

# The New Formalist

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## Jerry H. Jenkins

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### *Other Voices* by Neill Megaw

### *Beyond Renewal* by George Held

Neill Megaw was one of the generation of poets who, like Anthony Hecht, Richard Wilbur and Howard Nemerov, served their nation as combat veterans of WW II and as poets whose work kept faith with the poetic tradition that dwells in and celebrates the world without becoming mired in self. Megaw's poems collected in his "Other Voices" cannot easily be classified into genre or mood. They exhibit the playfulness of youth and early manhood, and the mature, sometimes wry, sometimes somber outlook of maturity and the recognition of his mortality. The sheer variety of his chosen subjects reveals an active mind, and a poetic style like the quick and agile movements of a water strider, quickly skimming a world which reflects him but whose surface he never penetrates so deeply that he loses himself in it. His love of life, family, of the playfulness and music of language combine to give his collection a brightness and depth that make it a pleasure to read. The scope of his interest ranges from the light and playful to the somber, from the adventurous to the reflective, but almost always reward the reader with some insight, inventive phrasing, and the sense of satisfaction that comes from reading poems that have something humorous, uplifting, even beautiful, to say.

He would be at home among many disparate poets, but I think he would have been most at ease with John Clare, with whom he shared a sympathy, perhaps even a camaraderie, with the creatures of the natural world. His rather extensive and affectionate consideration of the natural world is reflected in his poems about the likes of a baby sparrow ("The Lord of the Universe Visits My Patio"), a squirrel, a bee ("Improving Each Shining Hour"), a pussycat, a woodpecker, turtle, duck, and a variety of others in a thoughtful and extensive menagerie. Then, as if not to ignore the insentient and humble, he attends to a broom, a tire, a puddle, a sponge, and a variety of other inoffensive daily articles and objects. In his broad and dutiful coverage of the innocuous, he follows the obligations that other poets seem to undertake. Why do poets seem

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#### Poetry

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#### Reviews

Richard Moore  
Jerry H. Jenkins  
George Held

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Cover Page  
Contributors' Notes  
About us  
E-books  
Archives  
Poetry Links

to feel the need to write about at least one inert or slow-moving and inoffensive object? With Anthony Hecht, it's the giant tortoise ("I am related to stones"), and with Richard Wilbur, it's the stone in the meadow. ("The sill of heaven would founder did such as I aspire.") Megaw, not to be left behind, places his stone in a creek bed ("Stone in the Shallows"), where

Profoundly he broods, judicious cannonball,  
On life and death, on science and art;  
He sees, he feels the tragedy of it all,  
But soldiers on, old lionheart.

Not all of his poems are kind-hearted, sympathetic, or tolerant. In "Near Miss", the poet evinces a Francois Villon-like sarcasm when he wishes a long life to some disrespectful teenage jerks who run him off the road. Not to be charitable to them, but so that they endure the infirmities of age – along with plentiful dental cavities.

My favorite of the collection is "A Place Where Three Roads Meet" for its mystery, sense of fulfillment and regeneration, and its counterpoint to Auden's "Lady at the Crossroads". In this poem, too lengthy to reproduce or excerpt, an old man goes through strange and frightening transformations that lead to his reunion with his parents, and then quick separation as he prepares to fulfill a destiny the poem hints at but does not disclose.

Megaw devotes several pages to assorted haiku, and they fare about as well as other haiku written by western writers in pursuit or mimicry of a craft and philosophy sprung from a different culture's antiquity and nuances. Still, the old Japanese masters might have smiled at this:

Inn closed for winter  
on the porch a cold rocker  
dreams of warm bottoms

Some of his poems are richly fantastic and unsettling. Their details give them realism, like this cameo of a billiard room in a sunken ocean liner, which Megaw brings to life in "Aboard the Pacific and Orient: A Dream":

So this is where they gathered after tiffin,  
Or else at night, a P&O private club  
Or secular chapel- for men, by tacit consent  
The ladies neither excluded nor invited –  
Pink-cheeked lads out for the first time,  
Majors purple with port and the Indian sun

And as if to continue the Kiplingesque reminiscence of this poem, he gives us a chantey that might have been written by Kipling himself, or Masefield, in “Far South of Tahiti”:

Oh it's Captain Cook an' it's Captain Cook  
Is the one Old Boy for me,  
For Cook was the canniest sailorman  
As ever sailed the sea.

Further on, as if not to leave any poetic vein unmined, there is a section of poems dealing with the writing process. Such poems are seldom very interesting unless they're very good, and while Megaw's efforts are capable and interesting for the bright turn of phrase, for this reviewer, they tend toward the obligatory, and seem more academic than those in his other excursions.

