

# The Art Of Flight

recent small press poetry

(Illustration adapted from a C14th world map found in a Marco Polo manuscript; from *Verge* by Paul Matthews, Arc Publications, 1976.)

In that powerful novel of the sixties, *The Moviegoer*, Percy Walker characterised the conventional English poetic spirit: *Oh the crap that lies lurking in the English soul. Somewhere, it received an injection of romanticism which nearly killed it. That's what killed my father, English romanticism, that and 1930 science. A line for my notebook: Explore connection between romanticism and scientific objectivity.* They continue to battle with each other, but the contest has long since been won. Much English poetry, however, still gives us that non-marvellous humanism that has been the legacy from Hardy. No longer involving us in the visionary world of the early romantics, the poet still (unaccountably) believes in his own individuality, in his own magic that is about as individual as the 'individual portion' in a canteen. We are treated to the distinctive smell of his shit - but is it worth eating?

Robert Nye has an acute poem called 'The Interview':

*Inspired by the pursuit of his own tail  
He has written his poems to find out what he smells like,  
And now here's another dog, a dog-fancying thoroughbred,  
Just down from Oxford, trained to the minute,  
On heat and eager to do some of his sniffing  
For him, and to declare the crap remarkable.*

Nye seems to recognise the problem, but his solution is merely a Hardyesque distancing, a poetry that has to struggle against the quietness of its own poetic gift - *poets too / Are worn out by a patience / For poetry, and for the unquiet poem. / But is the grasshopper impatient when / She drowns in an autumn dew, a meagre fury?* He engages in easy and unheroic struggles with Henry James and Robert Southey, men who do not threaten to leave him off-balance. He disdains

the crap, but finds only Hardy's shadow, *grown cold in the company you keep.*

It is not enough any more to rest upon personal vision, the wresting of intimate response from landscape and human environment as a vehicle for meaning. As Ashbery acknowledges, such an enterprise is limited to self-defeat: the poets have merely found themselves at the boundary from which they have to retreat, unsatisfied, to a world that remains meaningless without their dream of incarnation. Thom Gunn, in many respects a fine poet, finds himself in this predicament, though he is strong enough to attempt a self-assertion. While Hughes has moved into a mythologising that remains confined within the limits of poetic convention, Gunn rests at the exploration of personal consciousness, imaging the experiences of acid and cocaine. But his vision remains essentially unstructured - nothing is offered except the well-worn gestures of poetic feeling and awareness. It is not enough for the mid-twentieth century poet to offer his own psyche as the resolving factor for disparate experience, invoking memory as a counterpoint to the 'righteous permanence' of natural and man-made landscape.

*The sniff of the real, that's  
what I'd want to get  
how it felt  
to sit on Parliament  
Hill on a May evening  
studying for exams skinny  
seventeen dissatisfied*

We do not want experience any more: a poem like Gunn's 'The Plunge' is not enough. Experience must be regrouped, reordered and reanalysed within the terms of a less humanistic ethos so as to express itself to our understanding as well as our emotions.

Allen Fisher steers us onto this new poetic landscape. In *Place I - XXXVII* we are given an extended study of South London seen in terms of a vast historical awareness that rises through the Victorian and twentieth century edifice. The experience of the city is structured by Taoist metaphysics: lines of migration, of the earth's magnetic forces, ley lines, ancient parish limits organised according to natural boundaries such as streams - now submerged, but still running underground, unnoticed. Fisher scrupulously avoids the pitfalls of his ancestors such as Williams and Olson who attempted to impose a personal cosmography upon Patterson and Gloucester.

Allen Fisher - *Place* - Truck Press - £2.50  
- Paxton's Beacon - Arc Publications - 60p  
Thom Gunn - *Jack Straw's Castle* - Faber - £1.95 & £3.25  
Jeff Nuttall - *Objects* - Trigram Press - £1.50 & £2.75  
Robert Nye - *Divisions on a Ground* - Carcanet - £2.00  
Cambridge Poetry Society - *Perfect Bound* - 75p

All these books are available from Compendium Books at  
240, Camden High St., London N.W.1.

Instead, he seeks in science and in the metaphysical frontiers of science for organising influences that are available to man: Tao does not rest upon a vision that none can hope to repeat, but upon fundamental structures that have an objective existence within our lives.

