

EDITORIAL

I first read the American magazine *Parnassus: Poetry in Review* in 1977. It was already five years into its stride. I possess a complete run of issues from that time (Volume 5 Number 2) to this (Volume 27 Numbers 1 & 2). It becomes an invaluable resource, but before that, issue by issue, it is a uniquely *coherent* pleasure to read. Here is a contrary view: 'The magazine's name seems appropriate: a mountain where dead major poets find an elevated home, and their potential heirs find themselves somewhere between a rock and a hard place.' With Jeremy Noel-Tod's words the *Times Literary Supplement* (12 March) dismisses *Parnassus*.

For well over a quarter of a century *Parnassus* has ploughed its uniquely fertile furrow. Edited and published by Herbert Leibowitz, it broke new ground from the beginning, serving no faction, marked by an informed, informing catholicity, the range of its contributors, and the firmness of its editorial standards. The *Parnassus* critic is Janus-faced, looking both at the work and at the reader. Many of the essays are wry and witty: here irony, though not the dominant mode, was not ruled out of court. In this and other ways it appeared to address English as much as American readers (it has certainly been attentive to British writing), and it surprises me that so few readers in Britain have found it out. At its best, it is written in the vulgar tongue; the languages of specialism and theory belong in an academic realm, and *Parnassus* is not an academic publication. The *Times Literary Supplement* categorised it as a 'learned journal': wrong from the start. It is not 'refereed' in the academically approved sense. Would they have regarded *The English Review*, *The Calendar of Modern Letters*, *Criterion*, *Paris Review* or *Encounter* as 'Learned Journals'? No, not because they lacked learning, but because the term, if it is to mean anything at all, must be reserved for describing journals with academic affiliations and 'validating structures'. *Parnassus* is simply too current to be categorised by a past participle.

New critics, many of them poets, cut their teeth in *Parnassus*, and still do; celebrated writers have preferred to publish in *Parnassus* because of the company they keep and the readership they engage. Ezra Pound distinguished between journals that paid a guinea for an article and those that paid five: the latter expected you to say what *they* wanted; in the former you were free to speak your own mind. The investment the writer and reader make in *Parnassus* is different in kind from the investments we make elsewhere in the print world. *Parnassus* is not about tenure. It is about literature.

It has not stood still. Leibowitz reinvents it time after time. There are celebrations, specials and anniversaries. It became impossible for him *not* to include considerations of music and the plastic arts; there is a determining sense of context and connection, something which leads not to the conservatism the *Times Literary Supplement* avers but to an informed, prudent approach to the new. It also became impossible for the editor to resist publishing new poetry and fiction, though the focus remained on poetry and the magazine honours the 'review' in its subtitle. The *Times Literary Supplement* is particularly dismissive of the creative work the magazine includes. The 'essay-reviews are the main reason to read *Parnassus*', says Noel-Tod, but

The poetry is not. It is always easier to criticize a bad poem well than to attract a good one. Most poetry magazines therefore suffer an

inevitable disparity between the high standards of the reviewers and the hopeful standards of the contributors. [William] Logan, who also contributes two poems of modestly 'minor' calibre, illustrates the problem. Where, in the end, does such a limited contemporary canon get us? If one really thinks that Robert Lowell, who died in 1977, was the last American poet to achieve greatness - and the sixty-nine pages given over to Lowell's *Collected Poems* in the latest issue suggest that the Editors of *Parnassus* agree with their critic - then the logical conclusion is to encourage creative writing-course homages to his poetry of high culture and unhappy families (two titles at random: 'Questions for Chekhov' and 'Cutting My Father's Hair').

It may be easy to criticise a bad poem well, but Noel-Tod does not do so. He only asserts the 'minor' status of Logan's poems. The two titles he dismissively adduces belong to a stark, strong poem by Iain Bamforth about Chekhov's work as a prison inspector in provincial Russia, and a vulnerable, unsentimental poem by Jon Volkmer.

