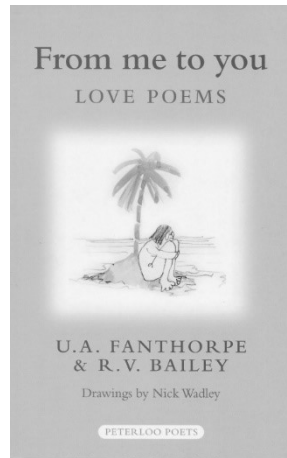


U A FANTHORPE'S BEGINNINGS AS A POET R V BAILEY RESPONDS TO KAY COTTON



R V Bailey



U A Fanthorpe

KC: One focus of this issue is what has happened to women's poetry since the last quartile of the 20th Century. I wonder if you could give us something of the 'feel' of the 1970s when you and your partner Ursula Fanthorpe were, I think, both writing. Am I right that the U.K. poetry scene remained male dominated or did change seem to be on the way?

RVB: At that time U A thought poetry was something that men did, especially men who had been to Oxford. She had no intention herself of writing. People spoke of only two women poets, Sylvia Plath, who had killed herself, and Stevie Smith. And time for writing? There was a living to be earned.

One night, in the middle of fish and chips, it came to me. I would have the Job and U A would be the full-time poet. The great thing was that two people could live on one job. However U A changed her own job, became a receptionist at a neurological hospital.

KC: In her preface to Fanthorpe's *New and Collected Poems* (Enitharmon Press 2010), Carol Ann Duffy praises Fanthorpe's approach as 'subtly subversive'. In her forward to the same volume U A herself refers to 'the strangeness of other people and how it felt to 'be' them, to use their words'. This makes me wonder whether the impact made by mind-changing women writers such as U A was something to do with a new kind of empathy, realism, and the understanding of 'ordinary life'?

RVB: It is true that U A struck a new note. She had read 'the men' at Oxford. And the War Poets, then, hit by a thunderbolt on the first day that she worked at the Neurological Hospital, she began to write poetry. She was a good listener; wrote the words they spoke. Empathic, she wanted to bear witness, to allow their voices to be heard. This was deliberate: every day she became a voice for them using a heightened language.

Like gulls they are still calling –
I'll come again Tuesday. Our Dad
Sends his love. They diminish, are gone.
Their world has received them.

As our world confirms us. Their debris
Is tidied into vases, lockers, minds.

After Visiting Hours

I'm not mental, am I?
 Someone told me I was mental,
 But I lost me memory
 'Cos our dad died.
 It don't make sense though, do it?
 After I've been a nurse.

Casehistory: Julie (Encephalitis)

When U A started writing, she came ready formed as a result of her focussed thinking around the subject. Every day, in the car on the way home from work, I'd ask "What have you got for me today?" She wrote during lunchtimes in a derelict caravan in the hospital grounds, munching cheese and biscuits. At home, after a bath to wash the hospital away, we'd talk about the poems over a glass of sherry, or whisky. It was a good forty minutes' discipline each day. I looked forward to it. It was amazing, heady stuff. Usually I got one good one, sometimes more. Then we cooked – an easy supper – ham and eggs, shepherd's pie, proper little meals.

KC: As active and influential women writers known to be very supportive of other women, including complete beginners, did either or both of you see yourselves as 'Feminist'?

RVB: Being gay, our hearts beating as 'feminists' we went especially to London, to a famous club, but never got through the door. We weren't joiners, you see. And meetings began late. We were never free on Tuesdays and always clad in the wrong clothes, because of work. We failed in 'groupness'.



Kay Cotton is co-editor and a Featured Poet in this issue (p29)

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