*so our new roads are straight through the heart past it  
to fall in line with the others  
to fall in line*

*in a grid an "iron grip of history"  
chosen by our logic bottlenecked to the chaos  
out of which our pleasure comes our sexual violence  
apart from our ancestors that we disown  
whose song weave  
between the gesmantic centres of this scape  
engenders the life essence*

*kurumba kurumba the centre's "increase"  
which every food has  
every plant and animal kaulakaulak  
accumulated to an increase within themselves  
their very buds' throbbing by our fathers' performance  
by the treasure of their ritual  
that is throttled by us here  
in Brixton market herded  
by the Bosses of this brickwork  
that insist our rivers be straight  
from here to here by way of the Ring road  
not by way of the body's measure the earth's pulse  
but the quadrant and motor car  
across the veins of the stomach nerves  
against the grain  
so that our poverty isn't just that  
in Railton Road where the council wet their trousers  
but in our own blood*

The poets too suffer this estrangement, and for a moment Fisher pauses with a superbly restrained irony to evaluate the contemporary poetic 'establishment', epitomised by an Oxford contributor to the *The New Review*:

*TWO JAPANESE SOLDIERS BACK FROM THE JUNGLE 1972  
BELIEVING THE WAR THEY JOINED IN 1940 STILL CONTINUED*

*LISTENER, 25TH JANUARY 1973*

*A POEM BY JOHN FULLER "TO IAN HAMILTON"*

In the later sections, particularly 'Lakes', there is a discernible movement from the local to the personal, but there is still no attempt to cast symbols. It is rather the synchronicity of the mind to the exterior world that Fisher is concerned with: *So much takes place in the mind / yet it cannot be apart from the body.* **The Art of Flight** continues this with a more considered deliberation, exploring the mechanics of the mind and matter in a style that creates a lyricism from the physiological. Fisher uses the structural precision of a scientific objectivity as a means of analysing *the essence of us / that invisible / is the same that is seen by us daily.* **The Art of Flight** is less immediately approachable than **Place**, but it is the more important and considered work. **Paxton's Beacon** is the first published selection from this poem.

Fisher recognises that his task stems from a *new need for a strain measurement- / device that does not suffer from / creep and hysteresis.* He seeks an understanding of the mental

processes that can combine the intuitive with the actual.

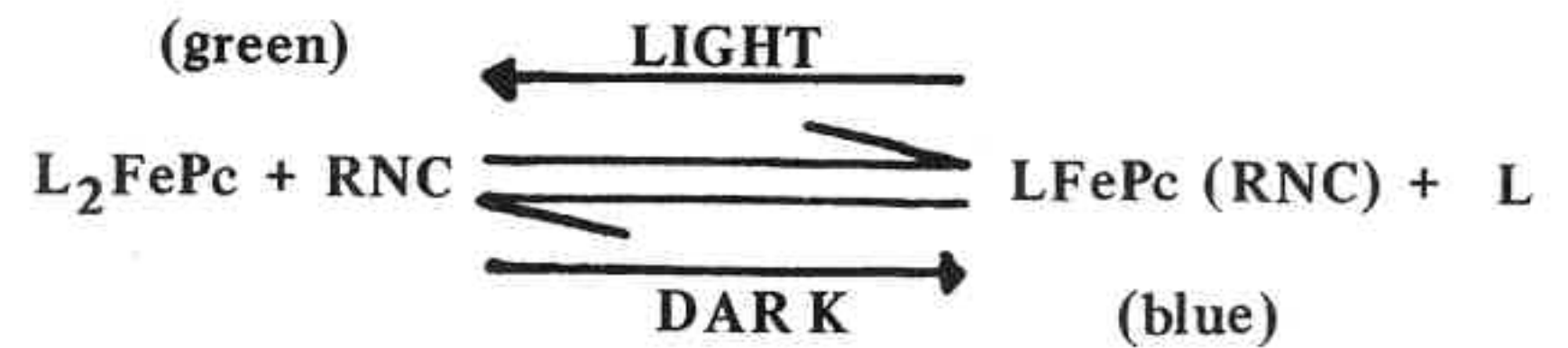
*The world eye, the complete make-up  
of the sensory-nerve-system  
could not be understood without  
exploration of light and the  
dark. The pineal gland, that acorn  
sitting deep in the brain tree in  
between the two hemispheres the  
vessels responsive as your voice*

In form, the poem takes its structure from J.S.Bach's *Die Kunst Der Fuge*, extemporising and circling back on itself with a beautiful lyric intensity. Its formal subject is *the usage in ideas and in language of the terms "light and dark"*, where "Flight" is fugue, folly, and fancy.

