





**August
Plinth
reads
selections
from
Gravy for the
Navy
•
Grief**

GRIEF

A Review by Daniel Murphy

In Virginia Woolf's first novel, *The Voyage Out*, Terence Hewst confides to Rachel Vinacres: "I want to write a novel about Silence. . .the things people don't say."

Mr. Plinth, in his third book of poems (the first was POPE ART, 1962, the second GRAVY FOR THE NAVY, 1964), might well say: "I want to write poems about silence. . .about the things people can't say." But he doesn't identify the two. Silence for this poet exists for its own sake, and he has taken further than I ever could have imagined possible the impulse which is present in his first poems, the Pope Dances. He seems to want to say "as little as possible" and in this book each word seems almost forced out of him, as if he hated each word, wanted to keep it from coming forth, and treats its appearance as a kind of failure in the face of silence. Some of his poems, on the page, look like scars against a perfect white space; I suspect that this is deliberate. Here the basic unit is not the stanza or the line, but the word. There seems something repulsive to him in the very act of making words: they are related to the geometrical forms which his poems sometimes take: triangles, circles, blocks. There is also the sense of a trajectory about some of them, as if they were weapons burlled against someone, anyone.

He approaches the reader with a knife, an axe, long sharp fingernails.

Now the world is divided in two:
You know who you are.

This poetry seems at times to be attempting a kind of sympathetic magic, as if by direct or indirect invocation or verbal attack it might effect events. But the irony of such an attempt is that it is futile, that it coils round on the speaker. And perhaps that is why Mr. Plinth hates words so much: they tend to catch him in their net. For it might as well be stated openly: there is a ferocious hatred and resentment unburied and hurled outward in these "lines."

I hesitate to call them poems, but I don't know what else to call them. There is certainly an original and forceful voice here at work, but it is not a voice I for one find human or humane in the sense I look for in a poet or in poems generally. It is not only human love he rejects, with his hatred, it is language itself, and how can a poet make poems when he hates the very medium in which he works? I shall quietly hope that no other young poets follow this strange poet's example. What is life for Mr. Plinth would be death for the rest of us.

A Reply to Daniel Murphy

Michael Hammond

I first remember Mr. Plinth rather conspicuous among a number of poets who used to meet at his house each week to read, in a very informal session, when he was teaching at East Carolina University, some years ago. He could barely conceal his disgust for the poems we were doing then – I think Dylan Thomas was rather in style at that time, and of course whatever it was, the poem went on for at least a page. His remarks were savage, as I recall: "Your poem goes on till you get to the bottom of the page, then you stop," he said to one poor fellow. "When are you going to run out of paper?" he shot into another.

When it came to his turn, he never had anything. Or at least we simply assumed that he hadn't written anything, and that he was just a rather acerbic critic with indigestion, for he never recited anything but a line, one line, or possibly two. He had hardly begun to listen before it was over. That was all? This was the start of a poem? This couldn't be the whole poem!?

I was a passionate admirer of a previous book of his, GRAVY FOR THE NAVY. Being a burlesque buff myself I delighted in his extraordinary imitation of various bump and grind rhythms, his "gorgeous" and witty pictures. I could see in them a movement toward condensation. But I couldn't understand this tendency toward what looked to me like a real blind alley. I was wondering if he was just putting us on, or getting back at us for having to sit there, week after week, listening to the four or five pages full of poems which each of us had done since last time. Or rather, everyone except myself; I was not able to write anything at all. I felt like the most plugged-up ass sitting among these prolific poets, and although I didn't think much of their work, anything, I thought, would be better than the silence, the sterility I seemed to be locked into.

"Absolutely not!" I remember him saying, when I told him my problem, and said I would prefer anything to silence, or "sterility" as I called it. "Nothing is better than silence, for a poet. In fact, I would go so far as to say that long periods of sterility are the best possible things that can happen to a poet." Now I was sure he was putting me on.

I retained that attitude as I saw more of him, and we became friends. Sometimes I felt that Plinth, as an infant, was nurtured in a debating school where the training consisted of being obligated to take the negative of such seemingly unassailable propositions as: The earth is round; Proust was a snob; Fresh air is good for you; Language is our most useful tool; The

unexamined life is not worth living. And where daily exercise in the gymnasium meant standing on their heads maxim like Clausewitz's "War is a continuation of politics by other means" ("Work is a continuation of war by other means!"). The man was a Charlatan, a "habitual disorganizer" as he called himself!