For all the occasionally sinister, foreboding or somber allusions in his poems, Megaw never seems to leave the luminous and friendly sphere in which nature and humanity are companions in a renewing symbiosis, in which light and dark combine to reassure us, and perhaps himself, when we approach the margin.

His poems seem to be most confident in their familiar and comfortable surroundings of house and home, family and love. In this arena, small worlds, rich with imaginative creatures and dramas, unfold. In “Sprinkle of Rain in a Long Dry Spell”, he describes rain droplets running down a window pane:

The terrace window titters and I look up:  
A company of small glass mice is running  
Down the pane.

The last section of the book is devoted to poems of family, age and reminiscence, and decorated with several black-and-white photos of relatives and special occasions. The section is charming enough, as in his poem to his granddaughter Anna (“Song For Anna”):

Anna, Anna, romancing-eyes Anna,  
As soon as you danced into view,  
Anna, Anna, entrancing-eyes Anna,  
I went bananas for you.

This poem is one of several in which Megaw's musical and entertainment background exerts a strong influence. The book cover tells us that he was a swing band singer and a professional dancer. It's a positively sentimental section, but one that would be more in keeping with a high-school yearbook than a poetry collection. This enriches the meaning of the photographs, but

dilutes the effect of the poems.

Still, the overall sense of the book is represented well by this image of a hummingbird in “Afternoon on a Terrace in Mississippi”:

Lost in his labor, fretting and fussing, burning  
Calories almost as fast as he sips them, intense  
As a coal, he decorates but does not share  
Our leisure, his pulse-rate breaks all records, he blurs  
Our sight with the effort of hanging fixed in air,  
Forging a jeweled calm from turbulence.

That jeweled calm pervades the poems in *Other Voices*. Neill Megaw’s poems are a tribute to his skill, his humor and humanity, and a welcome and friendly addition to any bookshelf. I recommend *Other Voices* with enthusiasm.

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Appreciation of the poems in George Held’s collection “Beyond Renewal” is an acquired taste, like learning to like coffee, olives, wine and cheese. At first reading, I was a bit standoffish about the poems, but with repeated readings, they begin to make a meal not altogether unpleasant. The book is a Pilgrim's Progress through three phases, each separately titled, (Beyond Renewal, The Age of Nullity, and Eros Turannos) from childhood's traumas, through the disappointments and realities of the Vietnam era, into an early, perhaps premature, old age of the spirit.

There are no lighthearted poems here; each is a recounting of some disappointment, petty rebellion, hopelessness, failed ventures, lost opportunities or other personal sadness that contributes to the ambient gloom of hopeless lives and loveless, banal sex.

Still, some of the poems are attractive. “Something's Missing” is a convincing exploration, in subtle rhyme, of the possibility or even reality that one's life is incomplete. The unrhymed sonnet “Prey for Love” is unusually good, with its stark imagery and concept of the lover as a sudden, devouring bird of prey. “Manual Destiny” is a strong reflection on the effect of a father’s suicide, told in stark, simple and memorable terms. Indeed, all of the poems in this collection share that trait, but their effect is diluted by their presentation, in which they occasionally employ variations on frequently-heard or familiar phrases, and their usage endows them with pun-like qualities that sometimes vitiate the seriousness of the

poem that employs them, as in “where sex rears its randy head” in the poem “Hogwash”. The poems occasionally use trendy phrases and conventions, as in the phrase “That said”, in “False Security”, and the equally trendy ampersands in “Come and Go”.

Occasionally, a poem emerges out of the pattern that catches our attention. “The Sniper” describes, then reflects on the role of the sniper as being “at the top of the chain,...sans sympathy, sans empathy, sans guilt.” However, this is followed by “Another Fall”, another sniper poem on the assassination of John Kennedy, and the juxtaposition enervates both poems. Next comes “From Nam to Armageddon”, a typical poem on the Vietnam Vet, stylized and wretched object of scorn, pity and betrayal, and the effect of these poems is to create a fashionable anomie.

“Salamander Love” could be the keynote poem for the collection, as it concludes: “save us from this long drawn out and ultimately fruitless fuck”. The collection is an endless, occasionally boring monologue that leads the reader through the introspection of a character who can't quite seem to rise above it all. But as a character study, it provides a fairly comprehensive, if depressing, view of one who has done it all, seen it all, has forgotten what a thrill feels like, and doesn't mind letting us know at each opportunity.

George Held is a writer of considerable talent and scope, and his poems in this collection suggest that there is more voice and talent than is presented here. If the collection was designed to create its impression of dejection and ennui, then it is a skillful choice.

**Top of Page**