*What concerns me about creation myths is that  
there is darkness  
and only when it separates do we get light.*

The poem wings and weaves about this central motif, asserting a melody of the creative possibilities that occur at the separation of darkness by light in the natural world - and within the brain the consequent trapping of intrusive light by the bacterium halobium inside the bilayers of fatty molecules. The poem explores such occurrences from the intimate to the general, counterpointing the impressions of feeling with a scientific precision. Emblifying this in a satisfyingly exact image, and neatly mirrored by the imperceptible change of the typography down the page from green to blue, is the natural solar-energy storage system - the complex blue LFePc (RNC) which loses its RNC when exposed to light and turns green.

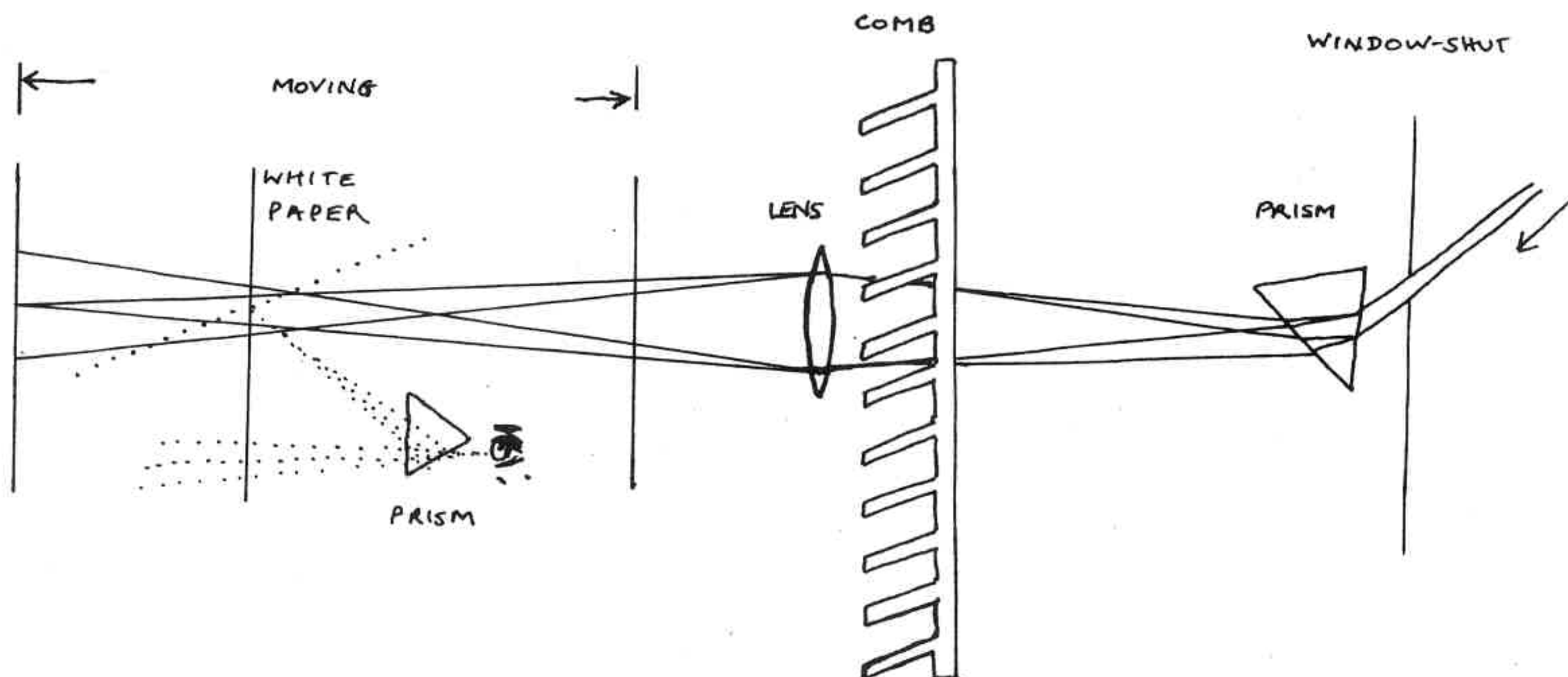
FePc, iron phthalocynine.  
L, piperidine, an organic solvent.  
RNC, a co-ordinated alkyl isocynide.



Television and lightning, the 'hum of light in Robert Natkin's paintings', the flash of the lighthouse beacon, the movement of sun upon the water and on the human face, all share this process of rhythmic separation.

*water in your eyes tonight  
dazzled by the brightness it isn't just emotion*

Protons react. The poetry turns back on itself, visually re-spacing the phrasing and drawing fugal re-meanings at each frugal meditative change. The early sections dwell upon the possibilities of the physical details of a diagram from Newton's *Opticks*:



(From Isaac Newton's *Opticks*, reproduced in *Paxton's Beacon*.)