Until one day when I happened to hear him read a few of his one liners aloud: and particularly one which I immediately saw as absolute perfection, a poem that could not be perfected by additions, and could only be marred by even the slightest change:

Your life is the longest thing you have ever
lived through or could ever live through

Now this poem has to be heard, in just the way he reads it, with the kind of mixture of logic, amusement, and sadness which is in that voice, and that line, to really "hear" it. For at the same time it is terrifyingly funny, an absolute statement of fact, and a kind of Zen riddle on the level of satori. I felt as if someone had hit me over the head with a brick. Was this Krazy Kat of the poetry sessions really serious after all? I wanted to see how it looked on the page. It looked to me on the page like words "falling off of a building" or simply tumbling in space. When I had seen it I asked him to read it to me again, and this time the effect was even stronger. The words "fell" into my ear. To this day that poem (and now I am absolutely sure it *is* a poem) and its companion

You are one of the dead in a dark room
Hit by one candle, in the intensest labor
Making a monolithic coach drawn by fleas

remain in my mind as a kind of measure of what a poem ought to aspire to. The intensity, the kinetic lightning of its movement (and how fast these poems move, they seem to light up the sky, and then intensify the darkness afterward), the fantastic concentration, dazzled me. I wanted to know what other poets did this sort of thing. He said he didn't know, because he didn't read any other poets, hated them as a matter of fact, "wouldn't be contaminated" as I recall him saying. Liked Eliot, and that was it. But read only prose. "Prose is infinitely more intense and real at its best," I remember him saying; "Why should I bother with verbiage?" And his favorite reading was diaries, notebooks, works where the chance of coming on one simple line, or fragments, was always present. He loved Kafka's *Diaries* more than any other book, with the possible exception of that writer's *Letters to Milena*; then Klee's notebooks, Gide's diaries, Hawthorne's working notebooks, Melville's travel journals from Israel; what else? I called it a passion for the fragment, for fragmentation. "Absolutely not!" he exclaimed, "Kafka does not write fragments!"

It was his conviction that their real genius, particularly that of Kafka, lay in what I called their "fragments." It was a genius, he said, for condensa-

tion, for compression, for boiling experience down to an angel dancing on the head of a pin. "They respect silence! They respect it so much that they refuse to break silence except at the breaking point!"

Be quiet. (I can't stand it.) Be quiet.

This reversal of the general direction which poets and writers take, this movement toward silence and away from speech, did seem to me for a long time a quirk, an obsession, almost a mania in him. But I noticed how the slightest noise disturbed him, so that he would hurl out the window at a motorcycle buzzing by, "Badass! Shit on you!"

"Do you know the Latin for noise? *Nox* is one root, *Nos* is another. *Nox* means evil, darkness. *Nos* is the root of nausea, sickness! It is also the root of speech. All language begins in *nos* and *nox*, and you'll see that when you listen to silence."

Now it seems to me that GRIEF is pointing beyond language and beyond the *nox* and *nos* of words toward the silence. The silence is the important, the most important element of each poem, and is in the whiteness of the page, the stately, decorous movement which seems at the same time to take its time and move like lightning across the whiteness.

You thought you dealt me a deadly blow
it was deadly but now I return with the poison
in my mouth

This poem is a good example of how important the "vision" of the poem is. It stands up like a snake, but a kind of heraldic, stiff snake, like the Egyptian snakes carved in pyramids to drive away gravediggers.

Mr. Daniel Murphy, in a recent issue of *Criteria*, has attacked GRIEF because of its negative attitude toward language, and the medium of poetry itself. Certainly he is right to assert that GRIEF is almost wholly negative, and negative concerning the very things which Mr. Murphy holds most dear. But I think that his attack is directed from within the poetic establishment, from within the "group of poets" at a poet who regards them with suspicion, if not contempt. But that is because he does not so much belittle the possibilities of communication, but rather thinks that it can only be done in solitude. Poetry "with a public voice" is not poetry to him at all, but accommodation, the cordial spoutings of a mutual admiration society. It is not only silence which Plinth's words crave, as Mr. Murphy asserts, but solitude, a "private world" cut off utterly from the big world, the "loud world".

