DENIS GLOVER AND THE CRAFT OF POETRY

by Joost Daalder

Glover’s Enter without Knocking (Christchurch: Pegasus Press, 1971) is amongst New Zealand’s most esteemed poetic publications to date, yet an extraordinarily uneven selection (by the author) of his work over the years. I do not suggest that it is not representative of the best of which Glover is capable. The unevenness, rather, is intrinsic — the result of an inability, on the poet’s part, to distinguish between his good and his bad poems. Thus, the selection is automatically uneven, and not the outcome of calculation or a wish to cheat us. It is impossible to believe that a poet who in one volume includes such startling contrasts, in quality as well as kind, as “The Road Builders” (22) and “The Magpies” (34) is a competent judge of what he is doing. The assumption must be, not only that Glover wanted to offer various fare, but also that he thought that such poems were nevertheless of a similar standard. No poet is likely to select a bad poem for posterity, or even for his present readers.1 Peculiarly, the unevenness of the poems seems to have gone largely unnoticed, or else has not been judged worthy of comment. I personally believe (as will become obvious) that Glover’s uncertainty of poetic register, on which I shall chiefly comment, is representative of deepseated New Zealand attitudes. However, even if they are more specifically Glover’s own, they need to be laid bare if we are to come to a proper appreciation of him, and in this instance perhaps more than with any New Zealand poet it is the technique which mirrors the attitudes and is our surest key to them. Furthermore, and possibly even more importantly, it is to the disadvantage of the best poems (Glover’s or any poet’s) not to seek an explanation for their success and for the failure of the inferior ones.

Basically, in Glover’s case as well as in that of poets like Fairburn or O’Sullivan, there is employment of two poetic registers, viz. that of formal, literary language often strongly influenced by British example, and a supposedly tough, colloquial, almost anti-literary “New Zealand” style. Two such idioms are always difficult to handle, and certainly in combination. One needs to have a very exact awareness of the effect created by each, and this means having a sense of distance from the words, such as Auden was a master at showing amongst modern poets. Glover is a conscious literary craftsman, as is obvious from his progression, but too closely involved with the tension between “England” and “New Zealand”; this is one of the deepseated attitudes that I previously referred to. Closely allied to this problem is the uncertainty about what I shall call Romanticism and realism. There is no simple one-to-one relationship between, for example, realism and a New Zealand register; but undoubtedly the poet’s success with words is strongly influenced by the certainty with which he chooses in favour of Romantic or realistic values. And the best poems, I believe, are generally those which are within the great English lyrical tradition of suggestiveness, simplicity, musicality and certainty of tone, even if adapted for New Zealand circumstances. I do not, of course, mean that all English poems of this kind are Romantic, but I do wish to contend that the “Sings Harry” poems, for instance, are Romantic poems and use, generally, pronounced elements of typically “English” poetry. It is not difficult even to point at some specific influences: e.g. Wordsworth for much of the attitude to nature and some of the language, and Yeats for the refrains. At the same time, we shall also see
some instances of quite successful realistic-prosaic language, and it is clear that occasionally this bears the stamp of Auden and is thus British to that extent. But generally I would claim that this register is not handled with great expertise; it either too obviously shows Auden’s influence and in a peculiar context, or it assumes an almost aggressive pedestrianism about which one should not complain as such but which does turn out to be the wrong tone for the place in which it occurs.

But such assertions about the most immediately sensitive aspect of poetry, its style, need detailed linguistic demonstration, and let us therefore now turn, for the sake of clarity, to two extreme examples, and consider these closely, viz. “Afterthought” (171) and “The Flowers of the Sea” (62):

I

AFTERTHOUGHT

Everything’s right
Love or grief.
Your puzzled educated mind
In some ways ignorant of life

Makes me lovingly laugh.

Not cruelly, but enough.

Finality
I put in chosen banality
Words trivial but true –

I love you.

II

THE FLOWERS OF THE SEA

Once my strength was an avalanche
Now it follows the fold of the hill
And my love was a flowering branch
Now withered and still.

Once it was all fighting and folly
And a girl who followed me;
Who plucked at me plucked holly.
But I pluck the flowers of the seas,

Sings Harry,

For the tide comes
And the tide goes
And the wind blows.

Now I suggest that the first poem is a reasonable example of the aggressive “New Zealand” pedestrianism which I have mentioned, expressive of a deliberately “realistic”, tough and no-nonsense attitude. It is an extreme example in that not so many poems in Enter without Knocking are quite as bad as this.