*It separates the full brightness  
out of this sound it separates  
in the paper sequence covered.  
Water glass light open sun breaking out  
the seed opens breaks sequence early.  
The sun haze pulls roots in paper  
the bud erupts vision complex  
the refractions' smell spin shading.*

This is followed by a lyric in which Fisher, in beautifully controlled verse, shows us the interaction of the natural creative processes when light's reversal into darkness and colours is embodied in the early dawn on the sea-coast:

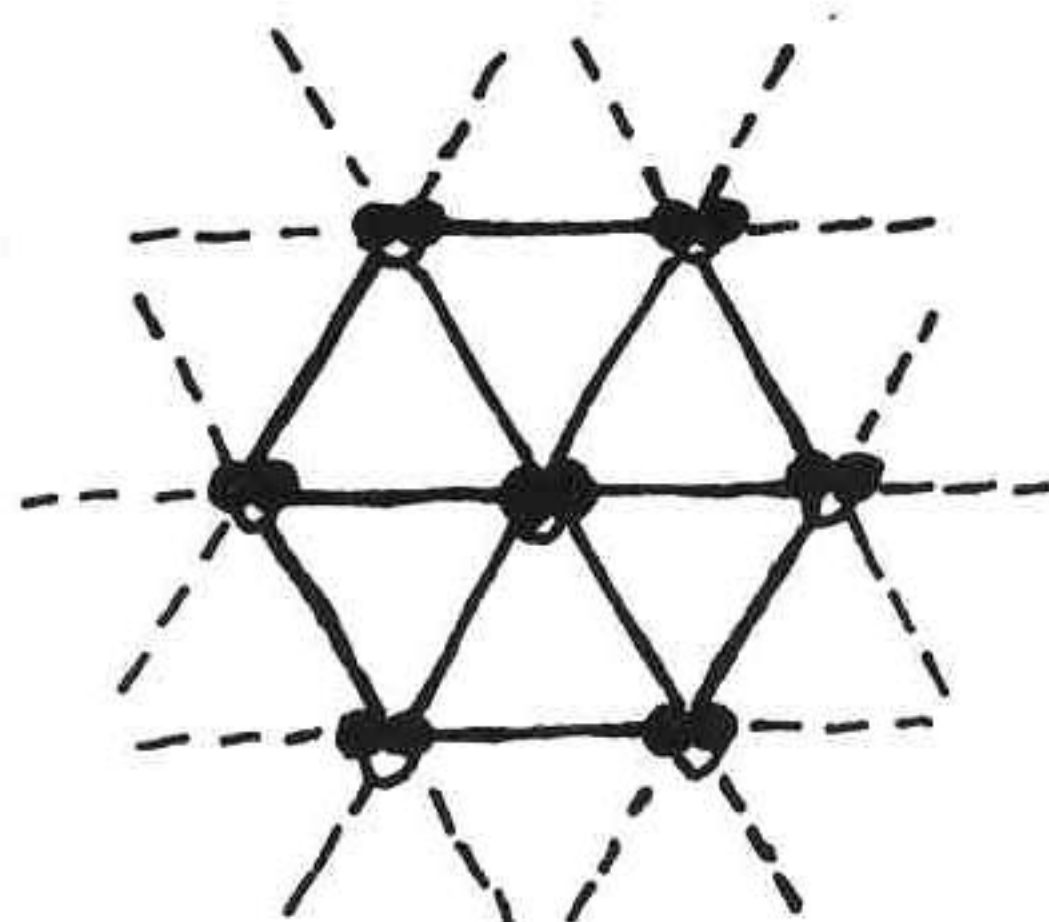
*the wind lifts the sea foam and beach  
dust screens sun coarsing the worm-digger's face as  
the lighthouse flowers mirrored light  
sun brightness dimmed by wind's screen separates  
into shattered pool of colours  
distant streams out of mind's eye begin to rush inside  
the bay rocks' wind lifts  
reflects shade the coming day settles down to  
the last testing light within light  
screening sun before lighthouse shuts down for day*

The poem then spins into its central sections - 'Paxton's Annie' and 'Paxton's Ecstasy'. Paxton was the gardener who designed the Crystal Palace, using the structure of the water lilies at Chatsworth; his beacon was the fire at the Crystal Palace in 1936, burning with a flame that could be seen for fifty miles around. Its importance for Fisher lies in the fact that during the fire the building recreated its patterns, folding inwards like the leaves of the water lily at night. Destruction becomes a new creation:

*out of the sighing fire rages health that  
heavy cloud ascending through  
the breast the mind*

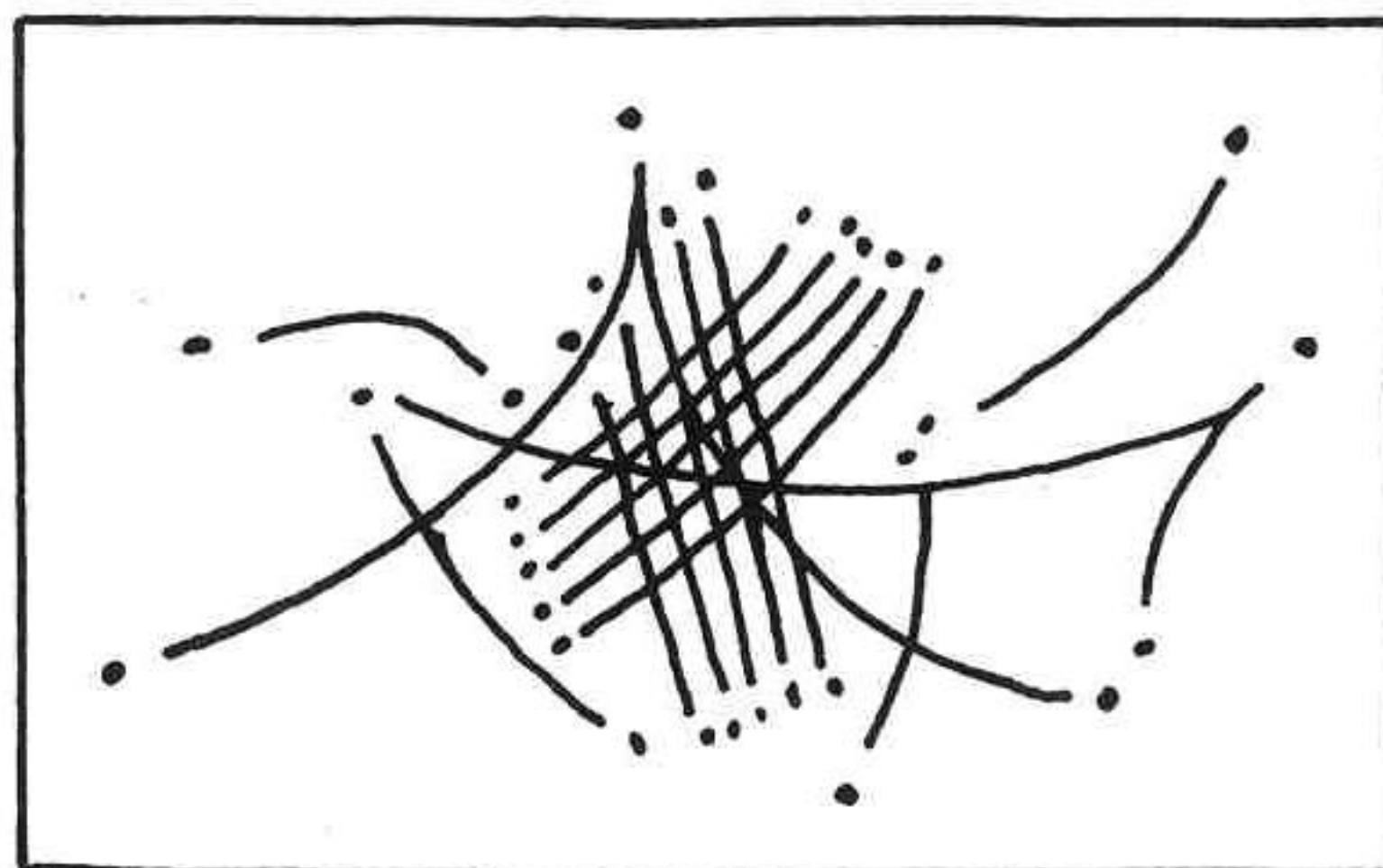
In 'Paxton's Ecstasy' all the meditational motifs of the poem are interweaved into the climactic lyric of the fugue, returning upon themselves, redefined and recreated at each new juncture. The folding flower of the burning building is seen to operate according to the same internal rhythms as the flower that fertilises its own seeds, a sexual energy that is patterned for all beings:

*not just emotion sexual beats  
energy creates its patterns  
inside its own limits not through  
a medium that could mar its  
grace unmixed and pure colours form  
an affair of deep silence  
determined by the earth's ellipse  
order dissociates complex  
these stamens unfold spin fall  
an interior coronet  
gleaming and glancing congeries  
the stigmas green mix scent mix act  
are laid bare a grateful perfume*



(Bacteriorhodopsin planar structure, from *Paxton's Beacon*.)

