



THE TAME AND THE JUST?

by **John Lucas**

REBEL ANGELS: 25 Poets of the New Formalism

edited by **Mark Jarman** and **David Mason**.

Story Line Press, 1996, \$12.00 paperback.

“There is no such thing as formal verse. Poems are well or badly written, that is all.” But no. Reversing Eliot’s famous dictum about *vers libre* won’t work. Yet it hardly needs saying that to write in regular metre and obedience to stanzaic rules isn’t a guarantee of writing well. It may however be a guarantee of conformity. In nineteenth century America formal verse became increasingly associated with the constraints of English culture. Emma Lazarus clearly identified formal verse with anti-egalitarianism; it was un-American. Then why bow the knee to its demands?

How long, and yet how long
Our leaders will we hail from over seas,
Masters and kings from feudal monarchies,
And mock their ancient song
With echoes weak of foreign melodies.

Lazarus, writing it must be said in impeccable iambics, has no doubt that this habit of echoing foreign melodies is doomed. “The echo faints and fails; / It suited not, upon this western plain, / Our voice or spirit.” She produced those lines some twenty years after the first publication of *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman, as Ezra Pound reluctantly acknowledged, changed everything: “It was you that broke the new wood.”

It’s a commonplace that following Whitman’s breakthrough American poetry can be divided between what is variously called “redskin and paleface” or “raw and cooked”. On the one hand, “new world writing”, on the other, continued borrowings from the old world. The stylistic divide is cultural and political: radical versus conservative. In the red corner, Whitman; in the white, Emily Dickinson. And after them, Williams versus Frost, and, if we think of the Agrarian poets, South versus North: Tate and Crowe Ransom versus Hart Crane, perhaps. But as this example shows, the terms won’t always fit the case. Hart Crane is as much concerned with the formal proprieties of verse as are his southern counterparts; and the Lowell of *Lord Weary’s Castle* owes as much to Tate as he does to Crane. Then again, the radical Williams, whose influence on *Life Studies* proved so enabling, was deeply opposed to and by the politics and cultural views of his contemporaries and equal masters of free verse, Pound and Eliot.

Nevertheless, there’s a widespread feeling — sometimes amounting to a critical rule-of-thumb — that formal verse is old hat, unfit for these modern or post-modern

times. The feeling is, as far as I can judge, especially strong in America, where it's often linked to what passes for a Marxist/Foucauldian theory that at predictable moments in history a certain form will go dead. An instance frequently cited — probably because theorists by and large don't go in for reading a great deal of poetry — was Blake's success in springing poetry from “the great cage” of the “Augustan” or closed couplet. This type of couplet, we are told, became an unuseable form during the Romantic period, or could be employed only by those who had no purchase on the spirit of the age. So much for *Peter Grimes*. It is true that from time to time certain poetic forms languish. It's equally true that they can be given new life by any poet who sees how to make use of them. An obvious example is Empson's re-discovery of the villanelle. Another is that exotic beast, the pantoum, fine examples of which have recently been brought to book by Peter Porter and John Tranter. Any form is useable at any time, might be the safest generalisation. We can probably all agree that much of the formal verse around at the present time is a kind of bijou offering, a literary equivalent of those lacquered shells to be found in curio shoppes strung along most sea-fronts. Or as Tom Paulin puts it in his poem “Air Plane”: “Foursquare / a dead duck / ...so many poems / are like square ducks / that is they contrive / to be both tame and just.” But then the same, or worse, can be held against most poetry, whatever the shape of its saying.

You wouldn't expect the tame and the just to pester poems that make up an anthology called *Rebel Angels*. The title and the American provenance seem the guarantee of a bristly confrontation. In the introduction to their chosen 25 poets of “the New Formalism” Mark Jarman and David Mason claim that “Rejecting the sentimental notion that meter is un-American, New Formalists have contributed to a new consensus, defending the material value of verse against the encroachment of prose, while simultaneously defending popular subjects against the charge of philistinism. These are, after all, poets who came of age when television was the most powerful medium. Ultimately, though, the rediscovery of meter by younger writers reminds us that language requires renewal by each succeeding generation.” This manifesto-like utterance is, as the editors generously acknowledge, buttressed by Timothy Steele's treatise on *Missing Measures* and Dana Gioia's justly celebrated *Can Poetry Matter?*, a witty and substantial criticism of the damaging effective creative writing schemes in American Universities have had in fostering groups who protect and promote each other's work irrespective of talent and craftsmanship, and of which, to the present writer at least, the emergence of the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets is the most preposterous example. Good that poets can be found who are willing to take on this new conformity. The anthology's cover illustration, a reproduction of Blake's “The Good and Evil Angels Struggling for Possession of a Child” is equally insistent. Meeting the *Rebel Angels*, any reader will surely assume, is bound to prove a heady encounter.

