RESIDENTS

Cold December - water birds
Have weathered autumn in the water
Not the leaves. It's my third winter.

Hardly distant a straight mile -
Woods I would have thought I'd miss
That have to flourish to exist.
SURVIVAL

How unsettling
to see the snowdrops
without panic,
when the winter,
after all,
was not wasted,
it seems,
far from it;
nor the disappointment
of Christmas,
like a pair of grey socks.
For though it is
less exhilarating,
it is also
less difficult
to discard,
when that which
one still requires
is a not unlikely result
of the struggle,
like the daffodils.
And yesterday
two people,
both setting up
the black pieces,
as in the opening
scene of a play.

James Keery
If I were to write a letter to *The Independent* about Peter Forbes' remarks in his review of *The New British Poetry*, what would concern me most would be the inaccurate description of the metrics of my poem *Ospita*. I think that at one time, say about 1800, a false description of the form of a poetical work in a review would have been considered a very serious and disqualifying error, but obviously not any more.

Forbes is so pleased to find an apparently "traditional" format in what is claimed (but not by me) to be an avant-garde assemblage, as if that in itself disproved the thesis, that he regards the text no further, and calls it "traditional sonnets in iambics". A sonnet is more than a 14-line poem; a sonnet is in decasyllabics (sometimes, usually wrongly, defined as five iambic feet) and should conform to or depart from one of a number of rhyme schemes, in English exclusively end-rhymed and with important divisions after the 8th or the 12th line.

The stanzas of *Ospita* are not sonnets and anyone with the slightest experience of reading poetry should be able to recognise that at once. They are 14-line constructs which refer to, or "remember" the form, tone, and familiar business of the sonnet, but especially the early Italian sonnet with its internal rhymes, its particularly pressing forward movement, and its constant awareness of syllabic count. There is not a single iamb in the entire text, and how anyone can find iambic rhythm or measure there is totally mystifying.

The line of *Ospita* is not defined by stress points or foot-sectioning at all, (hardly any lines worth reading ever have been) but by actual rhythm, and syllable-count, but again that is not formally maintained--the decasyllabic line remains notional to the sequence but is periodically "lost", with a strong pull towards the octosyllabic line when the lyric tensity is most "held" and towards the dodecasyllabic line when the sense is "released". The last stanza (10) is different -- it celebrates its release from the wounding substance of the sequence by adopting a playful strictness: alternating lines of 8 and 10 syllables throughout (but this was not noticed) and for once a sonnet rhyme-scheme, almost intact. One of the other stanzas uses a linked
rhyming system of my own invention in which rhymes are shifted back one or two syllables from the end of the line (which no one is ever going to notice). Perhaps one does not expect such attention from a newspaper reviewer (though at one time it would have been axiomatic).

The point of such exercises is, for me, indeed traditional, in the sense that there are after all meanings in form; there are world-meanings which can only be reached in poesis, and without linguistic events such as rhyme, number, consonance, and the whole bag of tricks, important meanings remain inarticulate or inert or the tensity of the poem is contradicted within it. "Human cosmic richness", if you like, is better reached by assent than by assertion. Isn't that what poetry is mainly about? But it is equally important that the poetic fabric is ever-new, and the historical body of poetical substance to which I refer is never so much as glimpsed in a manipulative and historicist ethic which builds Queen Anne office blocks in 1988 with concrete orders. Larkin is not of course a traditional poet: he can play cynically with rhyme in a deft enough way, but he cuts sense off from the lyric past into a self-speech of purely local and disregardful force, and by false psychology and wrongful philosophy reduces the whole thing to a kind of deeply opportunist cynicism. That version of poetry, very popular at present, relies on a journalistic backing which claims traditional status for it precisely by a selective refusal to read the poetic line as a formal entity.

Which goes to show, yet again, that there is seldom anyone so ignorant and unversed in the history of English poetry as those who wave the sneering handkerchiefs of prudence over what they imagine to be "young irresponsibles". Their notions of what is traditional are almost invariably inaccurate, and indeed the "tradition" which Forbes invokes is unlikely to stretch much further back than Auden. We should recognise that Forbes' approach is essentially populist rather than scholarly and he is not fundamentally at variance with Michael Horovitz, who has also attacked the poetacist sections of this anthology (and A Various Art) from a bandwagon and showbiz standpoint without any serious attention to the substance of the poems or any cultivated ability to read poetry. Such is journalism and none of this is at all surprising.
As to other remarks made, it seems futile to engage with undergraduates who probably think that Chaucer wrote in "iambics" or that Blake was anti-Puritan. And anyway there is no answer, it is strictly rigged so, except on pure technicalities such as what Forbes let slip in an unguarded moment. We are quite lucky to have that, which is why I make so much of it; otherwise both reviewers merely invoke "taste" in different formats, to which there is no possible response, and they hold the print-space. Journalism is automatically protected from its own responsibilities precisely because it does not know, or understand or in the least care about, what it engages with, be that "poetry" or something else. The attack is essentially marginal and superficial and therefore unassailable. One does not, of course, accuse Larkin of being "A Movement Poet" (whatever that is) but of being a mean-spirited and narrow-minded man, and a thus a poet of narrow scope and risibly inept utterance (and thus, I would have thought, a very different affair from Hardy). But Forbes in a typically sly trick of journalism pre-empts the "experimentalist" (who is that?) option and another trick artfully makes use of the rhetoric of a dichotomised situation while denying the validity of the division. It is indeed nonsense to insist on movements and camps in current poetry; it is absurd to have to deny that Heaney, for instance, or R.S.Thomas, can write well, for merely poetico-political reasons. But the slyest trick of all is to claim to transcend the internicine battles of the scene merely to confirm all the hideous errors which popular and commercial forces have committed in the last forty years in promoting a poetry of progressively smaller and smaller spirit to the position of exemplary normality. Neither Forbes nor Horovitz may wish to promote Pitt-Kethely or Cope, but it is their kind of journalistic superficiality, abetted, of course, by a great deal of experimentalist irresponsibility, which has led to the success-rate of pure jokers as accepted poets, judges, national representatives, and money-earners. N'est-ce pas, ô mes fantassins courageux?

