Classic Poetry Series

Francis Scarfe

- poems -

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Francis Scarfe (1911-1986)

Francis Scarfe was an English poet, critic and novelist, who became an academic, translator and Director of the British Institute in Paris.

He was born in South Shields; he was brought up from a young age at the Royal Merchant Seaman's Orphanage. He was educated at Durham University and Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge. He then studied at the Sorbonne.

While in Paris he wrote surrealist verse, and dabbled in communism, from which he then retreated. He taught at the University of Glasgow briefly before the outbreak of World War II, in which he worked in the British Army's Education Corps. He was posted to Orkney, and the Faroe Islands. While in the Orkneys he lodged with the family of the young George Mackay Brown, on whom he was a major influence.

His book from 1942 was one of the first to engage critically with the Auden Group, if superficially; he returned to Auden in a post-war book of greater depth. After the war he held a number of academic positions.

Eserleri:

Inscapes (1940) poems
Forty Poems and Ballads (1941)
Auden & After: The Liberation Of Poetry, 1930-41 (1942) criticism
Promises (?) first novel
W. H. Auden (1948) criticism
Underworlds (1950) poems
Single Blessedness (1951) novel
The Unfinished Woman (1954) novel
The Art of Paul Valéry (1954)
Picasso by Frank Elgar and Robert Maillard (1956) translator
Baudelaire (1961, Penguin Books) editor
Conversations on the Dresden Gallery, by Louis Aragon and Jean Cocteau (1982) translator
Complete Verse of Charles P. Baudelaire (1986 Anvil Press Poetry) translator
Baudelaire: the Poems in Prose (1989, Anvil Press Poetry) translator

Cats

Those who love cats which do not even purr
Or which are thin and tired and very old,
Bend down to them in the street and stroke their fur
And rub their ears, and smooth their breast, and hold
Them carefully, and gaze into their eyes of gold.

For how can they pass what does not ask for love
But draws it out of those who have too much,
Frustrated souls who cannot use it all, who have
Somewhere too tight and sad within them, such
A tenderness it flows through all they touch.

They are the ones who love without reward,
Those on whom eyes are closed, from whom heads turn,
Who know only too well they can afford
To squander love, since in the breast it burns
With the cold anguish every lover learns.

So they pass on, victims of silent things,
And what they love remains indifferent
And stretches in the sun and yawns, or licks the rings
That sheathe its claws, or sleeps and is content,
Not knowing who she was, or what she meant.

Francis Scarfe

Kitchen Poem

An Elegy for Tristan Tzara

In the hungry kitchen
The dog sings for its dinner.
The housewife is writing her poem
On top of the frigidaire
Something like this:

    'Hear in the kitchen
    The crows fly home
    Into the red-robed trees
    That walk across the sky.

    Hear under the floor
    The three fountains rising and
    Trickling through the bridge
    Into the sea of poems.'

In the kitchen the housemother
Pours soup for her thousand children
As her man eats his silence
And the dog swallows its poem.

In all. the kitchens of Europe
The radio shouts good news:
'Millions have had no accident today
All wars have come to an end
An honest politician
In another country
Wants to become a plumber
All men will be equal, next year
Volcano vomits ice-cream
A silent poem has been invented.'

    In my holy kitchen
    I draw the blinds of night
    On the homes of sleep.
    I hold the world in my palms.
    Now that I am old
    I can measure life with words.
    There's a nightingale in my coffee.
    My bread is buttered with memories.
    Since the old woman died
    I have two souls.

When I was small we had a lucky black cat.
We had a magic horse-shoe on the wall,
It was rusty and brought no luck
But fetched the fields into the kitchen
And made us not forget horses.

When you are old you make your own magic.

You speak oftener for the dead.
You move free in the wonderland of the past.
You invent a future on the other shore of death.
You must speak for the dead,
You are their rusty horse-shoe
In all the kitchens of the world,
Not the mug on the radio
But a thought rescued from the past.

