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## **Review Article**

### **Aging with Style and Passion**

*When the Right Light Shines.* By Fred Cogswell. Ottawa: Borealis, 1992. Pp. 74. \$24.95. Paper, \$9.95.

*In Praise of Old Music.* By Fred Cogswell. Ottawa: Borealis, 1992. Pp. 75. \$24.95. Paper, \$9.95.

*Running Out of Time.* By Betsy Struthers. Toronto: Wolsak and Wynn, 1993. Pp. 82. Paper, \$10.00.

An irony of Fred Cogswell's distinguished literary career is that he encouraged, published, and sympathetically critiqued numerous Canadian poets who practice what Dr. Cogswell has called "free verse," while Cogswell himself has composed with strong allegiance to pre-Modernist structures, such as the sonnet and his beloved sestina, strong end-rhymes, and unfashionable rhetorical devices such as chiasmus.

Cogswell could justly argue that the best of those poets he supported—e.g. Al Purdy, Jay Macpherson, Alden Nowlan, Milton Acorn—studied and incorporated traditional form. Nonetheless, those poets' work, with certain exceptions (e.g. Nowlan's quatrains in "The Jacker" and "The Dancer," and Acorn's later devotion to the sonnet), falls firmly into the contemporary mode of exploratory, individualized form—discovered rather than given. Reading Cogswell's poetry we are returned, for the

most part, to a poetic world before the dictums of Pound and Olson, Williams's "Down with the iambic pentameter!", and Acorn's "continuous dialectic interplay between form and content," let alone postmodernism: "from no beginning / must the poem's process go / forward to no end?" ("Six Questions for Contemporaries").

Cogswell asks, "should the current style / dictate the style that current/ poets ought to have?" ("Six Questions") Readers who demand "current style" from contemporary poets will probably avoid Cogswell's books. The rewards in these two volumes are rather the life-reflections of a discerning, delicately sagacious, gently loving, and gently suffering person. His "old music," fustian or retrograde for some readers, will seem cultivated and melodious for others.

The most moving poems, for this reader, are those in which Cogswell's wisdom and urbane emotionality work with childhood memories, profound personal loss, the tensions of longing and distance in marriage, the ironies of aging—including the perspective of the "Ex-Poetry Editor" "who fed the poets" for several generations, and the sublime sensory impressions and philosophical solace found in nature.

*In Praise of Older Music*, for this reader, offers more poignancy and illumination than *When the Right Light Shines*, and fewer disappointments resulting from didacticism, quaint diction, or stilted movement. The title poem, for instance, effectively uses "father's old gramophone" playing "Mother Machree" to honor "my mother's hands, / Chapped and worn and twisted by years of labour. . . ." And Cogswell's ironic wit succeeds in "A paradox," Cogswell's revision "in old age" of his youthful "thought" that "I should not mind to die / When I was old . . . ." In *When the Right Light Shines* I recommend: "My Father's Hands"; a sonnet of suppressed youthful passion, "A Memory," which concludes, "For both, the love that honour saved or fear / Persists through time, pathetic and most dear"; the forlorn lover's laments of "She Whom I Love" and "Wednesday Morning Dialogue" ("I do not know tonight where you have gone / who took the car and left without a word"); and "Fifth Christmas" about allied Polish soldiers killed in World War Two by a "ghastly blunder."

Only two of Cogswell's sestinas lifted me consistently above mere appreciation of his formal skill. "Sestina: On Seeing My Wild-Tame Garden in the Light of a Forest-Fire Induced Fog" is rich with dynamic

interplay of poetic perception and the natural world. "The Microbes That Move Inside the Moist Dark" insightfully philosophizes with the support of vivid images. Other sestinas are too didactic, even when "my daughter's life" is taken in "Sarcoma" (his lyrical elegies for his daughter in the 1983 volume *Pearls* are superior).

Cogswell's strong sense of poetic tradition includes intimate knowledge of imagism and symbolism—evident in these volumes—and the technique of discourse evoking natural speech, though he often abandons this for elevated diction and syntax. Cogswell is also one of our best translators of French, especially Acadian, verse. Hence, in the dozen accomplished poems "After the French" of various francophone writers in these collections, Cogswell seems to have found a complementary alter ego with a contrapuntal voice:

You sleep, wrapped in your face of mystery,  
 And I know that your eyes, somewhere,  
 Are open on a world  
 Where I have lost my foothold.  
 ("Slumber"—After the French of Eloi de Grandmont)

Where Cogswell writes from the vantage of "old age," Betsy Struthers's *Running Out of Time* begins with a childless narrator second-guessing herself as her biological hourglass runs dry ("Baby Blues"). Immediately after, in "On Edge," a man at 40 who has "everything a man is supposed to have in this / life" has "no faith in any of it." These poems set the tone for the first section ("Looking For Mother") of Struthers's third and strongest poetry collection. There are "stories / of lost daughters," and apprehension "In the midst of making love . . . as if a small / daughter beats at the locked door / crying Mommy. . . ."

This first group of poems—ominous, starkly descriptive—interrogates self-inflicted malaise and sinister prospects in one's environment, and succeeds because of Struthers's command of her literal, direct language. Her power comes from narrative clarity, straightforward discourse, and unambiguous images. Figurative language is used sparingly and with good effect. Realistic scenarios are contexts for the mind-and-body's journey through disappointment and dread, and into the sensuous relationships of the second and third sections ("Time Out," "Coming to Terms") with one's lover, with "jacaranda trees" and "oysters on the half

shell, / vulva on a pearl bed," and with "the swell / my belly makes," at last, in pregnancy.

There is an actual journey of the narrator and her companion to Australia in "Time Out," where the sensuous blends into the sexual. The passion, here, and when the couple returns home in "Coming to Terms," is utterly salutary and sometimes ecstatic. When the writing is artistically sure, Struthers can evoke erotic energy between two people and between lovers and their surroundings.

At times, though, Struthers says too much or wants to be blunt when subtlety would be more compelling. Of the aging women in a fertility clinic in "Baby Blues," for example, Struthers overwrites, "even in the bright waiting room in the company of others, our arms curve, hands on elbows, make cradles for the lost, wasted babies." Occasionally, there is some facile, uninspired writing: ". . . Between us, / kissed by salt and sun, / skin hums / electric" ("Sounding Line").

These excesses and let-downs are exceptions to the rule of a vivid collection held together by a clear, confident voice and a strong persona who processes blues, nightmares, and orgasms with a refreshing blend of cerebral solidity, emotional openness, and physical candor. In the final section, "Running Out of Time," Struthers confronts herself and us with mortality: her father's death and wake; the deaths of her young son's friend and her scuba-diving friend who drowns; and "The boys she watched dancing" in the title poem. Here, there's no over-telling. Instead, emotional tension, dramatic momentum, and artistic restraint leave the reader poised between fear and hope, anger or sorrow and equanimity. Struthers is no Rilke contemplating angels. Hers is a steady, concrete, and sensuous voice of the material world.