Peter Riley

Peter Riley's "Ospita" is a traditional sonnet sequence in iambics and rhyme, but inert and unconvincing — the iambics' revenge, perhaps, for all the post-Poundian abuse heaped on them.

Peter Forbes
produced a house like memory like a stutter
the ball-point as on grease clucking the throat
an I-can't place to always lose things you
find, museum-familiars once a grandfather's pin a
garden childhood finding with a sense since of
discovery
creation of appogiatura a turquoise
faience hoopoe breast ornamented with black foliage
a bird inscribed in the articulation of its wings
renunciation of the motif
of permatozoids (to lose the literary biological
flavour of the general symbol of woman originated as
orchid when the bee orchid frog orchid even spider
orchid just disguises of essential incessance makes
, if the history the patriarchy, prayer-enclosures
for sovereign, so must stutter transforms
cathedrals to stalactites candles beside swelling buds
orchid-like like death'sheads inventions of Christ
aeon of the Fishes an improvisation borne of the
moment but daffodils can look like cotton reels
up-thoughts of children birds' legs drawn in tan-
dem pointillist air Dhayani Buddha-breath

how this house has the perfect room greens
carpets velvet baize the desks typewriter windows
over the lawns south-east corner of the house
is full of rabbits over the bed the floor tiny
droppings I don't see but ask the host who
my old really friend of this could be our
old school in some imagining ask this friend
if another and as the child waking ill
says I want to go to the eye some
epenthesis takes me this tiny with a breakfast
bar in the corner opens out no privacy the
painter Bihzad in the Eastern MS National Library
of Cairo seduction scene with Zulaikha wife
of Potiphar miniature represents interior of the
villa on two floors Zulaikha & Joseph in room
at the top him writing effort to escape but
she clutches the hem of his cloak his cries
in vain no soul on the stairways or rooms
doors closed she has taken every precaution but
this I forego and another friend takes and
back at the first room is not rabbits but
dogs and small children dropping noise all's
fouled the design unwriterlied place pieceless
our dissociated world has left the Berlin wall
blackbird or blackleaf hoovering over the brackish
pond and I must photocopied Bill's sonnets a
reading-Freud list for the biscuit design unhappy once
correlations of text and image as Apollinaire's com-
parison of Lou's eyes to a mystic star is set
beside Braque's picture of two green apples on a
dish a discomposing obsessions with breasts and
exploding shells a derived childhood poems speaking
in American accidents the purling of ears how
they paint testicles on the boles of trees is deep-
ening operations of metaphorphosis a very deep
pancake stuck to the kitchen floor a pancake
two miles deep and the room where I must
write must do this is top of the house a
hidden staircase through a wardrobe which belongs
to one I can't trust who doesn't know
is what I frame to hope frame-up a lonely
eye-rie room I wake before finding, three-quarterway
babel-skelter I misguess (which is four-Is semi-
blindness-fashion the next dream evaporates proves

I have inherited this shape-changeling house and
the friend once-host never owned it never was
accompanies me now in the basement over a urinal
where we see a delapidated cinema or theatre
it might hold forty people has tangles of rope
bare boards and as we walk around I say
how it must be sixth I've found in my
wanderings about the house that each would hold
at least about the same number that and
we must realise the way things are in dreams
and this that it is right together they'd hold
2,400 people to watch what Buster Keaton on
tinted film traced in theoretical utterance a play-
surface covered by lines extend beyond the picture proper en-
croaching on the frame now set in motion with the
composition now knitted frieze of life it was in
the evening the sun had set but some fishermen
still remained on the beach resting beside their
boats Michael went up to them, and taking
some money from his pocket asked for how much
they would sell him one of their boats their lungs
to us

via of
'am' being
always since
can

link an
ambiguity A
positing and
an (selving)

Opening with the place
meant as something language
using through our over-
run 'purified'
of-being doing-
of-word text

we possibilities

Keith Jebb