'*Parnassus's* acknowledgement of the real diversity of modern American poetics is half-hearted at best,' Noel-Tod says: 'Marjorie Perloff, a critic friendly to innovative poets, is commissioned here' - he focuses on the current issue only - 'to write about (again) Lowell.' He seems to have forgotten that Perloff's second critical book was entitled *The Poetic Art of Robert Lowell* (1973). It is surely interesting, even important, to see how a critic of Perloff's disposition and exploratory distinction, who has travelled so far from her beginnings in Yeats and Lowell, responds when given the opportunity to survey her subject in his, and her, maturity? Leibowitz's invitation was appropriate. Perloff has written in his pages about 'innovative poets' as well. It was proper, too, when the vast *Collected Poems* has just appeared, to allow the time and space for a diverse reappraisal of Lowell's work, even if Noel-Tod regards such attention as excessive.

Has *Parnassus* been niggardly in representing the *avant-garde*? Not in its reviews: there are many essays on experimental writers, and much experimental writing. The current issue is presided over by a portfolio of Alice Attie's powerful photographs, 'Inside the Operating Room', and Leibowitz has taken the occasion to elicit from other writers' responses to the themes the photographs explore. The Surgery poems are challenging in their positioning and in their thematics, not to mention their formal properties. Melissa Monroe and Sarah Lindsay are writers I have not encountered before. The Ernst Weiss story 'Heart Suture' complements and extends the theme. Noel-Tod mentions no specific *avant-garde* absences from the feast: I can name a number of presences: Steve McCaffery, John Cage, Lyn Hejinian, Susan Howe and Michael Palmer for starters.

Noel-Tod's concentrates on the writing of one reviewer, William Logan. 'Logan's irreverently authoritative manner recalls Matthew Arnold, but he neglects the radical and liberating-implications of that great critic's ideal: "to see the object as in itself it really is".' Logan is hardly the paradigmatic *Parnassus* contributor. Indeed, it is hard to say who is, because the paradigm is based not on individual critics but on a critical tolerance and balance.

The very first issue of *Parnassus* included Helen Vendler's wrong-headed but important essay on Frank O'Hara as a *naïf*, Michael Woods' durable account of Borges, Neruda and Vallejo, and John Koethe on Ashbery. It was 1972, and here was a major new American journal insisting on internationalism and experiment. One could list the regular, distinguished contributors and the fledglings who now fly free: Ricks, Davie, Davenport, Denis Donoghue, Peck, Heaney... One could single out the wonderful Charles Ives supplement with contributions from Aaron Copland, Elliott Carter and Peter Yates, or the later supplement devoted to Virgil Thomson... Some issues are *points de repere* for any account of poetry, American or foreign, in the latter part of the twentieth century.

Aficionados of Leibowitz's magazine may be embarrassed by the quality and tone of the Noel-Tod response. It has an undisclosed avant-gardist agenda (certainly not shared by the *Times Literary Supplement* itself); its *parti pris* is matched by a condescension that taints many responses to American art and culture. The abundance of clichés in the review, which speaks of paradigm shifts and rocks and hard places, suggests that critic and editors did not take the appraisal seriously. This carelessness is surprising: Noel-Tod was once assistant editor of Craig Raine's magazine *Areté* and in 2001 went up to Cambridge to commence a PhD in modern poetry. He has gone so far as to suggest, in another, more 'learned' context, 'Prynne does mean something, fervently, but not in the smug way many people suppose. Far from being an elitist poetry for polymaths, Prynne's work is inclusively honest about the confusion of trying to see life whole.' This may be where he is coming from in his dismissal of *Parnassus*. Whatever: the damage done is less to a great magazine, more to a potential readership. We would never guess that Heaney, Sontag, Hardwick, Paz, Davie, James Laughlin, among many others, have loved *Parnassus* in its critical and creative aspects.