WENDY COPE'S USE OF PARODY IN *MAKING COCOA FOR KINGSLEY AMIS*

MARTA PEREZ NOVALES
UNIVERSIDAD DE BARCELONA

IN an article published in the late 1980s, Fredric Jameson argues that parody has been replaced by pastiche in the postmodern world. As he puts it:

> That is the moment at which pastiche appears and parody has become impossible. Pastiche is like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech in a dead language: but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without parody's ulterior motive, without the satirical impulse, without laughter, without that still latent feeling that there exists something *normal* compared to which what is being imitated is rather comic. (1988: 16)

Postmodernism, according to Jameson, arises from a late-capitalist, postindustrial, consumer society characterized by ideological fragmentation

and a lack of belief in individual identity. In art, "all that is left is to imitate dead styles, to speak through the masks and with the voices of the styles in the imaginary museum" (Jameson 1988: 18). These masks and voices of the past are no longer perceived as objects of imitation or targets of parody and satire. Although Jameson speculates that this sort of mimicry may have some revolutionary potential, he also points out that in the postmodern world art (both that of the present and of the past) becomes a commodity with no value other than its value of exchange.

Jameson's analysis of the postmodern condition can be applied, at least in some superficial ways, to the work of Wendy Cope. Cope is a British poet who became a best-selling poetic parodist in the late eighties —the period from which this article by Jameson dates. Although her poems have sometimes been presented as feminist parodies, they might also be labelled as pastiche in Jameson's sense of the word. It is often difficult to tell whether Cope truly satirizes her poetic models —the Great Male Poets of the English canon—, or simply apes them randomly in order to sell. The same applies to Cope's hypothetical feminism, which can be seen as no more than a commercial gimmick with no conviction behind it.

Indeed, it may be argued that Cope sets out to please everybody: her mildly shocking "feminist" parodies make her poetry palatable to the readers of *Vogue* —where she has been published—, and she has been presented as "an astringent alternative to the post-Plath, only-women-bleed school of poetry" (Dickson 1992: 47). Similarly, her command of canonical masculine styles makes her acceptable to Faber and Faber or *TLS*. If the essence of art in the postmodern era is its commercial, consumer-oriented bent, then Cope is certainly a postmodern poet: her first book sold no less than 40,000 copies, placing her just behind such poetic super-stars as Ted Hughes and Seamus Heaney on the bestseller list (Grove 1992: 1).

However, it seems to me that Cope's poems are also genuinely satirical at times and, especially, her use of masculine models is far from neutral: it betrays admiration as well as rejection. Therefore, the concept of pastiche is problematic when applied to her writing. Considering the general applicability of this concept to postmodern writing is beyond the scope of this article, yet it seems to me that its relevance to women's poetry is somewhat doubtful and deserves discussion.

There is behind pastiche, as Jameson defines it, an utter indifference towards the aesthetic and ideological models of the past. However, a woman poet writing in a patriarchal environment can hardly afford this particular kind of neutrality if she wants to be heard at all. Since the masculine poetic

tradition is a site of power, she has to take it seriously —whether it is to imitate it or to satirize it. She may appear playful, and yet her own survival as a poet is at stake.

I am going to argue here that Wendy Cope's use of parody exemplifies this especial plight of the woman poet, who cannot fully believe in a tradition that excludes her, yet can only view it with indifference at her own risk. Cope's puzzling parodies verge on postmodernist pastiche but do not totally fit in with this category. They stand in a sort of nowhere land, full of gaps and contradictions that seem more accidental and unconscious than deliberate and willed.

Certainly, much of her poetry wavers between the certainties of parody and the disorientations of pastiche. I will consider this dual nature of her poems with relation to the "parodies" in her first book, *Making Cocoa for Kingsley Amis*, which appeared in 1986. A second volume, *Serious concerns*, was published in 1992, and in this book the poet's use of parody is less pervasive, although much of what I will argue here probably applies to it as well.

In an interview that appeared in *The Sunday Times* in 1992, where the poet was presented as a pathetic spinster-poetess —"She does not look like she eats men for breakfast —she looks like she might be defeated by the chunkier kind of muesli" (Dickson 1992: 47)—, Cope defiantly declares that "being aggressive about men is the good part of feminism" (Dickson 1992: 47). She has indeed published poems that, nominally at least, criticize males, like the fairly obvious "Bloody Men" that was quoted prominently when the poet was interviewed in *Life and Times* (Grove 1992: 1):

> Bloody men are like bloody buses—
> You wait for about a year
> And as soon as one approaches your stop
> Two or three others appear.

Arguably, there is nothing very radical or feminist about this poem from *Serious Concerns*, and the same applies to similar ones that appear in *Making Cocoa for Kingsley Amis*, where about half of the poems are in line with "Bloody Men." They project the stereotypical image of a woman who nags, but is still bound to the conventions of heterosexual romance.

