

A YOUNG MAN'S FANCY?

by Alex Baron

Poetry is for the birds, a young man's fancy. Innovation and originality are the province of youth; the old fogeys should retire gracefully, take a back seat and let their juniors get on with running the show. Right? Wrong! Last year one of the leading innovators of the modern poetry movement celebrated his 71st birthday. R. W. Cobbing, Bob to all and sundry, has been a seminal influence on oral and visual poetry. To this day he still writes, performs and co-ordinates the publishers' association he helped to found some twenty-five years ago.

The son of a signwriter, Bob's father wanted him to follow in his footsteps. Bob had other ideas though; his first job was as a civil servant in the Ministry of Transport, something which he says he couldn't stick for long. Over the years until he retired from regular employment in 1967 he took a number of different jobs including working in a hospital, teaching French, Esperanto and builders' mathematics and managing a bookshop. Actually, Bob has never really retired; for the past 23 years he has made a precarious living as a full time performer. Although he has painted and written for as long as he can remember and has been around the poetry scene since the 40s he didn't really get hooked until 1964. Regular work for Bob has always been a means to an end, but making a living as an artist has never been easy; Mozart died penniless and countless other musicians, writers, sculptors and painters have suffered a similar fate.

Bob lives with his wife of 28 years, Jennifer, in a large terraced house in North London. Jennifer, who is a talented artist in her own right, is his second wife. His first marriage ended in divorce.

"Most people can't stand me for any length of time," he laughs "... that's the trouble with artists and poets, they're really impossible people to live with." His many friends will heartily disagree with that; he is one of the most easy going people one could ever hope to meet and devotes much of his time to running the Association of Little Presses (ALP), which brings him much satisfaction but no financial reward.

Formed in 1966, ALP has mushroomed from about 35 members to well over 300 today. Bob's original position with ALP was Secretary, then he became Chairman. When he was 65 he thought the time had come for him to retire, so resigned his post as Chairman but was persuaded to stay on as "co-ordinator". The idea of this post was that he would allocate work as it came in. In practice, since his retirement he has worked harder than ever. He prints two or three titles a week on his state-of-the-art photocopier. These are books, booklets, pamphlets and magazines for other ALP members. He also prints and publishes his own work, which to date runs to about 250 titles, the vast majority of them pamphlets, but a few are major collections.

BOB COBBING'S POETRY

Bob Cobbing has certainly been one of the most avant garde of late 20th Century poets, so much so that much of his poetry isn't immediately recognisable as such. Here one is reminded of the story of the abstract painting which was hung in the gallery and admired by all until somebody

pointed out that it was upside down. But there is nothing pretentious about Bob Cobbing, either the man or his work. His sound poetry stems from a fascination with the "shapes" of words. "By way of analogy", he says "imagine you're holding a stone in each hand. One is a smooth, round stone, the other is jagged and coarse. The round stone makes a smooth, round "noise", the other is sharp and, one imagines, distinctly unpleasant."

Bob has also experimented with "concrete" poems and other visual artforms. Not being one to lag behind the times, he has also produced many computer poems. Commenting on these and on sound poems generally he says: "Any blip which is a mark on a bit of paper can be a blip in sound."

It's all a question of interpreting the directions of lines, their quality and texture etc. When he's generating "poems" on his computer he likes to distort the mathematics by mechanically interfering with the print out. Most of his computer poetry/art has a distinctly abstract flavour about it. Perhaps a hundred years from now he'll be acclaimed as the Picasso of the Computer!

Like most poets, Bob Cobbing's work is not that widely read and he has derived very little income from book sales. His all-time best seller is The Judith Poem which, uncharacteristically for Bob, was dedicated to a lady of that name. This has sold only 2,000-3,000 copies; as Bob is one of the more successful of contemporary bards this should be a salutary lesson to anyone thinking of embarking on a poetical career.

One of Bob Cobbing's less avant garde poems is reproduced below:

sensations of the retina
and silence
on the shore
a yellow dog
unstrands the fertile image of decay
a plain white wall
pensive head
solid and impenetrable
as flower or swan or ghost
medusa images
fearful presences
seduce as readily as they bruise
eye standing at extreme perimeter
listens
becomes the medium of the heard
touch makes it moves
returned to motion
light stepping from its latent anonymity
explodes in sound