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Review Article

The Range of Douglas Lochhead

Tiger in The Skull: New and Selected Poems, 1959-1985. By Douglas Lochhead. Fredericton: Fiddlehead Poetry Books and Goose Lane Editions, 1986. Pp. 130. \$12.95.

The dust jacket of Douglas Lochhead's latest volume of poetry claims that what lies between the covers "makes the range, substance and fertility of Lochhead's work available for the first time in a single volume." As a general rule, statements on dust jackets are not to be trusted, but having read the volume, I must agree that this statement is true. In the variety of subjects Lochhead addresses and in his formal variations, as well as in his repeated concern for seeing anew and communicating the complexity of place and history, these poems offer Lochhead's understanding of people and poetry.

Tiger in The Skull does represent well the range of Lochhead's poetry, living up to its subtitle *New and Selected Poems, 1959-1985*. Of the ninety-three poems in the volume, the first seventy come from previously published volumes and the final twenty-three represent Lochhead's most recent efforts. Poems from virtually all earlier volumes are present in this volume, from *The Heart is Fire* (1959) to *The Panic Field* (1984). The poems Lochhead has chosen to include in *Tiger in The Skull* are chiefly short lyrics or meditations, although he does give a taste of longer poems or poem sequences such as *High Marsh Road* (1980). His subject matter has as its focus the elemental in life, whether he is speaking about the Maritime landscape, about history or death, or about family and human relationships. Several poems in the volume, such as "Nova Scotia fishermen," "Poems in a train — Newfoundland," and "Louie," give impressions of places and people. Others, such as "Luke Fox" and "Samuel Hearne's Bloody

Fall at Pickering Beach," attempt to make historical figures and events "real" for the reader. Still others touch upon personal history, upon family ("Tonight we are exhausted," "The child cries in the night," and "My daughter's cheek"). Birds, primarily gulls, occupy the poet's attention a great deal, appearing repeatedly in several poems, making birds in essence a leitmotif for this volume and Lochhead's patterns of thought. And finally, although the lyric dominates this volume, several poems offer an ironic perspective, poems primarily concerned with the poet's experience in the army.

This volume shows a richness in form and technique similar to its topical variety. For Lochhead, the poem's form must be found. In the selection from *High Marsh Road*, the poet suggests that "the real round of the saying never forms, / but the poet is constantly working, moulding / it closer and closer to the truth." Form for Lochhead is a means of communicating truth, if only indirectly; the shape that a given poem takes attempts to remember, to organize, and to communicate the poet's reading of himself and what surrounds him. In many of these poems, Lochhead succeeds in this communication. Lochhead's verse can be characterized as free verse, with a rich use of alliteration rather than rhyme (particularly in the early poems), enjambment, and ellipsis. In particular, Lochhead uses repetition well to give a sense of the rhythms of land, sea, and the self. We also find in this volume a variety of forms: short lyrics, prose poems, longer poem series, prayers, and diary entries. In the new poems, however, Lochhead seems to have found a particular form suitable to his meditative tone, namely six two-line stanzas with a great deal of enjambment. Twenty of the twenty-three new poems take this form, a form which provides both stability and an opportunity to surprise the reader within the poem.

Essentially, Lochhead seeks to maintain the tension between structure and freedom, between form and looseness, a tension central to his understanding of how the poet organizes his or her perception. Indeed, one of Lochhead's greatest strengths in these poems is his ability to maintain that tension, a tension both alive in the world and in the forms he uses. Many of the poems are concerned with surface and depth. In "Sunday Rain at Ingonish" the poet links himself with the ocean, its surface waves barely suggesting the depths from which their power comes; he speaks of "the unleashing of power and wisdom / in the wave, wing and opening petal." And in "Into the swamp," the poet notes the world around himself and below the water's surface, speaking of ". . . the long hidden / fight prolonged / going on / just underneath." The world of Lochhead's poems is often an oxymoronic world,

a world dominated by juxtapositions such as the "mute songs" found in the poem "In the lost forest." Lochhead succeeds in yoking opposites that call into question accepted ways of seeing. In "Unicorn in captivity—a 16th century tapestry," a poem about art and the artist, the poet describes the unicorn as "a contented prisoner," content to be fenced, content in being the center, content with a sterile and powerless beauty. Lochhead sees the need for something more. The order of his poems is no such easy order. Like all good poets, Lochhead questions accepted centers. Indeed, his poems suggest a constant struggle between centering and decentering, and this struggle is the power of his poetry. As he says in "Are you writing any. . . ?", the poet is constantly drawing circles around the poems that he finds, defining and controlling the chaos. While this play reflects the modern psyche, I did wish occasionally as I read these poems that Lochhead would give in to the chaos, that this "bull in a word-shop" would break a few things, that he could cavort with his children, "crazy with doing" ("Across the park my children race the clouds"). But such criticism asks for something the poet feels unable to do or has chosen not to do.