The reality is rather different. The evil angel of anti-formalism — let's call him Belial — might say that these 240 pages of text offer not so much the energy of rebellion as a kind of enervate dullness. And, Belial could add, the anthology as a whole feels rather like an example of 20th century church architecture: a structure whose purpose is unsure and which lacks contemporary vernacular. Belial knows that in saying this he's taunting the editors when they remark that their chosen poets, by using metre, remind us “that language requires renewal by each succeeding generation.” But what's metre got to do with it, Belial might well ask, except in the negative sense that the rebel angels commit the crime against poetry of which Pound convicted pre-first

world war English poets: of stuffing their lines with stale words and phrases simply to fit the metre or the rhyme? How else could the following, selected at random, appear in an anthology published in the 1990s: “larch whose sap / sometimes *bedews* the dreamer in suspension”; “The moon appears and *flees*”; “paintings from some fine old master’s hand”; “one by one they’re *bodied forth*”. (Emphases all Belial’s.) And “bodied forth”, Belial notes, comes from a poem Philip Larkin wrote some fifty years ago. (“Can it be borne, this bodying-forth by wind / of joy...”). But then another poem borrows to no great purpose Suckling’s famous image of a bee-stung lip and yet another to even less purpose includes a variation on Edmund’s “Some good I mean to do / Despite of my own nature.” In these cases, and others, the borrowings are less knowing than hapless. And for all the claim that the anthology is somehow attuned to the popular — which surely suggests an alertness to argot, to the idiomatic? — the poems by and large exude a bookish smell. So says Belial.

As to subject matter, here the encroachments of, if not prose, then the prosaic, are especially debilitating. Belial recalls that the Movement poets of the 1950s were rightly criticized for giving house room to ersatz ratiocination: an on-the-one-hand-but-on-the-other sort of balance, the presumed decorum of which, far from being intellectually daring, was merely habitual, the dithering binaries of the tame and the just. Well, consider the way in which in *Rebel Angels*, words like “yet” and “odd” are used to indicate a sudden check to thought, as in “Odd, how his genius courts expectancy,” or “Yet time yields shape and history.” One poem, ‘The Waterfall’, begins with two stanzas describing the irregular movements of water and then continues “So too with language, so even with this verse. / From a pool of syllables, words hover / With rich potential, then spill across the lip...”. Belial admits the neat wit of that last phrase, but points out that it’s weakened by the cliché “rich potential”; besides, he asserts, the poem’s *donnée* can be traced to Donald Davie’s far better poem, ‘The Fountain’.

The author of ‘The Waterfall’ is Greg Williamson, who is also represented by a narrative poem. Narratives matter to the rebel angels and a very good thing, too. The narrative poems included in this anthology are among its best things. But why, Belial wants to know, despite the editors’ insistence that their poets defend “popular subjects against the charge of philistinism”, are the narratives typically set in rural communities and deal with past events? Where is the city? Where is there any evidence that these poets came of age “when television was the most powerful medium”? Not in Williamson’s ‘Walter Parmer’, that’s for sure. Still, Belial acknowledges that this six-part narrative, a kind of ghost story about the burning down of an abandoned village school, undoubtedly works well, and that Williamson handles *terza rima* with enviable ease. At the end of the poem a young man thinks he hears something stirring in the wrecked building,

like shoes scuffing a wooden floor.
And then a chalk stick squeaks across clean slate,
like a dry hinge turning. Down the hall a door

Is opening on a room where a classmate
Is looking at a warping windowpane ...

Pity about the repeated “like”, Belial says, but that apart he will agree that the movement of the lines is subtle and assured. But don’t think he’s weakening. He’s saved his most wounding criticism till the last. Why, he wants to know, do so many

of the anthology's poets appear not to know or have taken the measure of Hardy's "cunning irregularity", his use of what he called "metrical pauses, and reversed beats"; and where, oh where is Frost's concern for "sentence sound"? Where for that matter are five stresses to be found in the following intendedly pentameter line: "Don't give me any: just promise me some"? Or