"Loneliness," Rilke wrote to Princess Marie, "is a true elixir, it forces the disease completely to the surface: first one has to get bad, worse, worst. . . then though, one gets well. I creep about for the whole day in the thickets of my life and scream like a savage and clap my hands - you wouldn't believe what hair-raising creatures then fly up."

It is out of an utter loneliness that Mr. Plinth's

poems speak so they may very well be found to scream like a savage, throw weapons, anything at hand – some of them are certainly hair-raising creatures. But I see a certain development in the book from bad, worse, worst. . .and then there is a barely perceptible movement toward “getting well”. This is the structure or movement as I see it:

A: Bad: loneliness – sense of loss, betrayal of kinship

B: Worse: terror – falling to some lower form of life, inhuman

C: Worst: dying, feeling dead: “The sound barrier of the unbearable is broken”

D: Good: peace and pleasure of the “warrior” in traversing the world’s length

One side of the poem which has distressed many readers who have been otherwise rather impressed by GRIEF is the hatred which is openly and almost violently driven out toward the reader, and toward certain targets generally. I can only say that these poems seem to work as poetry in a rather remarkable way, and as a wholly new tone in poetry. They have the virtue of honesty, and like a wind that blows the dust out of a room that’s been closed up too long – rather refreshing.

He approaches the reader with a knife, an axe,
long sharp fingernails

Shall I be the Oswald of perfect beauties? Shall I?

There is something chilling about that second question – as if there were some fear that he thought the first question might be taken as rhetorical. That persistence, that forceful energy like a laser beam concentrated on one fine point makes a little hole in my mind. It runs through my mind now and then like a musical chord I cannot forget. I think that rock music, particularly the insistence of Mick Jagger, and some of Bob Dylan’s songs, have had their powerful influence on GRIEF. I recall Dylan’s description of the way he wrote “Like a Rolling Stone”: “It wasn’t called anything, just a rhythm on paper – all about my steady hatred directed at some point that was honest. In the end it wasn’t hatred. Revenge, that’s a better word.” Hatred directed at some point that was honest: that not only justifies GRIEF, it raises it above most of the verbiage that people have called poetry in the last fifty years.

There is an intense private atmosphere about the poetry, and yet this privacy is not like some “personal element” belonging to the poet’s own life. It is all perfectly clear, but it is meant to belong to “the little world” of the individual, rather than “the great world” of the public. I think most poets think they must write for this “great world” in the sense that they must create what Plinth calls “a public voice” as compared to “the private voice.”

Your gift cracked all my clocks
A public voice in a private place

Now I give you as strange a gift
A private voice in a public place

I will say this for his “strange gift”: he and GRIEF have made the poets I used to like seem like *nos* and *nox*.



THE LANDLORD
1962

(from *Pope Art*)

*His knees giving way beneath him with rage
Mount the stairs to their room by stamping on them,
Not holding the bannister but taking its throat,
The million keys shiver in his trouser pocket.*

*He sticks the key in the lock so violently
The other keys in the bunch gag in sympathy,
Legs spread wide, takes everything
And hands it over into hands that stretch*

*Out from the dark interior.
Fills a small glass at a prostrate cabinet,
Empties it with a smack of the lips,
Then locks up several bottles of “Rosehips.”*

*Submissive the table received his blows
“Postponement? Shall I tell you how postponement works?”
Pulled a stick with a horn knob out of a stand,
And threw the table down stairs instead.*

*The child of the housekeeper opened the gate.
The housekeeper’s poodle sits on the steps,
Watches the table as it cartwheels downstairs,
Includes it in the familiar house and its noise.*

*Throttles the spiral bannister as he grows,
Holds it by the throat and hurls himself up.
Submissive the small door received his blows,
“Saved? Nothing saved? You feeble fellow!”*

*The landlord sits down, and the housekeeper comes
Brings him food on a tray, and then goes away.
The table lies down in the street backbroken,
But round and round, the poodle chases his tail.*

*Dignified, if a little bedraggled, the fallen
Picks himself and his greasy hat up and goes
Eyes wide, like a flyer gone deaf who still knows
The sound barrier of the unbearable has been broken.*

GRAVY FOR THE NAVY

In the work of August Plinth, the fear of the castrating woman and the accompanying longing to return to her womb by some way that precludes sex, attains to its fullest and deepest expression. At times it slips over into a puritan cry of distress and distaste before unredeemed, burgeoning life. All of his males are frozen, paralyzed in the positions of “watchers”. None of his goddesses are fertility symbols; all are there not to bring new life but to take back to their womb the withered foetuses, an inversion of the ordinary function of the womb.