Of course, the poet does show some sense of distance from his language according to his own declaration that an expression like “I love you” is trivial. But this is defended on the basis of its being “true”. That, however, is a bad excuse. Even if we take the view – as we should not – that bad use of language is permissible if the sentiment behind it is not bad, the fact remains that a purely private feeling is not common property and thus uninteresting. We can only accept a statement like “I love you”, even as something to disagree with, if there is something within the poem which we can, in modern parlance, “identify with”. Glover’s basic aesthetic error is that he thinks that sincerity of feeling is a substitute for adequate poetic language. And not only does “I love you” have the trivial expression poetically in this poem, and the declaration, however Romantic in the poet’s private life, linguistically pedestrian: it derives its unpleasant taste largely from the fact that the poet, in an attempt to offer a statement which will seem realistic because genuine in feeling, goes against his own better instinct not to be content with such stylistic flatness. The toughness mentioned before here resides in an emphatic wish not to be seen to be literary, though such supposed honesty springs in part from what appears to be a feeling of a purely personal kind to which the poet is not accustomed. Lack of ability to handle such an emotion seems to be responsible for a most curious tendency to own up to it on the one hand, while suppressing it through “simple” New Zealand language on the other. Thus what may be in part “Romantic” feeling leads presumably to a wish to reject that, and certainly to a quite “realistic” expression. The failure to manage tone is probably therefore not just a poetic failing.

But it is poetic quality with which we are concerned, and some more reasons need to be advanced for a negative view of the technique in this poem. There is, to begin with, a degree of vagueness which is not an asset and once again probably springs from the confusion between personal honesty and poetic success. What on earth is meant by such a statement as “Everything’s right? Love or grief”? Probably, though the lack of punctuation does not help, we are to gloss: “Everything is right, no matter whether love or grief.” But love and grief are not everything, nor is either of them on its own (supposing we are to give prominence to or). It’s not that we need disagree with the poet’s feeling: it is the sloppy use of language which we should first of all complain about. What are we to understand by the assertion that the mind referred to is “In some ways” ignorant of life? Which are those ways, and, if they need not be defined or even suggested, what point is there in referring to them at all? Does the speaker laugh “lovingly” because the mind is educated or because it is ignorant of life? Does “cruelly” further amplify “lovingly” and just what is “enough”? The syntax of the last few lines is awkward. “Finality” cannot hang loose, and one must assume that it is the direct object of “put”. I would explain: “I put (i.e. express) finality in (the form of) chosen banality, in words trivial but true, viz. ‘I love you.’” But in what way can “I love you” convey finality? Or is the poet instead of making a “final” statement referring to a relationship now finished? The title, “Afterthought”, would seem to give some support to this interpretation, but one can by no means be sure, and does not gain anything by not being sure. Indeed, the sense is unsatisfactory in either case, for, if the second interpretation is the right one, one has the right to wonder what justifies or explains the poet’s stating “I love you” because (or despite, or whatever) the “Finality” of the relationship.

It may be objected, at this point, that poetry has no duty to be as clear as it may seem I want it. But my point is not, or at least not simply, that poetry
needs to be intelligible. Rather, I mean that this poem, by its own choice, asserts certain things in a prosaic, non-connotative and seemingly logical style, but fails to convey elementary logical connections and explanations. Vague assertions are substituted for clear statement, and on inspection prove quite unwarrented or unsupported insofar as sense can actually be extracted.

But such vagueness, including ambiguity which yields poverty rather than riches, is accompanied by a "prosody" equally unconvincing and uninteresting. The poem could with little loss be re-written as follows:

*Everything’s right — love or grief. Your puzzled educated mind, in some ways ignorant of life, makes me lovingly laugh: not cruelly but enough. Futility I put in chosen banality — words trivial but true: “I love you.”*

If it has been presented this way from the outset, I doubt whether many readers would have thought of the poem as in any respect rhythmically organized. If asked to re-write the paragraph as verse, what would prevent a reader of it to compose this for example:

*Everything’s right: love or grief. Your puzzled educated mind, in some ways ignorant of life, makes me lovingly laugh.*

— and so on? There is, in short, little that compels one line-length rather than another. Small wonder, for there is no evident prosodic patterning: in the poem as it actually stands some of the lines are syllabically much longer than others; there appears to be an iambic pattern in "Your puzzled educated mind," but not in, for example, "Makes me lovingly laugh;" and there is no rhyme in one or two instances but not in others. One does not, in fact, feel at all certain whether some of the effects are incidental or not: presumably "true" — "you" is meant to be recognised as rhyming, and one can see point in "Futility" — "banality;" but a line which I recognize as iambic in this mixture need not be intended as such: one could readily (and would in the prose-paragraph) read "In some ways ignorant of life" as non-iambic. Since there is no iambic norm set up throughout the poem, one cannot with justification decide that the line was meant to be iambic. It is, quite disregarding the meaning of the poem, for the moment, prosodically upsetting to find such uncertainty or ambiguity.

