidden by the wind,
giving old misgivings to a maiden who has
sinned
against a godlike apparition dressed in green
and
red and acting unimagined where
mannequins stand,
each meaning something to this watcher but
nought
to one another, only to their fiction wrought.

As I read and reread poems like this I try to imagine what hides in the shadows that the words create. Perhaps these poems are more concerned with "delay" and "mercy" than I can appreciate. Perhaps these poems are not about shadows at all, but rather the directness of speech, colour, texture. But I don't think it's that easy. If the poems are meant for a wider audience than the person to whom they are addressed, then I can't help feeling cheated by these poems. Perhaps there are too many "unexpected pictures," too many unexpected *in-jokes* to warrant interest from the *outside* reader.

In the collection preceding this one, *Kerrisdale Elegies*, Bowering was always conscious of audience, as well as of his intensely private and autobiographical meditations. In *Delayed Mercy* the general reader seems largely to have been forgotten. Perhaps the reason is that this book is often concerned with the emptiness of language and words. Toward the end of the book this theme is particularly evident: "Sometimes your word organ / is just empty, / you stare at an object, a broken tree, / a grate in the ceiling, / & you cant say, you can only think / you cant say, / the thing in front of you / becomes worthless"; "Do you have to write / just because there's a pen?"; "Here, do we always have to / talk about poetry / when we mean our lives? / (I didnt want to write a poem, / somehow starting this, I wanted / time to make a thing / longer, a thing lived / in my head too long.)" But again, I think that is too easy an explanation. I like poems that lounge around or bang around in my head for a time — unfortunately, that does not happen with these poems.

Those that I found most satisfying were the ones in which Bowering tells a story, any story, about himself, or a cat:

*The black & white killer cat who used to live
next door walkt
my way without seeing or without caring that
I was there. He
stept four-foot along the rail of the rotting
fence, not
swaying as it swayed, foot step off the moving
board, intent on
patrolling my, not his, yard.*

Here, from "Thea in Oliver," is Bowering simultaneously talking to himself, to Thea, and to the reader:

Drawing a few days of your childhood
upon my boyhood's landscape,
I make memory not a servant but a poem
through which you scamper, a brownish
butterfly in the sun. A daughter,
a metaphor, a sister to my first years.

In these lines Bowering has an intense loyalty to the subject and object of the poem, but at the same time has not forgotten his responsibility to the audience, the anonymous readers willing to offer their interest. It is disappointing to see so many private poems that do not work, when Bowering obviously can write ones that do.

At its best this book has a late-night sadness and softness. But you have to look hard, perhaps too hard, to see it: there is too much private, ungiving hardness to too many of the poems. What we are left with in this book are "A trail of ambiguities" as Bowering tells us in the last poem. This trail sometimes leads the reader into a private and reflective world. But more often than not in this book, it does not.

PETER O'BRIEN

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