*rises into air reflections  
soaked in light's image in water  
fertilisation of the seeds  
accomplished  
the great object of the flower  
its own affair not of ideas  
the bio-core revealed  
then fold inwards the petals  
fall beams fire sight love's motion beats  
the sun flowers the water rose  
the flower closes system*



(Drawing by Ian Tyson, from *Printed Circuit* by Andrew Crozier, Street Editions, 1974.)

'Paxton's Annie' and 'Paxton's Ecstasy' are also printed in the summer 76 issue of the magazine of the Cambridge Poetry Society, *Perfect Bound*. The receptiveness of the poets represented here to influences as diverse as Tristan Tzara's poetry\*\* and the U.S. West Coast poets such as Charles Olson, Ed Dorn and Jack Spicer, contrasts tellingly with the feeble neo-Georgianism of *Oxford Poetry Now*. J.H.Prynne is given pride of place - rightly in terms of his stature as one of the most important English poets, but less so in terms of the sequence printed here, 'The Land of Saint Martin'. Prynne's poetry has always - after the early collection *Force of Circumstance* - been difficult. What convinces the reader is the rhythmic certainty, the moving emotion controlled beneath blue-steel language:

*After feints the heart steadies,  
pointwise invariant, by the drown'd  
light of her fire. In the set course  
we pass layer after layer, loving  
what we still know. It is  
an estranged passion, but true,  
the daughter willed back by blue eyes,  
unscathed, down the central  
pain pathway.*

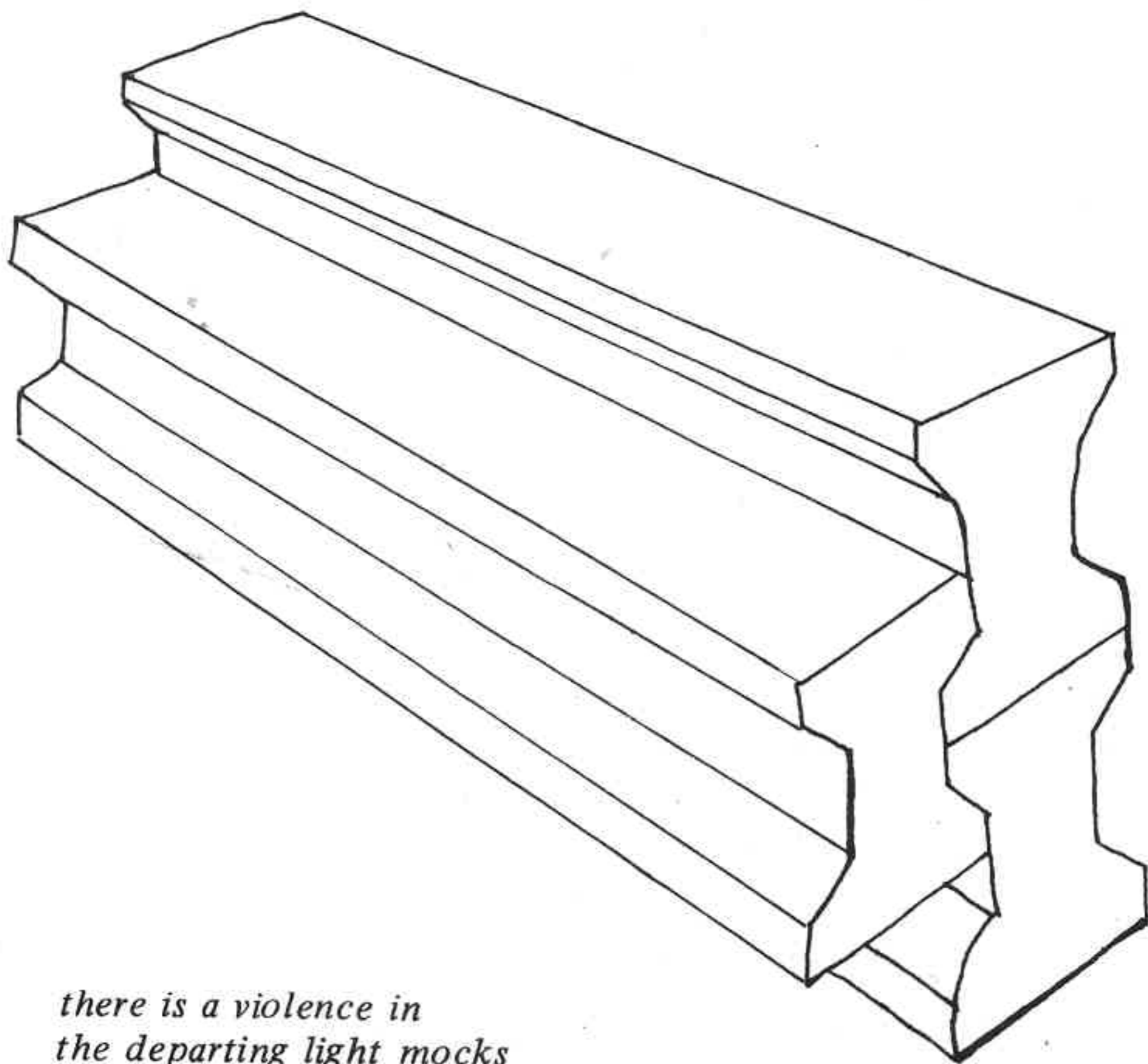
(Into the Day - 1972)

