

Julie Kane

Mortality and Mellowing: On Wendy Cope

ALMOST TWENTY YEARS AGO an American reviewing a book by Cope for a transatlantic readership remarked that Cope was not very well known in the U.S. but almost ‘too well-known’ in Britain. Not much has changed since then. Although Cope is one of the best-selling poets in the British Isles and the winner of a BBC Radio poll to determine their listeners’ choice for Poet Laureate, Cope’s books can be difficult to obtain in the United States, even through online booksellers. Faced with a wait of five to six weeks delivery time from Amazon, this reviewer had to ask *The Dark Horse* to buy and mail her a copy so that the transit time did not chew up all of her review-writing time, while an American friend writing an academic essay about Cope had to ask a relative to bring a copy home from London packed in her suitcase.

In the Age of the Internet, difficulties in getting one’s hands on the physical artifact of a book should, in theory, pose no barrier to the dissemination of individual poems across international boundaries. But because Cope can actually get paid fairly well for her poems, she has campaigned against their unauthorized posting on the Internet and against the practice of reading poets’ works aloud in public without first clearing copyright permissions. As she has noted, ‘short funny poems’ like hers are particularly vulnerable to such well-meaning pirates. While those of us whose annual poetry royalties could probably be paid out in rolls of postage stamps normally rejoice when an amateur blogger puts one of our poems online, Cope phones her attorneys—well, she does so for the worst offenders, which tends to scare off the small fry. One such website, which had contained about twenty of Cope’s poems, now bears only the foreboding message ‘Poems removed upon request from the legal representatives of the Poet.’ Ironically, for a poet somewhat at war with the Internet, Cope has just sold her archive of emails dating back to 2004 to the British Library for the sum of £32,000 (\$53,000).

Logistically difficult as it may be for the American half of this audience to catch up to the British half, I would recommend that potential readers of Cope’s new book begin by acquainting themselves with her first book, *Making Cocoa for Kingsley Amis*. Not to do so would be like reading the later poems of Robert Frost without knowing his early work. The Frost of *In the Clearing* (1962), genial and wise and upbeat (‘Forgive, O Lord, my little

jokes on Thee / And I'll forgive Thy great big one on me'), is all the more to be treasured if one knows the darkness of *A Boy's Will*, *North of Boston*, and *Mountain Interval*. In both early Frost and early Cope, one is struck by a wildness, a bleakness, a runaway self-destructive tendency that is just barely kept in check by the exquisite formal control of the art. It is like listening to music played on bagpipes or Cajun accordion, with that mournful drone note always fused to the melody, however tuneful. Of course, one can't keep up that level of intensity throughout a lifetime. Other such artists flamed out early, but these two mellowed out.

Wendy Cope, for her part, burst on the British poetry scene in 1986 with a first book that violated nearly every prevailing trend in contemporary poetry. Transgression #1: Poets were not supposed to write in rhyme and meter. Cope did so, expertly. Transgression #2: Poetry was not supposed to be funny. Cope was pee-in-your-pants funny much of the time. Transgression #3: Women poets were supposed to stand in awe of the Great White Male tradition of English poetry. Cope's book contained poems parodying or mocking GWMs including Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Eliot, Larkin, Hughes, Heaney, and Raine. Worst of all, perhaps, was Transgression #4: Poetry is not supposed to be popular. But while the average print run for a book of contemporary poetry is about five hundred to a thousand copies, Cope's books sold briskly from the outset, and to date their sales have topped the half-million mark.

In the case of Frost, a vast swath of the reading public responded to his modernism before most critics did, and the same is true of Cope and her postmodernism. Academics who dismissed her work as 'traditional' while believing that poets writing anecdotal free-verse lyrics in the style of William Carlos Williams were somehow hip or trendy were missing the obvious. Cope had no consistent formal 'voice.' Like many postmodern architects and musical composers, Cope was borrowing and recycling forms from the past with no particular allegiance to them: the villanelle, the triolet, the ballade. She used them like handkerchiefs for the purpose at hand—not terribly concerned about re-laundrying them for future use, although that could happen. Part of the fun was the contrast between the 'tradition' associated with each form and Cope's irreverent content. She also mixed brand names of pop culture consumer products with allusions to Shakespeare and Tacitus. Like many funny women from Dorothy Parker forward, she adopted the persona of a woman on the margins of polite society. The 'I' of those poems drank too much, jumped into bed with awful men and got dumped by them, craved cigarettes, and thumbed her nose at