However, Cope's use of parody is far more complex and, I believe, says more about Cope's position as a woman poet. The way in which Cope herself justifies her use of parody is revealing:

> What I wanted to do when I was starting out, and what I do now, is to write about my own experience. But in the Seventies and even in the Eighties, the male literary establishment wasn't very keen on a woman telling it like it was. I'm sure they would all be terribly offended at the suggestion that they were discouraging to women; but the fact is that they were. So writing parodies of acceptable male styles was a way of breaking out, of saying, OK, if that is the kind of thing we're supposed to be writing, then I'll show you I can do it, but don't expect me to take it seriously (Dickson 1992: 47).

Indeed, parody can be seen as a strategy on the poet's part to overcome the "anxiety of influence" that she is bound to experience as a woman poet in a world of men. And yet to write a parody of a poet is, ultimately, to take him seriously. Although in the above-mentioned quote Cope partly dismisses masculine literary tradition, she also implies that she cares about it: "I'll show you I can do it." Indeed, parodies are always imitations —twisted, distorted, hyperbolic imitations, but imitations nevertheless. By writing them, Cope is also showing her skill at writing in "acceptable male styles," and thus seeking acceptance from the establishment.

The title of Wendy Cope's first book of poetry, which I am going to discuss here in some detail, already suggests mixed, perhaps contradictory intentions behind Cope's use of parody. She provides a somewhat puzzling interpretation of this title in the final poem of the volume, "Making Cocoa for Kingsley Amis" (*MC* 69):[1]

> It was a dream I had last week
> And some kind of record seemed vital.
> I knew it wouldn't be much of a poem
> But I love the title.

We are not told why the poet loves the title, although we may infer that, since the title appeared in a dream, this love is beyond her conscious control. If we take Kingsley Amis as a representative of "The Movement" —and therefore of one canonical style in contemporary British poetry—, Cope presents herself as bound to a tradition of "acceptable male styles." In the above-mentioned interview, Valerie Grove reports the following:

> Her first collection, in 1986, was called *Making Cocoa for Kingsley Amis*, a bold move since she had never, at the time, met him, a man

> not hard to vex. It was I who brazenly rang him on her behalf, to find out what he thought of her stuff. Luckily he thought it bloody good. He admired her adherence to traditional metres ("She might never have heard of Ezra Pound," he said approvingly) and, to her amazement, turned up to her launch party. (Grove 1992:1)

Apparently, Kingsley Amis liked *Making Cocoa for Kingsley Amis*, which seems to suggest that the book is in line with The Movement's aesthetic. As a reviewer put it shortly after the volume was published, "if the title does hold an implication, it might be paraphrased 'offering something soothing to the conservative formalist'" (O'Donoghue 1986: 616).

However, Cope is not so subservient to this aesthetic as it might seem. Indeed, it is difficult to read the book's title without perceiving some irony in it. For one thing, Cope's subject matter should be distasteful to Kingsley Amis, since her poems often deal with the theme of love and with the complexities of heterosexual relationships. One of Kingsley Amis's best-known poems, "A Bookshop Idyll,"[2] criticizes women poets who write about love:

> We men have love well weighed up; our stuff
> Can get by without it.
> Women don't seem to think that's good enough;
> They write about it,
>
> And the awful way their poems lay them open
> Just doesn't strike them.
> Women are really much nicer than men:
> No wonder we like them.

On the one hand, Wendy Cope's style resembles Kingsley Amis's —I think this is obvious from a comparison between, for example, this quote and "Bloody Men": the rhymes, the humorous-bitchy tone, the prosaic language. However, Cope writes about love like the women that Kingsley Amis criticizes, and presents herself as a proud confessional poet who is not afraid to lay herself open: "And if some bloodless literary fart/ Says that it's all too personal, I'll spit" ("Manifesto," *MC* 42).

From this point of view, making cocoa for Kingsley Amis is making cocoa for a "bloodless literary fart." In the context of the book, where the relationship between the female poet and her male partners is presented as far from idyllic —"There are so many kinds of awful men," she says in

"Rondeau Redoublé" (*MC* 39)—, "making cocoa" for a well-known male poet suggests subservience on the woman's part. Yet cocoa is popular among children —there is a drawing of a child of indistinct gender drinking a cup of cocoa on the front cover of the book—, and mothers often make cocoa for them. This turns "Kingsley Amis" into a child, and "Wendy Cope" into his mother rather than his wife, his lover or his disciple. The mother is perhaps the child's slave, and yet she is also an adult with some power.

However, Cope's position with regard to Kingsley Amis is difficult to define. Depending on how we read the book's title, Kingsley Amis —or rather, what he represents as a male poet— is a target of satire. And yet, although the book is full of parodies of established male poets, there is no parody of Kingsley Amis. This is particularly striking since a poem like the above mentioned "A Bookshop Idyll," which Cope must have read, would have given her brilliant subject matter for one of her parodies. It seems odd, for example, that she includes a parody of the Liverpool poets ("Strugnell in Liverpool," *MC* 52): they are pretty anti-establishment themselves, and authors of literary parodies as witty as Cope's. But she makes fun of these poets, and not of Kingsley Amis, or at least not explicitly.