Such broad descriptions of the formal and topical variety in *Tiger in The Skull* do not communicate fully the richness of the poetry found in the volume, a metaphysical poetry very much in the line of A.J.M. Smith. Part of that richness is found in the meditative tone of most of the poems. The seasons found in this volume are essentially autumn and winter, with only occasionally summer and even more infrequently spring. With such emphases, Lochhead risks moroseness and opaqueness, particularly in the diary form: nevertheless, for the most part he avoids these traps. In the volume's first poems, "The heart is fire," we find the human heart caged in talons, but human life and energy are also affirmed. In "March Landscape," we find restless crows, rigid earth and white furrows, the ever-present wind, and a windmill "turning itself/inside out," played and pumped by the wind, "almost a pin wheel/ gone wild here,/ over an empty/ farm." While in this poem and others such as "Little man me" there exists a sense of futility, many poems looking at death affirm life. In "October Diary 26/10" and "Uncle Amos," the poet's musings on his uncle help him understand his own life. And the headstones in "The Cemetery at Loch End, Catalone, Cape Breton" strangely communicate life to the poet. Such poems, and others such as "Credo" and "The rogue wave," simply emphasize the poet's participation in the regular rhythms of life and death. And it is in these poems, where he is most in tune with these cycles, that Lochhead is most successful. Indeed, the new poems in the

volume continue these observations. In "A brief whiff," snow covers farm fields to make them forgotten, while in "Near Dorchester," the poet contemplates the end of man and his doings: "where have the boyos and the old bridge gone?/ they have gone to sleep in the sea's throat." These poems contemplate continually, and not in a simple manner, humanity's participation in natural cycles.

And these sometimes sombre meditations rarely fall into moroseness or become opaque because Lochhead's poetry is primarily reader-oriented rather than self-oriented. Such a statement of orientation appears self-evident given the nature of poetry, but it is particularly true of this volume. Lochhead attempts to "cleanse the doors of perception," to look again and think again. The poems become invitations to the reader: the poet takes his experience of the world, interprets and organizes the chaos, then attempts to communicate that experience in such a startling manner that it becomes the reader's. In "The heart is fire," the first words we find are "Now look . . .," and in "Phoenix" we are told to "Look beyond . . ." We are told in "Bandy-legged poem" that the reader can "bend it" the way he or she wants to bend it, although the poet gives it the way he sees it, and in "The Poem" the poet suggests that a good poem leads the reader into a "place of mirrors." Perhaps "poet talking" best captures Lochhead's understanding of the poet, the poem, and the reader:

I want first to hear
 something the sea says
 something the wind knocks;
 touch, smell something
 the moment has;
 has for sage and suitor,
 sailor, scholar, saint;
 and when all is there
 then I will take it
 tell it again my way,
 loud enough
 to crack mountains,
 live it softly
 for children.

The poet reads and then writes his experience. Lochhead pictures the poet taking the chaotic world inside in order to interpret it for common people, in order to touch wise men and children. His primary task in the poems found within this volume is communication.

We find Lochhead primarily reading and writing place, and it is in the poems concerned with place that he best succeeds in communicating his vision. These poems explore the often opposing rhythms of

people and environment, but also the strong connection between the two. The poems give a strong sense of the elemental in both. The poem "Pulse" speaks of the rhythm "in the shell's rewording/ of the sea's bounce," of the earth's song, "the anthem in the bone/ carried for listening/ and hoping to the ear." The rhythms and language of nature are those of humanity. Other poems, such as "In the summer woods—I," "In the summer woods—II," and "Open wide a wilderness," explore the tension between the two. While there are moments when the poet feels comfortable in the woods, and indeed moments of at-oneness, the woods are a place to bring your liquor, your box of IGA groceries, and your copy of Thoreau. Instead of moving into a wide wilderness, the poet finds himself in a "soft/centre/labyrinth." In still other poems, Lochhead attempts to communicate a sense of place through history. We find Lochhead understanding his personal history in "Uncle Amos" by reading the "leavings," the remnants of his uncle's farm.

The new poems contained in this volume continue these meditations on place by exploring the connections between people and Lochhead's specific New Brunswick landscape, connections which lead to understanding some of the universals in humanity's situation. Lochhead particularly here succeeds in creating a sense of place and history. In "The meeting," the poet finds a spade handle, "a hand carved artifact," which allows him an entrance into the past. In other poems, Lochhead speaks of reading nature's writing, "the ragged leavings, codes on beaches" ("Voices"). In still others, he explores the questionable value and end-result of man's writing on nature. "The Remains of the Bridge, Dorchester" examines more artifacts, "the cold remains of pilings," and "Ditch on the march, Aulac" looks at humanity's necessary rape of the land, at earth "whored out to farmers." These new poems, perhaps more concrete and specific than some of the earlier poems, create a strong sense of place while exploring the complex relationships between the poet and his world.

Tiger in The Skull is, in fact, a record of Lochhead's many years of reading both himself and his place, whether that place happened to be Toronto, Halifax, Cape Breton, or the Tantramar marshes. The volume's final poem emphasizes the relationships Lochhead has been exploring. He speaks of the world as ". . . a place of meeting, retreating / of taking the message of nature and man," and he goes on to affirm that "it is not emptiness, but a loud place/ for reading, for noting this and that." The poems contained in this volume, both new and selected, are such places of meeting for the poet and the reader.