(There was love in the thin soup
A bone some lentils and great love.
My mother's hands were clouds.
There was a bluebird in the gasjet
When she bathed us by the kitchen fire.

There will be no such soup again
Nor such transcendent poverty.
I have lost the treasure of poverty.
The old woman is dead and buried
In her wonderland of oblivion,
But lives in my kitchen poem
In this 'sentimental' aside.)

Now that I am an old man, I think in bed.
I think nothing. I think poems -
The metronome of sleeplessness and death,
The art of being deliberately alone and yet
A centre in the vortex of the world,
Feelings stretched drum-tight on the grid of thought
As your decaying flesh taut on its bones,

Sensations phantom ideas dreams, pinned bugs
On the living conveyor-belt of experience,
While in the poem you are everybody else,
Each poem merging into another construct,
All poems rationally absurd impermanent
----------DADA----------
There being no poem ever, no poet ever.
An old man in a kitchen, cooking words.

I am no poet I am
Lived by unfinishable poems,
The horse-shoe hammered
On the anvil of my brain.

I think nothing. The poems think me.
I do not often write them down,
Being a structuration of the unknowable
That dies upon the page,
My inward poems whispered for the dead
While the living bury the living
With foul political slogans.

An owl is hooting in my poem
Which sleep will end.

Good night, poet of life,
Be with me always.
I give you my kitchen poem,
Immortal TRISTAN.

Francis Scarfe

Ode in Honour

Evening is part of the jig-saw truth of her,
ply-wood ply-flesh, her insolent reply
blinding the ace with a straight shot to centre,
the woman's a delicate devil in twenty places
blander and blonder, tinder tenderly
setting the smiles on fire in men's faces.

On any evening gets you ready for dark
swathes and saves you for the magic carpet
spirits you anywhere anytime anyhow
over the bridges the tunnels the hills the foothills
the pools lakes oceans cataracts crystal floes
the mountains and fountains the antique windows of space,
the deserts orchards vineyards milky ways,
over pontoons and the silting tracks of moons
over the decks and the docks where the clocks
chime, anywhere anytime, anyhow, any fresh place.

Anywhere where winds blow and babies grow
where poor men wait for money in a row
where magnates buy and sell your heaven and hell,
anyhow whether the storm runs over the roof
or hollow tooth aches or gangrene takes the soul,
anytime when the sun splutters and throws shrapnel
between the legs of dead men and mad lovers,
she will be there to hold you by the cuff
to give you all her stock of luck or love.

With
two round lips and two round eyes
and two round ears and two round palms
and two round arms and two round thighs,
any child, any girl, any woman, any surprise.

Francis Scarfe

Progression

See that satan pollarding a tree,
That geometric man straightening a road:
Surely such passions are perverse and odd
That violate windows and set the north wind free.

No doubt tomorrow the world will be too straight.
Five hundred miles an hour will churn our dreams
Like surprised whales, when we lie a dead weight
In an ignorant sleep, and things will be what they seem.

Tomorrow we will hear on the gramophone
The music of the Spheres, registered H.M.V.
By a divorced contralto: we shall perhaps
Meet Adam under glass in a museum
Fleshless and most unlovely, complete with pedigree.

Or else, tomorrow, workers, kings and crooks
Will all have aeroplanes and be fast friends,
In a world no longer divided by dividends,
Where love will be almost as simple as it looks.

Francis Scarfe

The Clock

Far away is one who now is sleeping
In the same world and the same darkness,
But not in my keeping.
Oh no, my arms could never stretch so far
And my hands trembling with tenderness
Cannot hope to caress
Her limbs, save by remembering what they arc.

Oh no, my words must never reach her ears
That lie so white against her sombre hair,
No, no, she must not hear
My voice that has no happiness to bring,
For she also is lost in a realm where
My cry and my despair
Are out of tune whatever song they sing.