As in Fisher's verse, emotion is dealt with in terms of a scientifically precise analysis: *intense burning / pain in the chest / how much to give / LD<sub>50</sub> a scruple of fair dealing.* (*High Pink on Chrome* - 1975). 'The Land of Saint Martin' is more purely meditative, but less strong verbally - *leaf-leaf and sister speaks, we pick / any song up.* - and contrasts transparently with the poetry of Martin Thom that follows. Thom is concerned with the possibilities of analysing human emotion from a controlled perspective of Freudian and structural anthropological analysis. His response to his own nightmarish perceptivity is evoked in a violent spare language that first developed in his brilliant long work *The Bloodshed, The Shaking House*.††

\*\* Lee Harwood's translations of Tzara were recently published by the Trigram Press.

†† *Spanner* vol. 1, no. 2, February 1975 was devoted to a long selection from *The Bloodshed, The Shaking House*.

( from *Ceremonial Devices* by Martin Thom, The Many Press, 1976 )



there is a violence in  
the departing light mocks  
sulphur torches on the Inner Site  
If this is Winter  
I want to drive  
forever into that startling  
light motherless he has lain so  
long the jan  
of tracks  
a slight wind rises  
offering red  
ash to the cheek  
grief-crazed driver  
la bête humaine

The other highlights of the issue are the two prose sequences by R.F.Walker and Peter Riley. The first is a surrealistic fantasy that writes an epitaph for the alienated artist - *There are six men jostling each other as they suck the drawer-knobs of a couchant chest of draws. A seventh tries to shoulder in unsuccessfully. He is the artist...* - the second 'three cave sections' from which the writer clinically observes different sets of excursive schoolchildren who release the death-vapours in which the adult world has enclosed itself. It is a measure of the stature of *Perfect Bound* that four of its poets - Prynne, Peter Riley, Chris Torrance and John James - were included in the important anthology of English poets selected by Andrew Crozier for the recent *New Directions Anthology 32*.<sup>++</sup>

Finally a very different poet who has rejected the lure of the gentle individualistic view for the formal cold eye of the painter. *Objects*, the title of Jeff Nuttall's new collection, aptly characterises his attitude to the world that surrounds him. Nuttall plays with language as if it were a medium for a painting or a cartoon, excising the personal that pretends to be anything more than itself, and throwing the artefacts back into the reader's face. He possesses the painter's eye, a viewpoint from which objects retain their own autonomy, their own existence in relation to each other. The book opens with a series of ten 'Still Lives':

*Kitchen. Plastic bowl containing sheets. Cheap dishes containing the remains of baked apples. Striped tablecloth.*

So much is given. The objects are transformed into a Tibetan temple, the dishes set before the distant building of the folded linen:

*The early celibates that protected the sheets from stain  
Were not buried, were left, regurgitated, curled in their  
perfect craters*

<sup>++</sup> The other poets represented are Anthony Barnett, David Chaloner, Tim Longville, Douglas Oliver, John Riley and Iain Sinclair.