the rich and the royals. But she also wrote poems from the perspective of 'Jason Strugnell,' a failed and pretentious male poet. Her use of the Strugnell alter ego, as well as the ease with which she parodied the voices and styles of many famous male poets, could serve as textbook illustrations of the decentered postmodern self, not to mention the destabilization of gender binaries. One critic, Marta Perez Novales, has examined Cope's work in relation to Frederic Jameson's definitions of parody versus pastiche, but other than Novales, many academics seem to have mistaken Cope's stylistic timeliness for its opposite, anachronism.

Having paid homage to Cope's early brilliance, one can proceed to consider *Family Values* in its proper context, as a later stage in her development. The very title of the volume poses somewhat of a puzzle: is it ironic, or not? The phrase 'family values' has remained in the news since at least the early 1990s, signifying a Republican or conservative party platform that views the Christian, heterosexual marriage with children (and without adultery, abortion, or divorce) as the foundation of civic culture. Had Cope used that title on one of her earlier books, the sly wink would have been obvious. In this book the phrase appears in the poem 'The Archers and Adultery,' about a BBC radio soap opera, and there, too, Cope intends it to be hypocritical: 'Yes, in *The Archers* family values reign. / The straying spouses all come back again.' Yet *Family Values* does seem to embrace family values to a certain extent. The book opens with four poems about churchgoing or Christianity, and Cope told Tom Payne in a recent interview in *The Daily Telegraph* that she had returned to the Church of England after a long period of absence. Many of the poems celebrate the quiet domesticity of a contented love relationship, mirroring the happiness that Cope has found in her own personal life with poet-critic and biographer Lachlan Mackinnon.

Lest anyone think that Cope has gone over to the dark side—or, perhaps more accurately, the light side—she also told Payne that she had been lured back to church by evensong services, and that 'I was so moved by it I tried to persuade myself that I believed it all. I almost succeeded.' In 'An Anniversary Poem,' Cope tweaks the Church of England for refusing to allow women to become bishops. And when she does zero in on particular families in *Family Values*, they are (thank goodness) miserably dysfunctional. Several poems are written from the perspective of a child with an extremely overbearing mother, and Cope told Payne that her own mother's death in 2004 had enabled her to publish some of these poems for the first time. The mother in these lines is always convinced that she is right, even when she is dead wrong; she worries so much about what others will think that she tells

her daughter to stay home from church rather than attend without taking communion. The speaker's mother is ashamed of her bus driver brother's occupation, and she packs her daughter off to a boarding school where she is bullied by the other girls. If these summaries are not sounding at all like the 'typical' Cope poem with wit and rhymes snapping like mousetraps all the way through, that's because they are not. The majority of the poems in the volume are free verse, and the prevailing tone is serious.

The average American poetry book, these days, seems to get planned more carefully than the average American military engagement. It has become increasingly fashionable for the whole thing to tell a story or center around a theme. There must be a dramatic 'arc' from beginning to end, and within each individual section there must be a smaller arc—arcs within arcs. Then, based upon research from neuroscience showing that the last thing in a series makes the strongest impression, and the first thing in a series makes the second-strongest impression, one's strongest poems must be positioned in the key slots within the mini-arcs. By comparison, baseball team managers have it easy, dealing with only nine players and easy issues like where to position one's strongest hitter and fastest base-stealer within a starting lineup. If you can't structure the manuscript yourself, there are even consultants who will do it for you, for a fee.

But the U.K. approach to assembling a manuscript still seems to be, 'Hey, here are some poems I wrote since my last book'—rather a relief in contrast to American overdeterminism. *Family Values* appears to consist of a bunch of poems Cope wrote because she felt like it, followed by a bunch of poems she wrote because she was commissioned to do so. Still, within the first section, one can follow a progression of themes: Christianity and the Church, an overbearing mother and a miserable childhood, time and loss, the looming fact of mortality, the transience of happiness. The act of writing as an attempt to capture what will otherwise be lost is a recurring motif. While Cope has parodied Shakespeare's Sonnet 55 in the past (in Cope's version, 'Not only marble, but the plastic toys / From cornflake packets will outlive this rhyme'), in this book she seems to be rewriting it again and again. Finding herself in tears before a portrait of a long-dead bride and groom, Cope's speaker thinks, 'Someone will read our story, by and by. / Perhaps they'll feel like this. Perhaps they'll cry' ('Dutch Portraits'). Re-encountering an old flame at a poetry conference, another speaker imagines the future in which one of them will hear of the death of the other: 'The survivor will sit down and weep / And write a poem mourning the ex-lover / And have a drink or two and go to sleep.'