If they are foetuses, they are bitter, suspicious, contemptuous foetuses, foetus-vampires, as it were; hanging sluggishly in their mother’s arms, and growing long teeth. In GRAVY FOR THE NAVY one can almost hear at times the gape, whistle, and howl of the unquenchable anguish and joy of pure desire. Then it is quelled, the hall becomes silent, sinister; the degradation ceremonial begins. It is the desecration of a cult object, a fertility totem who cannot take back forever what she has given birth to. But the degradation ceremonial itself is futile, and stops halfway through; stopped by the foetus in its recollection of traumatic birth, longing for pre-birth again.

Powerful and sweet return
Of the joy of being unborn.

Oblivion blooms
Oblivion blooms

Blossoms of nothingness
Between inner tongues.

Some of his dancers are motionless, quivering, mammalian targets; others are sheer motion, a blur of dancing leg and wind-blown hair in a speeding car. Plinth is justly famous for his genius for capturing the rhythms of a dozen different bump-and-grind dances, the stops and starts, the hesitations, the tension of choice between unveiling and refusing, teasing and inspiring, attack and retreat.

Some are disconcertingly almost male in their aggressive force, their will to determine events; sometimes it is difficult to tell whether a man or a woman is speaking in a poem, and I think this confusion is deliberate. Which one is the phallus-bearer? What is more illusory than male-female roles. Plinth has already made that point in his first published poem, *Peter and Paul* (1960), in which surrogate females appear like mushrooms all over a boarding school denied the actual presence of women.

What ought to be noticed above all in GRAVY FOR THE NAVY is Plinth’s ability to achieve a great range and psychological depth in his portraiture of young

women. The distrust of “unnatural” women may lead at times to a tedious sameness and predictability of characterization: female incubae. But what keeps GRAVY FOR THE NAVY from the inclination toward misogyny is the “natural women” who counterbalance the “degradation ceremonials” and with their white and black magic, their natural sorcery, cure the sick male.

Breasts like young beasts cutting horns
Sleeping eyes

Two somber blooms on the same black stalk
Sleeping eyes

They knit a pair of earmuffs for Van Gogh
Sleeping eyes

I know of no other group of poems about women that deals with such a variety of different women, different situations, different attitudes toward women. Each new stripper seems to require a new style, a new tone, a new frame of mind; sometimes she inspires a hate poem, sometimes revulsion against woman’s betrayal of all that lies traditionally hidden; sometimes a poem will exult in this very revealing, this freedom, this primitivism, which gives to the man his vision, his freedom, his own state of nature. Some of the “hate” poems are obviously written at white heat, a nightmare directly transcribed. They possess enough hallucinatory vividness to give it the baleful appearance of a Dostoevsky grotesque. But the honesty of the hatred, together with the refusal ever to stop there, give it a kind of health, a kind of rightness in the context of a body of poems which sings songs of delight over the body that have rarely been matched.

Plinth is intent on proclaiming the subtle and insidious powers of women, to evoke a sense of their dizzying attractions, even to speculate, in the style of legend, on female malevolence as one of the root terrors of existence.

At the same time woman in her natural state has magical powers of maternity and sexuality to lead man back to his origins, his ancient identity. Unnatural women may provoke quantities of bitterness and bile; natural women only praise.

The achievement of these poems is an achievement of *seeing*. Again and again Plinth asks that the doors of perception be cleansed, so that the primordial mystery of man and woman can be *seen*. Some critics have seen in this only a sexuality detached from responsibility, impulse without mind, where sadism is never very far away, while the boys wolf-call and wail in the stifling dusk. On the contrary, I think that Mr. Plinth has accomplished the feat of suggesting with great power and vividness how, in the most sordid and degrading context, the female still leads man past his dreams of destruction back toward his indestructible origins.

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GRIEF**

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GRIEF

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GRAVY FOR THE NAVY
FOUR (4) SHOWS