The really important reason for one’s frustration, though, is not merely that the poem is prosodically inconsistent: it is that there seems to be no cogent cause behind it that would tempt one into finding the formal features functional. For example, although the final "true" — "you" clinches the poem well enough in what is indeed a banal way (hardly attractive despite the assertion that it is banal), why — if this is the intention — is "Your puzzled educated mind" iambic? Is this to suggest that there is something excessively formalistic about the educated mind? If so, it would be functionally logical to make sure that the next line mirrors the mind’s surprise at finding life different from what one’s education might lead one to expect: but the line can in fact be regarded as perfectly regular.

At this point I should again like to deal with a possible objection, viz. that I am opposed to verse which is irregular. However, once again such an objection would show a misunderstanding. It is not the irregularity which is being argued against. True, I cannot exactly think of successful poems which combine a "classical" prosody and "vers libre": there is no theoretical reason why such could not be done, however, since surely it is the function of the effect with which we are concerned rather than the immediate pleasing or displeasing effect alone. While something may at first sound unpleasantly regular or irregular, the aesthetic effect is ultimately to be determined by whether it contributes to the overall success of the poem, and, therefore, is sufficiently related to other aspects of it. In the poem under discussion, some of the effects do seem functional, while others do not. I think the weight of the evidence is in the direction of the conclusion that the poem lacks prosodic control.

After so critical a discussion, it is a relief to turn to "The Flowers of the Sea." Unfortunately, it is (I find) generally more difficult to point out why a poem is technically successful than why it is not. Our tendency, as academic critics, is to overlook poetic technique or to be merely technical about it in our concern with meaning, which intellectually is so much easier to discuss. Even so, I think I can reasonably well explain why this poem seems to me excellent — so much better, actually, than "Afterthought" that one is astounded to find that the same poet has produced both.

In this instance, I am initially more struck by the sound of the poem than whatever may be its "meaning", and I think that my reaction is explained by the fact that "meaning" is not at all transparently accessible, while some of the phonetic features immediately draw attention to themselves as produced by a master of his craft. One at once notices the contrasts set up in the sounds of lines 1 and 2, and 3 and 4. The line-ending at "avalanche," for example, is appropriate in that the first line (necessarily imitative) must be followed by something like "Now...". I do not think that one can easily detect a well-balanced rhythmic patterning in the lines, but there is a sense of balanced. Such balance is well-known from the great alliterative tradition in English prior to the sixteenth century and continuing beyond it. Whether Glover consciously has in mind this tradition or not matters less than that he can be regarded as writing within it, in a fashion, or be seen to use some sort of native ballad-metre, and at least that he is ordering the verse in such a way that the four stresses of the first line are roughly equivalent in sum and weight, to the four stresses of the second, even though the number of syllables is not identical. Lines three and four are not quite as exactly balanced, since the number of syllables clearly decreases, but this can readily be defended by pointing out, (a) that the indentation makes a somewhat shorter line not altogether unexpected, (b) that the weight of each line remains sufficiently similar because of the number of stressed syllables, and (c) that a decrease is functional: the "branch" is now "withered".

The brevity of that final line gives it considerable, and valuable, contras- tive force: one stops "still" at the right word. And in each instance the distribution of the stresses is impressively right. For example, there is irregularity in the first line, but a classical melodiousness in the second: it may well be that Glover is thinking of a combination of the alliterative tradition and metres employed by the Greek and Roman poets, but, again, what counts most is that we observe the smooth effect of the line, created by careful consideration of "alliteration on f, the abundance of l, and the dancing rhythm of "follows the alliteration on f, the abundance of l, and the dancing rhythm of "follows..."

Such an arrangement of sounds effectively satisfies the statement that the strength now follows. As I said before, it is "the function of the effect with which we are ultimately concerned."
It will not be necessary to discuss the other fine phonetic effects in the poem in such detail, and I now want to say something about the choice of the words in relation to their "meaning". One has to put "meaning" in quotation marks, because what is being talked about is a thing to be implied; and the conclusion is that the poem does not have certain "meanings", but that certain "meanings" are implied. However, the punctuation implies nothing derogatory. It is certainly possible to find at least one intellectually coherent statement carried all through the poem. It will be useful, in order to show the difference with "Afterthought", to show that this is the case.

The key to the poem's central "meaning" as I see it (but no doubt other interpretations are possible) lies in the identification of the youth with nature. That identification is such that the youth becomes nature, as is in tune with for example "In Memoriam H.C. STIMSON Port Levy" (64):

You were these hills and the sea . . .

(My emphasis)

The vision is of course Romantic (essentially Wordsworthian), and a very potent one: it so forcefully links man to nature that one is aware of a "oneness" rather than a distinction.