Note the self-reflexive gestures within those two quotations, the poet calling attention to the fact that she is writing the poem—another post-modern technique of Cope’s (although the sixteenth-century Bard certainly employed it, too). ‘Look at how I write,’ she observes in ‘Boarders.’ ‘And now / I’ve gone and put her in a poem,’ she says of a childhood friend (‘Omo’). Sitting ‘In the Wimpy Bar at Stafford services,’ Cope’s speaker imagines that she could be taken for several identities including ‘A poet, maybe, scribbling in her notebook.’ In ‘At the Poetry Conference,’ she says, ‘I need to write a poem but I’ve written it / Already’ and, ‘You see I’m alternating / Two kinds of rhyme, the way you recommend.’ Disarmed of her usual humor and formal armor, Cope may be leaning more heavily than usual on this technique for its effect of distancing the writer from the painful material of the poem. John Gardner in *The Art of Fiction* famously advised that a writer should never awaken a reader from the dream cast by the narrative, but here Cope is dashing ice water on her reader every few minutes and calling out, ‘It’s not a bad dream—just a poem!’

Surprisingly, because this reviewer did not think Cope’s commissioned *The River Girl* (1991) or ‘The Teacher’s Tale’ (2000) the equal of her ‘self-commissioned’ work, some of the most delightful poems in this collection are to be found in the second section. There are nine poems from ‘The Audience,’ a series commissioned by the Endellion String Quartet, and eight from ‘An ABC of the BBC,’ a sequence written under the patronage of BBC Radio 4. ‘The Audience’ consists of dramatic monologues spoken by various audience members and musicians involved in an orchestral concert, from the players stuck in traffic to ‘The Cougher’ and the couple on their first date, each presuming the other to be a classical music expert and hoping not to be exposed as a pretender. The poems read well on the page, but they would work even better staged by actors, with musical accompaniment. Some of the wittiest poems in the volume can be found in ‘from An ABC of the BBC,’ perhaps because the domestically contented poet, unable to unearth much fodder for satire in her own life, finds plenty of it in pop culture radio programming and its middle-class audiences. For example, among the ‘[t]hings that make me switch the radio off’ are ‘Actors being actorish, and, worse, / The voice of Dylan Thomas reading verse.’

With Cope herself always ready to plunge a sharp pen into the balloon of anyone’s pretentiousness, it seems rather foolhardy to pose the question: How many of the poems in *Family Values* will stand with Cope’s best and most memorable poems of the past, on a par with ‘Waste Land Limericks,’

‘Triolet’ (‘I used to think all poets were Byronic’), ‘From June to December,’ ‘Rondeau Redoublé’ (‘There are so many kinds of awful men’), the Strugnell poems, ‘Bloody Men,’ ‘Loss,’ ‘Another Unfortunate Choice,’ ‘Valentine,’ ‘Flowers,’ ‘I Worry,’ ‘Two Cures for Love,’ ‘Favourite,’ ‘Being Boring,’ ‘What I Think,’ ‘The Sorrow of Socks’?—and that’s just a top-of-the-head list, by no means complete. Perhaps the pretty little triolet ‘Stars,’ reminiscent of Whitman’s ‘When I First Heard the Learn’d Astronomer’; in both poems, there is more to be gained from gazing in delight at the night sky than from studying facts about it or looking to it for deeper meaning. And perhaps, the two-poem sequence ‘Differences of Opinion,’ although it is not really new: the first poem was previously published in *If I Don’t Know* (2001), and both poems appeared in Cope’s 2008 volume of new and selected works, *Two Cures for Love*. This is not an album studded with potential Greatest Hits, but everything this poet does is worth following with close attention. Wendy Cope is a living treasure. So say I, and so say the folk.