But at this point Belial is elbowed aside by the good angel, Gabriel. He's here to provide reasons why *Rebel Angels* ought to be on the shelves of anyone who cares about poetry. Gabriel points to the example of Tom Disch, whose 'Ballade of the New God' quite brilliantly exploits the form in which it's written. At his best, Gabriel says, Disch is one of the wittiest poets writing; and he's often at his best in the pages allotted to him in *Rebel Angels*. Then there's Brad Leithauser's 'The Ghost of a Ghost', which moves deftly between three and four-stress lines in a manner that makes for a true speaking presence. Then again Marilyn Hacker's 'Cancer Winter', part narrative, part acute psychological probing, is a *tour-de-force*, fourteen Petrarchan sonnets handled with, as Hardy commented, "the art of concealing art." Frederick Feirstein's 'Mark Stern Wakes Up' delivers its Raymond Carver-like tale of male frustration in couplets whose panache is harmed only by a rhyme on "thing". Belial interrupts to point out that Timothy Steele resorts to the same desperate ploy in his poem 'Timothy': "Across the grass which seemed a thing / In which the lonely and concealed / Had risen from its sorrowing / And flourished in the open field." Yes, yes, Gabriel says impatiently, but what of the good poems by, among others, Marilyn Nelson ('Chopin' — a sonnet) and R. S. Gwynn, who makes an entire set of verses out of an ingenious use of famous pentameters. ('Approaching a Significant Birthday, He Peruses *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*' ends: "Downward to darkness on extended wings, / Break, break, break on thy cold gray stones, O sea, / And tell sad stories of the death of kings. / I do not think that they will sing to me.")? Belial is silent.

The last shall be first, Gabriel says. Andrew Hudgins is a master of the iambic pentameter, especially for narrative purposes. In fact, there haven't been better narratives than 'Saints and Strangers' since — oh, since, if not Frost, because nobody can touch him, then certainly E. A. Robinson. 'Saints and Strangers' manages to achieve the seemingly impossible: produce a credible, sympathetic, affecting account of the life and mostly hard times of a southern redneck baptist minister as seen through the eyes of his now-laughing, now-irritated but always attentive daughter. She is therefore as much the subject of the poem as her father. The story is told in the plain style Matthew Arnold identified as having been introduced into poetry by Wordsworth, which is why Gabriel sees no point in quoting from it: excerpts won't give the sense of how, over its 10 pages, the narrative accumulates its compelling power, its imaginative authenticity. But if 'Saints and Strangers' isn't a masterpiece, the angel says, I'll eat my halo.

As to Dana Gioia, Gabriel is aware that probably few English readers need to be told how good he is. But as the anthology doesn't include his best poems it's worth noting that if *Rebel Angels* achieves nothing else than to show how a genuine poet can always work to advantage with the forms of his choice, then it will have served its purpose. The double triolet of Gioia's 'The Country Wife'; the masterly, interwoven, teasing constructions of his 'Lives of the Great Composers'; even the mockingly adroit 'My Confessional Sestina' — what are these but evidence of how for the best writers the truest poetry is the most feigning?

Who is right: the evil or the good angel? You makes your choice and you pays your money. But one further point needs attention. For all the fuss Messrs Jarman

and Mason make about New Formalism in America it should be said that there are several poets in the U.K. who write with as great if not greater accomplishment than any of the *Rebel Angels*, and that most if not all of them move easily from formal to informal mode and back again. Perhaps this is because the warring camps into which American writers seem to separate — or into which they are separated by literary theorists and historians — aren't so evident here. And of course we are the history from which Whitman and his followers wanted to awake. To English [and Scottish] poets, therefore, formal verse may come as naturally as the leaves to a tree. But there are commentators for whom this is by no means a good thing. For them, the formal preoccupations of English poets is a sure sign of irredeemable cosy second-ratedness, of a refusal to engage with or even so much as acknowledge the decisive element in modernism, its rejection of ontological security and therefore of empirical knowledge. Hence, they contend, the fractured forms which characterise modern writing are foolishly rejected by those for whom the formal consolations of rhyme and metre continue to assert a belief in essential knowledge or at all events in a knowable and thus controllable universe. I hope that readers of *The Dark Horse* will agree that this particular orthodoxy, which for the moment at least enjoys widespread support, is nonsense. Not only that, the terms in which it's conducted don't allow — how can they? — for the achievements of, say, Kit Wright, George Szirtes (not British by birth, I know, but a major poet and one who customarily makes use of formal structures), Sean O'Brien (often at his caustically inventive best when using rhyme and regular metre), W. N. Herbert, and others I could name among poets born after 1940 — as are all 25 of the *Rebel Angels*. Which is one way of saying what ought to be obvious: that poems, as Mallarmé told Degas, are written not with ideas but with words. Conformity to this or that theory cannot guarantee a poem's worth. Poems are well or badly written, that is all.