

Book Reviews

NEWS OF THE UNIVERSE, poems of twofold consciousness. Chosen and introduced by Robert Bly. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books. 1980.

As I write this, the state of Alaska is busy slaughtering its wolves. The Reagan Administration is manipulating support for increased aggressions against Nicaragua. The buffalo herds having already been annihilated, we ache to move south, waving the flag, into Central America. We have seen this all before, and recently enough, I think, that the vision is especially painful. It is Mather, the sex of wrath, what Lawrence called white consciousness and what Robert Bly, in *News of the Universe*, calls "the Old Position."

News of the Universe is an anthology of poetry which Bly put together for the Sierra Club in 1980. As such it presents another, saner, direction in which we have been moving, an alternative vision and means for living our lives. Subtitled "poems of twofold consciousness," Bly's collection goes beyond simple ecology into its deeper strain where ecological awarenesses merge with spiritual, psychological, and moral ones. The book presents a world-view which has consistently moved away from the old position that consciousness is exclusively human to the new one in which "trees or hills or living creatures not of our species" are also "granted" it.

If such a position seems a bit exotic, we might reflect that it is consistent with the news from other, more "objective" areas such as physics, biology, and psychology. And the more we learn from anthropology, the more we come to appreciate Lewis Thomas's remark that "the astonishing thing about the earth, catching the breath, is that it is alive." Moving from *chains-of-being* to *whorls-in-the-grain*, we become less anthropocentric in our thinking, less chauvinistic, less imperialistic.

We move like Whitman in his animal ease, corpus and polis both. Or move like Rilke "in growing orbits...out over the things of the world." Stones and bunch grass, groundhogs and lambs, these return to

us, in Denise Levertov's words, "in holy presence." For James Wright spores of milkweed shimmer from the hand; Gerald Stern imagines the roots of maples cradling our homes. Paradoxically enough, the "twofold" is really a vision of unity, of things as they move together. In what Bly calls "the Novalis-Hölderlin-Goethe tradition" the old oppositions of nature and spirit are overcome. At least such is the attempt.

As may be apparent, *News* contains quite a number of poets from various cultures and times (Blake, Yeats, Frost, Machado, Dickinson). Its general arrangement is the line from the old position in the eighteenth century (Pope, Milton, Swift) to poems which "take place after the healing [of the Cartesian split] has begun" (Mirabai, Takahashi). This arrangement, which Bly admits is overly simplified, is further accomplished by dividing the poems into six "parts," themselves abutted by an introduction and the two "meditations" which close the book.

I don't think there's one bad "twofold" poem in the book, or one which isn't worthy of our attention and gratitude. And there are poems which are among the best we have, certainly within the tradition Bly's mining: the poetry which aims to bring us not "news of the human mind," but rather "news of the universe." The distinction is Georg Groddeck's, and marks another valuable element in *News*: its bringing to our attention thinkers and positions we may not have been previously familiar with.

To me *News* is as useful and important for its introductions as it is for the poetry introduced. Bly has carried out his offices well, bringing to us information about brain research and natural history, the vagaries of the Catholic Church's positions concerning the soul and nature, Ponge's ideas about objects, and Descartes' dream of slumping into his left side as he struggles in a head-wind. By demonstrating the relatedness of these issues, Bly amply illustrates Steven's argument that poetry is a "vital activity," not merely a "literary" one.

It's not that these introductions present anything like the last (or even the most considered) words on their subjects. Nor do they make such a claim. Speculative, ruminative in nature, they are the evidence of a mind's processes more than of its proclamations. And there are a number of what I believe to be important qualifications throughout.

For one thing, Bly's nature has its dark and dangerous side (it isn't simply the "all in all" of Wordsworth); for another, *News* makes no claims to preeminence ("I am following one stream...Another anthology would have to be created to include these other streams"). The book is far less doctrinaire than it might at first appear, especially to unsympathetic readers.

Four years ago, when this book was first published, Ronald Reagan was elected President. Now, four years later (James Watt, Rita Lavelle, etc.), he has been elected again and we need more than ever the wisdom these poems contain. We need their compassion and humility and their openness to "something foreign," to the "deep quiet" and "mad freedom" Thorkild Bjornvig finds in an owl. We need to save the wolves for their sake and for our own. We need to hear words like these from Robert Aiken:

The self imposing upon the other is not only something called delusion, it is the ruination of our planet and all of its creatures. But enlightenment is not just a matter of learning from another human being. When the self is forgotten, it is recreated again and again, ever more richly, by the myriad things and beings of the universe.

— Robert Gibb



IN GOD'S COUNTRIES, by Bil Gilbert. University of Nebraska Press, 1984. \$14.95, 203 pp.

Two fellows from Adams county, Pennsylvania, sit under a gum tree by a billabog watching two platypuses paddle under their dangling feet. Two bear-sized men stop for a smoke in a shallow draw of the Huachuca Mountains and speculate over whether a rather soggy footprint belongs to a small mountain lion, a large bobcat, or a rarely seen