

WENDY COPE

Wendy Cope is among Britain's best-selling living poets. By September 1995 her first collection, *Making Cocoa for Kingsley Amis*, had sold 60,000 copies since its publication in 1986; the ironically-titled *Serious Concerns*, its follow-up, published in 1992, had also sold 60,000 copies, or about 20,000 copies a year. A former primary schoolteacher, she is also a notable writer of poetry for children.

Any assessment of Cope has to take her popularity into account. In at least one sense, it's of small relevance what literary critics think of her work. Some of her truest critics — her readers — express their opinion by buying her books. Perhaps this lies behind some of the mild enmity one finds concerning her. She neither belongs with what some may think of as the chopped-prose streetwise school of poetry, nor with the dense, high art type of writing, which can appear to be fodder only for tedious and opaque criticism, nor with the papery aridities of the language poets. Her work has taken poetry back into a public realm. Like Larkin and Harrison, she has proven that it is largely possible to do this without compromising quality. Her popularity can be taken, in some measure, as a comment on that contemporary poetry which means little to the so-called ordinary reader, and moves that reader less.

In my experience, Cope's work tends to polarise other writers. Some straightforwardly enjoy it. Others have a curiously powerful reaction against it — dismissing her as a simple versifier of no depth who fails to display the range of reference they expect of a poet, and usually rounding off with some comment that big sales have nothing necessarily to do with quality. It is interesting to look at this perception of her work, and at what it says about what poetry should now be. I listened recently to an argument between two friends about poetry. As it proceeded, it became obvious to me, from the poets they preferred, that one of them considered poetry to be almost a form of philosophy; to the other, poetry confirmed (or questioned) his emotions, gave pleasure in the wide sense, and was memorable. Cope is much likelier to appeal to the second type of reader. As with Hardy's, her best work convinces less by its dazzling ideas than by its emotional resonance. While not making exaggerated claims for Cope — in a way her work, predicated on modesty, resists such claims — when considered as a maker of poems she is exemplary. Her more hostile critics, however, have a tendency to focus on what they feel is her lack of substance, not on her art. One Scottish woman reviewer compared Cope's second book to work by Jean Binta Breeze with the implication that, as Cope wrote about love affairs, while Binta Breeze wrote about large subjects such as slavery, the latter's work was consequently of more worth. One can of course make ideological comparisons, but poetry as poetry is devalued when it is conflated with ideology. While Cope is unlikely to appeal to the politically correct (which may explain why she sells less in America than in Britain), she is a literary artist.

So, what makes Cope, Cope? Firstly, her poetic persona to date — as opposed to her private self — has been that of a modern middle-class woman who has affairs, drinks a good deal, (often as a result of a failed relationship) and has straightforward views about

what exasperating characters men often are. At the same time, her exasperation is engaging because based on affection and attachment. (One could never imagine her persona entirely rejecting men, or devaluing sex.) Secondly, most of her work is in rhyme, and she uses forms such as triolets, villanelles and sonnets in a completely contemporary idiom. Thirdly, she brings a disenchanted female perspective to the male literary world. She is probably its best satirist. (In her verse narrative, *The River Girl*, her satirical observations of the modern poetry scene are precise, exact, and very interesting.) In *Making Cocoa* this instinct for satire took the form of parodies, highly-skilled and often hilarious, of poets such as Larkin, Hughes, and Craig Raine; her parody of 'My Cat, Jeffry', Christopher Smart's remarkable free verse poem from *Jubilate Agno*, is 'My Lover':

For I shall consider my lover, who shall remain nameless.
For at the age of 49 he can make the noise of five different kinds of lorry
changing gear on a hill....

Her invented poet, Jake Strugnell, who writes 'Strugnell's Sonnets' in that first book, subverts the Shakespearean sonnet with marvellous wit. Beer-swilling, sex-starved, Strugnell is politically-incorrect, but far from unbelievable. He is ageing New Laddism personified.

In *Serious Concerns*, Strugnell survives to make a number of appearances, and Cope's skill at parody and lampoon is unblunted. Her poem 'The Concerned Adolescent' is a finely-judged exposition of the solemnity and lack of self-knowledge of that stage of life. Yet in this second book a less literary note sounds, and her approach is much more direct. She satirizes the 'Tump' (or typically useless male poet):

A tump isn't punctual or smart or efficient,
He probably can't drive a car
Or follow a map, though he's very proficient
At finding his way to the bar.

She pokes fun at the male propensity to argue finer literary points for hours, as in 'So Much Depends', which is a response to a male poet desperate to argue about William Carlos Williams. The title of the poem is deftly taken from Williams' famous piece, 'The Red Wheelbarrow', which is, ironically, about the primacy of the physical world. 'Men and their Boring Arguments', written five years before a debate in the *Independent* about the BBC's discussion programme *Question Time*, and whether women are as keen on verbal confrontation as men, was published on the front page of that newspaper.

Robert Nye, reviewing *Serious Concerns* in *The Times*, pointed to its 'deep despair'. This seems true of some of the poems. An initially light piece, such as 'Roger Bear's Philosophical Pantoum' (Roger Bear illustrates the book's front cover, reading Eliot's *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*), seems on a close reading to be full of

existential angst, buttressed and confirmed by the repetitions implicit in the form. ‘Some More Light Verse’, with its rather circular form, has a similar bleak jokiness. Cope’s virtuosity in particular forms is something too often missed by her detractors. Sometimes she manipulates traditional forms, as in her ‘Nine-line Triolet’, about a love-affair doomed by ‘the old rules in life and in art’ in which the extra, rule-breaking line, is:

(I’ll curse every rule in the book as we part)

Or in her triolet, ‘Valentine’, in which the refrain, “My heart has made its mind up/And I’m afraid it’s you”, shifts the sense of “afraid” from a colloquialism in the first two lines to a resigned dread in the repetition.

It is difficult to know how Cope’s work will develop. When I interviewed her for my magazine, *The Dark Horse*, last year, she was unsure herself. Of the two poems I printed along with her interview, one, ‘John Clare’, marks a different approach in being a touching elegy for that unfortunate poet. The other, a triolet called ‘The Sorrow of Socks’, shows Cope’s ability to write about everyday perceptions in a new way. Simultaneously a piece about the tendency of socks to go missing, and an observation on contemporary relationships, the poem’s eight lines have a compression that one finds in few modern poets. One of Cope’s gifts is seeing subject matter in overlooked everyday experiences. A definition of poetry, Robert Frost once commented, was that it should be *common in experience, uncommon in writing*. It is surely Cope’s fulfilment of this, among other things, which have made her appreciated by so many readers.

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