Perhaps as I lie waking she is dreaming,
But not of me, for dreams are not so kind;
While my eyes arc brimming
With images of things that might have been,
And my lips for a prayer for her peace of mind
That, early, she may find
A love more delicate and more serene.

And all my body prays her to forget
One who long cared for her too bitterly,
One who is in her debt
For the clock of suffering that kept, twelve years
The hours of absence and futility,
Who could love utterly
Beyond the meaning of these words and tears.

Francis Scarfe

The Grotto

The sea still plunges where as naked boys
We dared the currents and the racing tides
That stamped red weals of fury on our thighs,
Yet did not know our first love was the sea
That rolled like colts between our shining knees,
While under us the sands in golden curls
Coiled round our bodies like the plaits of girls.

We came oblique to passion on that shore
Identified with our blind will to danger,
As when we explored the slipping walls of caves
Booming with dark more fearful than the waves
Whose silence magnified the heart's deep roar
Till senses beat that were asleep before,
And in ourselves we recognized a stranger.

Or when we scaled by Frenchman's Bay the cliff
No man has dared though boys there in the night
Still prove their manhood on its hostile side
That was our climb from innocence to life;
And yet, if I could be there once again,
My love, I'd pause amazed among the gulls,
Afraid of both the triumphs and the falls.

In sea and grotto where we found our hearts
Our youth remained, and all our days return
In dream and vision to the mocking sea
Where womanhood and manhood proudly stirred
Within our silence like a singing bird,
And never a dawning day will break as pure
As our grave adoration, immature.

Francis Scarfe

The Merry Window

The alabaster legs of the lonely woman
hang from the window like white ensigns
out of the laughing window like false teeth
sheets, flagstaffs, telescopes, rolls of music,
or you would say beheaded necks of swans
or the electric horns of factories
where foreign dreams are nightly fabricated.

Yearning for her coal once heaved in the seam
for her the sewers shrieked their way through London
and pigeons ate each other in the air.

But the deserted lady is frozen to the marrow
her heart has floated into her left leg
and her forked tongue asks in three languages
for a bassoon, a pyramid, and an egg.

All the white birds have flown out of her lips
the Polar Bear has eaten her left breast
her eyes are covered with yellow webs of dust,
in fact she is what a Saint would call abandoned
since even her own self has forgotten her.

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The Window

In after years, when you look back upon
This time, and upon me, who am no more
Close to your heart nor a shadow in your sun,
Perhaps you will stand still and lean on the door
Or lay down something, feeling quite undone.

Some passing stranger, or a turn of phrase,
Or any echo or shade, will be enough,
Anything that is worn and almost effaced,
Anything half finished, will be proof
I was no natural but an acquired taste.

So you will stand there, looking back, inspired
As though the curtains parted on some view
Not quite to be believed in, nor desired,
And which did not exist except for you,
Like some clay thing the potter never fired.

No, it would not be wise to throw the window wide.
Close it quickly, before it hurts, and go
About your usual tasks, and let time hide
Beneath mountains of hours, what you know
Cannot be lived again, yet has not died.

Francis Scarfe

Tyne Dock

The summer season at Tyne Dock
Hoisted my boyhood in a crane
Above the shaggy mining town,
Above the slaghills and the rocks,
Above the middens in backlanes
And wooden hen-huts falling down.

Vermilion grass grew in the street
Where the blind pit-ponies pranced
And poppies screamed by butchers' stalls
Where bulls kicked sparks with dying feet,
And in the naked larks I sensed
A cruel god beneath it all.

Over the pit-head wheel the moon
Was clean as a girl's face in school;
I envied the remote old man
Who lived there, happy and alone,
While in the kitchen the mad spool
Unwound as Annie's treadle ran.

The boyish season is still there
For clapping hands and leaping feet
Across the slagheaps and the dunes;
And still it breaks into my care,
Though I will never find the street,
Nor catch the old, impulsive tune,
Nor ever lose that child's despair.

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