With this in mind, I interpret as follows. Once the youth was an avalanche in strength; now his strength must follow the fold of the hill. The strength declines, but, more importantly, we observe that it no longer is nature itself (a hill or an avalanche) but only "follows" a natural outline, being, alas, divorced from it — clearly as a result of growing older (another Wordsworthian thought). Similarly, the poet’s — or rather Harry’s — love is no longer nature alive, but nature dead, though still, in a way, part of it — which perhaps explains why there is more to love than to strength.

The second stanza suggests that in youth one was at least alive, even if one’s love was all fighting and folly. Then, it was the girl who “followed”, because as yet he was nature (“holly”). Now, people cannot pluck holly at him, and he himself has to tap nature, i.e., to "pluck the flowers of the sea." because he no longer is nature himself.

The expression “the flowers of the sea” is an interesting one, the image of the sea connoting a vast reservoir of potential and that of the flowers no doubt implying fertility, riches and so on, while at the same time the combination of the images seems to be used to suggest that Harry is probably reaching the limits of his love, since perhaps he does not think he can be successful. Such an ambiguity does enrich this poem: in fact, we cannot be quite sure of the author’s attitude in either case, and we may share his hesitancy.

This appears to be carried into the three final lines, where the observation that the tide comes and goes may imply that abundance constantly re-offers itself even though temporarily disappearing, so that Harry’s idea that he is plucking flowers of the sea is not unrealistic; or the stress may be on the fact that the tide goes, so as to point out that Harry is deluding himself half the time; or, quite differently, Glover may be ironically re-inforcing the notion that one cannot pluck from something so vast in its movements, with the force of the wind behind it, in which case Harry has to be seen as now quite divorced from nature in fact even if he remains close to it in longing. In any case, the implied “meaning” remains firmly possible and consonant with what goes before, and so does the poet’s attitude. While no doubt other suggestions can be advanced, my main point is that the conclusion of the poem centres round the contrast between what is possible and what is not,

with various accompanying authorial attitudes suggested most subtly. And insofar as there is a preoccupation with this contrast, and with longing as opposed to reality, the poem is a Romantic one.

While I think it becomes plain that a logical meaning can be extracted from the poem, an attempt to do dispassionate justice to the meanings that — even if unspoken and to be implied — are to be derived shows that the poem has considerable richness beyond that of denotative prose, such richness deriving from the suggestiveness of images which in any case can intrinsically connote a range of suggestions, but which in this poem have their range restricted as well as extended through the context in which they are grouped. I believe it is true to say that our age tends to prefer poems of this kind to more denotative ones, but I wish to state at once that it is not my purpose to show that this poem is better than “Afterthought” for that reason. I shall, in fact, shortly argue that Glover has also written some successful poems which are not primarily imaginatively suggestive. My contention is at this juncture that this poem succeeds within its chosen mode in a way “Afterthought” does not within its. Its message, insofar as one can feel justifiably sure of what it is, at any rate appears to make sense. Even more importantly, it is possible for the reader to share the poet’s experience. One should again say “Harry’s” and it is not pedantic to stress the distinction. The mere fact even that very plainly a persona is used makes what is offered less distantly private. It is not, however, as though “The Flowers of the Sea” is altogether less subjective in content than “Afterthought”. The difference is that in “Afterthought” the experience remains purely private though a public kind of language is used, while in “The Flowers of the Sea” the images, though clearly having proper meanings for the poet, become public property. We might then ask what is meant by “the flowers of the sea”, but first of all an image is invoked and after that it is possible to construe an interpretation which we can share as an objective possibility even if we may all have our different preferences; simply to claim, however, that one’s (ex?) partner’s mind is “in some ways” ignorant of life shuts the reader out.

Only a very close discussion of some salient examples has been able to reveal what I am convinced are the central aspects of Glover’s poetry, but it would of course be unfair to limit oneself to so small a selection. I now must first of all make true my claim that in some instances Glover does write successful poems “which are not primarily imaginatively suggestive”. I select for this purpose the “Letter to Country Friends” (29), of which I quote the first stanza:

We in the city live as best we can,
Fettered by fears of by-laws and police.
Our short perspective magnifies alarms;
We feel uneasy when the gas-man calls;
And hopes decline, through tabulated years,
To quarter-acre sections neatly fenced.