*Cooled to apple pap by persistent plateau winds*

Such imaginative moments are left as such, offered as nothing more than the visual creation of the poet-painter. The arbitrariness of his vision is emphasised by the presentation of alternatives, as in the poems 'Three Takes of the Same Chorus' and 'Two Takes of the Same Chorus at Dunstanborough'. The 'Cartoons' offer an amusing analogical play with language that emphasises the poet's fluid craft as being as arbitrary as the change of a minute pen-stroke on the page:

*Terrible rise in the price of marg  
Marj  
Large? To the clinic swiftly*

*Thruppen soff Thruppen soff Thrup  
Rupp  
Sure? Dangling like a quishy egg*

Nuttall's awareness of the relationship of words to themselves stems ultimately from Hopkins, but unlike Hopkins he remains acutely aware of the chasm between the poet's language and his experience. They are 'equivalents' only: visual and linguistic, one for the other.

*She's a saddle / hunter's leap. Her thighs breach morning-  
light to afternoon...  
The antler's of her guncarriage, slap of leather, of elastic  
lathering embattled flanks.  
The carriage of her cunt, the lurching runaway that rocks  
your children in their liquid  
sleep and swings your sky-  
kissed bowels to vomit...  
Hanging knackers of a bulldog's labial jowls / the wattles of  
the night at cock's cry.*

Landscape can be seen in terms of a lover, as in the remarkable poem 'Leeds', or the lover in terms of landscape:

*I enquire into your structure.  
I have a crest. A nipple like a rivet on my head. Substance  
like a sponge. Labyrinths like  
the frills of tripe and seaweed  
piled on the front of Mae  
West's rib cage.*

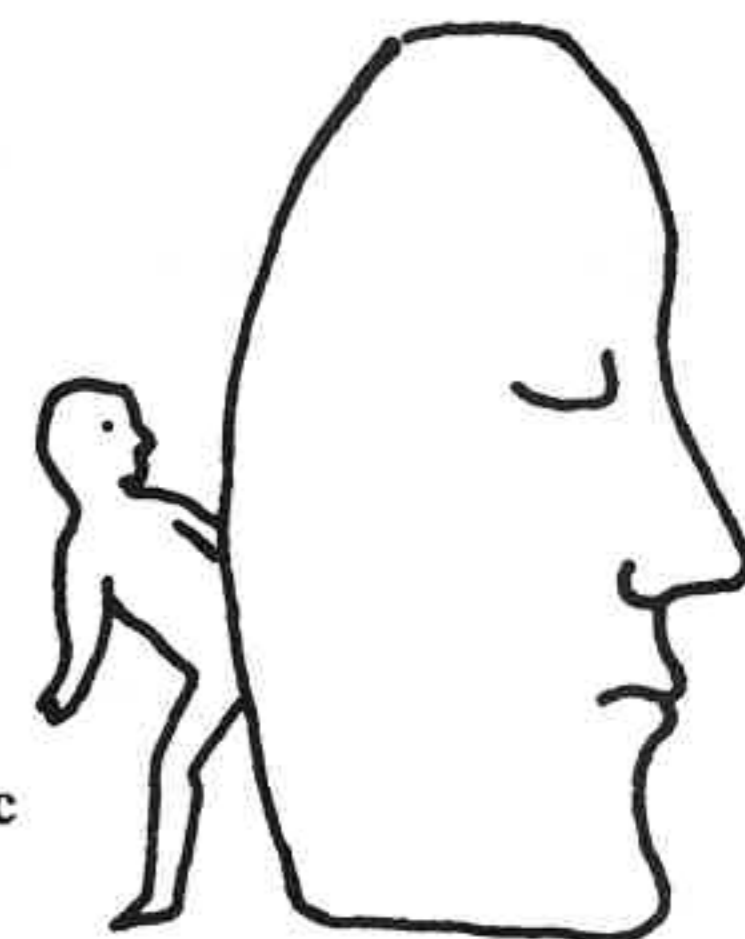
*I lick you.  
I taste of sour cider. Mould and menopause. Maiden's water  
and summer rain.*

Mould and menopause are savouries that Nuttall has tasted already - in the early poem 'Schoolmistress' - but now there is an intensity that has come from maturity, a density of language seeking its equivalents, and above all a sardonic humour that appears as he relishes the sourness of sensual experience.

*After the snow the cunt.  
There are odours no bad alley cat can scavenge...  
Oh the chlorophyl toothpaste from the drooling twat of  
Primavera.*

A sign of Nuttall's strength is the forcefulness with which he savours the Englishness of the environments that he paints. Strong poets and writers come with a powerful belief in their own culture - hence the dominance of American art in all spheres in the twentieth century, culminating in Warhol's exaltation of the most everyday experiences of American life. Nuttall, perhaps helped by his early association with Burroughs and Trocchi, possesses this strength. The intense activity of the small presses shows that he is not alone.

## ROBERT YOUNG



(from *A Talisman* by Nic Totten, The Many Press, 1976.)

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