The influence of the early Auden is obvious enough not to need illustration; nor does it seem that our example is that of the Eliot of “Prufrock” (“tabulated years”). But although the poem lacks the stylistic originality of “The Flowers of the Sea”, “Letter to Country Friends”, nevertheless, uses its language well enough. "We feel uneasy when the gas-man calls" — the collo-
quial “uneasy” is used with a very exact awareness of its British tone, its attempt to minimize what is clearly perceived to be a major danger, although with superb irony, the poet goes on to show that the danger is in fact very minor indeed. The image of the pedestrian “gas-man”, though hardly suggestive, is nicely contrasted with the register of “uneasy”, the more so because that word by itself is not spectacular either and because the overall level of the language is very muted. In the next two lines, again, pedestrian elements are successfully used to deflate. We must see the contrast between the Romantic hopes of the city-dwellers and what comes of these hopes, observing that the pedestrian here is not put forward with awkwardness (as in “I love you”) but seen exactly for what it is. Distance from the thing itself brings with it distance from, and hence better control of, the language. There is a similar nice poise in the conclusion of “In Fascist Countries” (31):

And the improbable future what tea-cup will foretell?

The image of the tea-cup is pedestrian, but Glover sees it as such, and uses it to evoke a vivid contrast with something more grandiose and Romantic, like a crystal ball. Indeed, within the lines themselves there is the different but eloquent contrast between the prosaic “tea-cup” and the more “learned” dictation of “improbable future.”

These are nice examples of what one might call the “prosaic New Zealand bloke” pole of Glover’s art: the very fine awareness, in such poems, of the effect of delectable, colloquial, pedestrian words like “gas-man” and “tea-cup” is up to the level of Auden, but also, and as significantly, to that of masters of New Zealand prose like Sargeson.

Unfortunately, this pole of Glover’s poetic range is on the whole far less well handled. Many examples could be adduced that are comparable to “Afterthought”: Glover’s love poems are generally of this sort (including many, outside Enter Without Knocking, in his Diary to a Woman [Wellington: The Cats-Paw Press, 1971]). It is probably significant that those which express political sentiment are often likewise unsatisfactory, and a telling instance is “The Road Builders” (22):

THE ROAD BUILDERS

Rolling along far roads on holiday wheels
Now wonder at their construction, the infinite skill
That balanced the road to the gradient of the hill,
The precision, the planning, the labour it all reveals.

An unremembered legion of labourers did this,
Searing the stubborn clay, fighting the tangled bush,
Blasting the adamant, stemming the unbridled rush
Of torrent in flood, bridging each dark abyss.

Their tools were pitiful beside the obdurate strength
Of the land:
Crosswire of the theodolite, pick-pointed, curved shovel,
Small tremor of a touched-off charge; but above all
The skill and strength, admirable in patience,
Of the hand.

These men we should honour above the managers
Of banks.
They pitted their flesh and their cunning against odds
Unimagined by those who turn wordily the first sods.
And on the payroll their labour stands unadorned
By thanks.

Who they are, or where, we do not know. Anonymous
They die or drift away; some start the job again; some in a country pub
Recount old epic deeds amid that unheeding hubbub,
Singing of pitiless hills, wet mountain roads where
Rustling barrows lie.

At least, the flatness of the language, no doubt intended to be in keeping with the subject, is not particularly interesting; but, more damagingly, parts of it are really such as to make one wonder why the poem has been allowed into print. The dullness of “Rolling along far roads on holiday wheels” soon contrasts with the enthusiasm of the intellectual in expressions like “infinite skill” or (to take some particularly hollow words from stanza 3) “the skill and strength, admirable in patience,/ of the hand.” “Admirable impatience” is a literary rather than a colloquial expression, and it is this, in a poem trying to be non-literary, which jars immediately, though of course the emptiness of the claim is also striking, as is its platitude. I do not wish to suggest that the “prosaic New Zealand bloke” poems are unsuccessful when pedestrian in one particular way: a bad taste can be revealed just as well in civilised genteel language. But the poem contains vague sloppiness (“it all”) which quite stands outside this aspect of aesthetics. We can surely agree, as critics of poetry, that the words should count. When they do make their impact strongly felt, they often do so for the wrong reasons, as in the case of the pompous pause before the new line “of the hand” — which, rhyming with “of the land,” is asked to carry altogether too much. And what justifies the highly literary inversion in “These men we should honour above the managers of banks”? Since we have not been told what is wrong with bank-managers, the stress on “These men” seems unwarranted, and even if the subsequent explanation justifies having the men before the managers, that could still have happened in a normal grammatical sequence. The effect is some quite unintended grotesqueness at the expense of the men that we are to honour.

The poem is not, of course, a total failure. The description of the activity of the man is fair enough — though what does it show? Is the poem to be a documentary detailing the function of such things as curved shovels? The last stanza appears to be more interesting, but the faults do stand out glaringly in the remainder, and even the conclusion is not exactly tight.

Prior to the “Sings Harry” sequence there are very few poems in Enter Without Knocking which do not to a marked extent exhibit such defects as are typical of “Afterthought” and “The Road Builders”, and the position is much the same after the “Arawata Bill” section. “Very few”, is not however, the same as “none”. There is at least one poem which justifiably enjoys wide popularity, viz. “The Magpies” (94):
When Tom and Elizabeth took the farm
The bracken made their bed,
And Quardle oodle ardle waddle doodle
The magpies said.

Year in and year out they worked
While the pines grew overhead,
And Quardle oodle ardle waddle doodle
The magpies said.

But all the beautiful crops soon went
To the mortgage man instead,
And Quardle oodle ardle waddle doodle
The magpies said.

Elizabeth’s dead now (it’s years ago);
Old Tom went light in the head;
And Quardle oodle ardle waddle doodle
The magpies said.

The farm’s still there. Mortgage corporations
Couldn’t give it away.
And Quardle oodle ardle waddle doodle
The magpies say.

Certainly this poem on the whole sounds very good, and that, particularly in view of the highly melodious refrain, must be considered one reason for its popularity. What the magpies say, “Quardle oodle ardle waddle doodle,” is probably not meant to mean anything in any conventional lexical sense despite the appropriateness of “doodle” (their sounds being as aimless as the activity of doodling?); the success of the sound formation lies in the way such meaning is eschewed to the extent of onomatopoeia becoming quite obvious and sounding naturally accurate, while yet the sounds are very beautiful within what is after all a known musical device in poetry. It is notoriously difficult to analyze such beauty, but I think it may be said to be a real enough “fact” in that readers/listeners seem to be agreed on its presence, and presumably because of such symmetries as the 1-2-3-1-2 pattern of the internal rhyme scheme, in which the “s” (ardle) is both sufficiently similar and different to the others. If it were so different as not to look like a rhyme at all, one might not accept it as part of the “language” of the birds; if properly and fully a rhyme with Quardle or oodle, the pattern might seem unduly repetitive aesthetically, and possibly too contrived for magpies to produce.

The only — but minor — aesthetic dissatisfaction which I feel is with the last stanza. The change of “The magpies said” to “The magpies say” is undesirable, in that the poet no doubt wishes to indicate that, as in the past, so in the present and future the chatter of the magpies will go on. Still, the deviation from the pattern that has been set up with “said” produces rather an odd jolt, and arouses some suspicion that a rhyme with “away” may have been looked for. Furthermore, although in a ballad like this one does not expect anything like stiffmetrical regularity, the rhyme of “Mortgage Corporations” does not seem to balance the remainder of the line, and apart even from the Latinism of these words in a very “English” poem, the embelishment

here is unexpected in a rather pointless way, as though things got out of hand.

However, to make comments like this may seem to be uncharitable in the case of a formally exquisite poem. Glover generally is perhaps at his best when handling poems of a “ballad” type, poems whose lyricism does not lie in subjective utterance, but in a musicality which is very pleasing by itself and which, as regularly in this tradition, is used to create a most poignant effect (or at least some sort of emotional stir) when measured against the implied content — a content the more forceful because in part implied. There is, of course, a “story” which is part of that content, but what that story leaves unaided or perhaps the very incompleteness of the story itself — creates much of the impact, and is certainly no less important.

In the present instance, one could, just possibly, feel more concern about cues that perhaps should have been provided than about any other kind of technical clumsiness. Why, most significantly, did the beautiful crops go to the mortgage-man? It cannot be that the couple did not work hard enough. Are we to assume some natural calamity? Not likely, for then the crops would not have been beautiful. The remaining possibility seems to be that the poem refers to the great depression of the thirties; but if so, it does not have the true timelessness quality of a ballad event which even if it is particularized still is put forward in such a way that one understands the situation as one that could for good reasons repeat itself.

The very fact, however, that one wonders about these issues means that the poem succeeds well enough in conveying something telling, and in this story plays a crucial part. Since I have not previously referred to this aspect of Glover’s art, I should like to illustrate its success by analysis of the “Arawata Bill.” I do not think that I should once again comment at great length on the fact that these poems are at the same time (and no doubt partly as a result) suggestive through well-used imagery, and prosodically in control in ways similar to “Thistledown” or “The Magpies.” On the other hand, it will be useful not to limit oneself rigidly to a discussion of the story, for the function of that of course has to be seen in relation to other artistic devices as well as the themes of the sequence.

Indeed the first poem of the sequence, “The Scene” (85), is more significant for its imagery than the story, for which the poem obviously provides a setting. Much of the poem does little more than describe a harsh landscape, but the point of the description emerges gradually and logically enough in the last stanza:

In the dominion of the thorn
The delicate cloud is born.
And golden nuggets bloom
In the womb of the storm.

The harshness of the “dominion of the thorn” (a metaphor, in part, for New Zealand) is accompanied by something more gentle. However, the poise achieved here is such that Glover leaves open three possibilities, viz. (1) that in this thorny land delicate clouds can indeed, in the physical sense, come into existence, (2) that he observes such a birth symbolically (whether through nature or the mind does not matter much), (3) that Arawata Bill, introduced on the next page (86), has a fantastically extravagant imagination, in that we are very much aware that delicate clouds are not born in the dominion of the thorn” — in which case Glover’s attitude to Bill may be
mixed, I think it probable that the stanza does give Bill's attitude as much as Glover's, but the fact that both are possible probably implies that Glover (quite rightly) admires Bill's imagination even though aware of its lack of 'realism'.

Such subtlety of language is unparalleled in most of the poems preceding "Sings Harry" and, I think, is most strikingly in evidence in the sequence "Arawata Bill". The images are, insofar as necessary, sufficiently naturalistic, yet at the same time suggest interesting thematic possibilities and attitudes. Also, we are taken into the story in that obviously we are meant to see that an imagination as fertile and courageous as Bill's will readily translate itself into action. In "Arawata Bill" (the title poem, on p. 86), we therefore see Bill setting out on his quest. Bill's motives are this time more explicitly stated, and the connection with "The Scene" is firm: "Wicked country, but there might be/Gold in for all that." The language is here more colloquial and less "poetic", and although the story is logically continued through the repetition of an idea, the aspect under which that idea is viewed is nevertheless different: Bill is not himself aware of his own Romanticism, and therefore a more credible and yet pathetic figure than "The Scene" had led us to suspect. The story, too, is continued in an interesting manner. The end of the poem tells us of:

A rusting shovel in the ground 
By a derelict hovel.

It had been there long, 
But the handle was good and strong.

The shovel, thus the protagonist of the poem informs, us, was found by "a man from the mountains". Very probably it is Bill's tool, but it is not altogether impossible that it is Bill who finds it, or that we are meant to think of both possibilities. At any rate, the narrative is suggestive, enlarging its scope through this possible ambiguity but also through the image of a pioneering tool which lasts and lasts; the past, and Bill as a hero of that past who is a type rather than an individual, assumes mythic dimensions. Again, we can see how the images, working within the context of the narrative, are considerably enhanced in status by that.

"The Search" (86) is a development which gives Bill's view of things as he actually, in reality, tries to find the target of his quest, concluding:

The best pan is an old pan
- The grains cling to the rust,
And a few will come from each panning,
The rust brown, and golden the dust,

But where is the amethyst sky and the high 
Mountain of pure gold?

The Romantic shovel of the previous poem cannot prevent us from seeing that things have been taken a step further and that Bill is not succeeding in making his dream come true. For the resemblance between the shovel's good and strong handle and the excellence of the "old pan" is of a dubious kind, again because of a subtle change of perspective: previously it was in all likelihood the man from the mountains who observed the quality of the shovel, whereas now, again, we are presented with Bill's thoughts, which, although they may be reliable about the pan as such, are obviously not necessarily correct when he claims (in his mind) that a few grains of gold "will come from each panning". And, while Glover does not deny this possibility, he certainly presents Bill as incurably Romantic in his vision of the amethyst sky and the "Mountain of pure gold". I do not mean that Glover disapproves, for the lack of emphasis at the end is to be observed.

It would take too long to pay attention to each poem (though each poem does repay close study), but it will be illuminating to take up the thread of the implied narrative at "In the Township" (93), which is also an eminent poem in its own right. It gains, however, from our increasing awareness of the fact that Bill is less and less successful. All the time, we continue to hope for him, and his tragedy is commensurately greater as each attempt fails. The poem is important, too, for furthering the reader's view of Bill as a Romantic quester, not a materialist:

... the only gold he'll ever pan
Is the glitter in his eyes
If you know what I mean.

These words are spoken by a rather contemptuous barmaid referring to our hero as "old/Arawata Bill." The sloppily "If you know what I mean" is used with careful irony by Glover, and once again it is the poise which impresses: we are to distinguish between the character, who probably has only the faintest notion of what the glitter in Bill's eyes really does mean, and the true Romantic understanding of those who realize that the glitter is exactly the result of Bill's not panning any gold. He himself, in his turn understanding his motives, when asked what he will do "When you strike it" ("Conversation Piece, p. 98):

Me? I might go to town
- I don't like it —
But I'd cut a bit of a dash,
Buy a billycock hat and maybe
Go on the bash.

The true answer immediately follows:

But I really need
Some tough new boots
And a stout pair of breeks
For crossing the rivers
When the river breaks.

It is a sign of Glover's marvellously ironic handling of his speaker that this revelation, though hinted at in the language of the barmaid, comes after a great many expeditions which have, evidently, no other purpose than the satisfaction which they give in themselves and because they allow the quester to retain the glitter in his eyes. And "The End" (102) is a perfectly natural unfolding of what has been set up so far:

It got you at last, Bill,
The razor-edge that cut you down
Not in the gullies, nor on the pass
But in a bed in town.
R.I.P. where no gold lies
But in your own questing soul
Rich in faith and a wild surprize.

You should have been told
Only in you was the gold:
Mountain and rivers paid you no fee,
Mountain melting to the river,
River to the sea.

The irony which we have just observed is intensified in the picture of our hero dying very humbly in “a bed in town”. It is not a cutting irony; on the contrary, it is used to show the painful tricks life plays on us. However, Glover’s values remain Romantic: it is the gold of the soul which, alone, counts, and Bill’s death is not accepted without a final — beautifully implied — comment about the harsh scene with which the story had opened. Even the solidity of a mountain is only seeming, melting into vast, and apparently aimless, liquidity. At the same time, Glover is of course also commenting on the futility of man’s hopes, the image of the mountain symbolizing expiration. But the two go together: it is, evidently, because of the natural fact that mountains melt that man’s Romanticism is futile, and the blame, if there is any, probably does not lie with man.

It is surely apparent, after such investigations of the evidence of Glover’s central volume of poems, that the poetic level in them is extraordinarily mixed. In the best poems, we find excellent song-like prosody, delicately suggestive imagery, subtle handling of persons, all in the service of a vigorous Romanticism which does not deny the brutal facts of existence. Unfortunately, with rare exceptions such as “The Magpies”, the best poems are almost wholly confined to “Sings Harry” and “Arawata Bill”. Within the format of Enter without Knocking this gives us something like 70 out of 170 pages on which we may be confident Glover’s reputation will rest. While I think that even with this successful section of poems he remains very much slighter and less strikingly original than R.A.K. Mason, he is not, in these poems, conspicuously derivative as regards his poetic techniques. The fact that the poems do not appear to be very “modern” is ultimately an advantage; we are reaching the stage when it is a poet like T.S. Eliot who is beginning to look old-fashioned, not a poet who makes us less aware of the supposed novelty of his devices. Also, while the Romanticism of the poems, for example in their portrayal of damage caused by time, may make us think of a great precursor like Wordsworth, this is not necessarily an indictment, and in “Arawata Bill”, as we have just observed, Glover succeeds in exhibiting a personal mixture of Romantic longing and realistic awareness. He is, when all is said and done, among New Zealand’s more important poets, perhaps with a greater lyrical gift and accomplishment than Mason, although I predict that Mason’s greater technical inventiveness and quite remarkable intensity and profundity will be remembered more. The large body of bad poems in Enter without Knocking, and the fact that they continue to be reprinted, must at the moment give ground for serious concern about the taste of Glover and his many uncritical admirers; but his status as a major minor poet somewhat below Mason is a very formidable one if this is what he will be granted. My most essential purpose has been to ensure that the merits of his fine work will be recognized very sharply against his failures, and thus to bring his very real contribution into focus. We need, in New Zealand as elsewhere, to guard against the bland, vaguely amicable view of culture which, precisely because it does not distinguish between good and bad, is at least as harmful an enemy of it as contemptuous neglect.

NOTES

1. It is evident from the variety of his verse that Glover has considerable interest in technique; it may be of interest to observe (though informally) that he also displayed this in a theoretical way when addressing an audience of English students and staff at the University of Otago in May 1975. It seemed to me that his and my standards of what poetry should be were very close, though I am referring to a talk, not printed work. If my record of what Glover said is right, it would seem that I am not wrong in claiming that the poet is in his own case unable “to distinguish between his good and his bad poems.” It is the more important for his readers to attempt to do so.

2. As in “Sunday Morning” (15), where the nineteenth century diction of e.g. “luxurious green life” jars oddly with the “Anglo-Saxon” Auden manner of “epic of artichokes, career of cars.”

3. For a very much more positive view of such love poems, see the reviews by James Bertram ("Glover in Love") and J.E.P. Thomson ("Glover’s Songs and Sonnets") in Islands 1 (1972). The eulogy by Thomson is virtually reprinted in his Denis Glover (Wellington: Oxford University Press, 1977), which is the fullest account of Glover’s poetry and life to date, and contains further critical references. My own essay was written before I saw Thomson’s booklet, and is not indebted to it. Thomson is useful on the influence of poets of the Auden generation. However, when it comes to critical appreciation of Glover’s work he is less penetrating than Alan Reddieck in “A Reading of Denis Glover,” Landfall 73 (March 1965), pp. 48-58.

HOPE

by D.J. HIBBERT

We are the whirling sand
in the desert of the spirit;
nothing else but hope
leans from the tower —
only the drooping flag
occasionally catching the wind
against the sun
suggests another occupation —
the sun is sinking
over dead heroes.
No-one else but hope
leans from the tower
to drop her white handkerchief
like a lady imprisoned.