On the other hand, there is also a parody of Shakespeare in the book, and this seems to indicate that Cope will make fun of absolutely everybody famous and male in the English poetic tradition, regardless of their style or status. However, not all poets male and famous receive the same sort of treatment in *Making Cocoa for Kingsley Amis*. In fact, Cope's selection of poets for her parodies seems to indicate that her literary taste would not displease Kingsley Amis. In two instances —"From Strugnell's Rubáiyát" (*MC* 63) and "Strugnell's Haiku" (*MC* 65)— the object of the parody is a literary form, but all the others are send-ups of famous male poets. The list includes, apart from Shakespeare and the Liverpool poets, William Wordsworth, T. S. Eliot, Ted Hughes, Seamus Heaney, Craig Raine and the "Martian" school, Basil Bunting —or perhaps Ezra Pound: "E pericoloso Sporgersi" (*MC* 50) could be a parody of either— and Geoffrey Hill.

Implicitly, therefore, Cope rejects Romanticism, Modernism and their derivations, which is exactly what the poets of The Movement, Kingsley Amis included, did in their time. If we consider Cope's professed dislike of "bloodless literary farts" and canonical poets, her apparent allegiances to The Movement are difficult to explain. Indeed, Movement values are still a dominant part of the canon, to the point of becoming limiting and even oppressive to younger generations of poets (Edwards 1988: 265-270).

However, Cope's sympathies are not very clearly defined. Even with the proviso that we are here referring exclusively to "Wendy Cope" —the nominal author of *Making Cocoa for Kingsley Amis* as opposed to the Wendy Cope who talks in interviews and makes public statements in prose—, it is difficult to find a consistent authorial point of view in the book. Perhaps, as deconstruction argues, this is true of all writing, but I believe it is especially true of *Making Cocoa for Kingsley Amis*. I have already discussed some of its ironies and uncertainties, but perhaps the most disconcerting aspect of the volume is Cope's use of a poet-persona that she names "Strugnell." This character is the fictional author of most parodies in the book, and therefore an alternative point of view needs to be taken into account. This complicates interpretation quite a lot, as I am going to argue here.

A distinction can be made between the parodies by "Wendy Cope" and those that are attributed to "Strugnell." If we take, for example, "Waste Land Limericks" (*MC* 20-21) —by Cope, not Strugnell— the parody is straightforward: "No water. Dry rocks and dry throats, /Then thunder, a shower of quotes/ from the Sanskrit and Dante. /Da. Damyata. Shantih./ I hope you'll make sense of the notes." This is obviously written by someone who finds Eliot's style ridiculous, and makes fun of it. In "Usquebaugh" (*MC* 48), similarly, Cope mocks Seamus Heaney's notions of language: where Heaney implies that poetry is the language of roots and the earth, Cope links poetry (Heaney's poetry) with excessive drinking —"Whiskey: its terse vowels belie/ The slow fuddling and mellowing,/ Our guttural speech slurring/ Into warm, thick blather."

These sort of poems are "orthodox," classical parodies, and they should not present special problems for the reader. However, interpretation becomes more difficult when Strugnell is presented as the author, and I therefore believe that Strugnell and "his" poems deserve more detailed consideration. First of all, Strugnell's identity needs to be established and Cope encourages us to do this by including a poem about him ("Mr Strugnell," *MC* 45-46) at the beginning of part II —the section where Strugnell's poems appear. The poem, however, complicates rather than clarifies the issue of Strugnell's personality and point of view.

On one level of interpretation, the poem can be read as a parody of Philip Larkin's "Mr Bleaney."[3] Both poems are about the lonely, squalid life of a bachelor, and Cope uses the same stanzaic pattern as Larkin, but the perspective is different. In Larkin's poem, the poet has just moved into the bedroom which Mr Bleaney used to occupy, and he empathizes with the old lodger and perhaps fears a repetition of his sad story in his own life.

In Cope's poem, however, the bachelor is described by a woman, his ex-landlady "Mrs M.," who finds him a bore: like Larkin, Mr Strugnell works as a librarian in Hull, he is a John Betjeman fan, he likes jazz, he is a bachelor and he did not go out with women much until "'sixty-three" —an obvious allusion to Larkin's "Annus Mirabilis": "Sexual intercourse began/ In nineteen sixty-three / (Which was rather late for me) / Between the end of the *Chatterley* ban/ And the Beatles's first LP."[4] The caricature is not devoid of sympathy —"He was the quiet sort who liked to read"—, and there is no real malice in it. However, where Larkin presents his character in an almost tragic light, Cope's perspective is humorous and debunking.

Cope implies here that Larkin's self-commiserating pathos towards Mr Bleaney (an extension of himself) is typically masculine, whereas the woman's perspective is more practical and down-to-earth. And yet, while Cope is criticizing Larkin's choice of tone and subject matter, she is not attacking his poetic style as a whole. In fact, Cope is indebted to Larkin, and not just in terms of poetic form. Since I mentioned Larkin's "Annus Mirabilis," the mixture of regret and humour in that poem is not alien to Cope's style. On the contrary, Cope often deals with love and sex in the context of everyday life, and she looks at human mediocrity and frustration with critical, but also sympathetic eyes —for instance in "Lonely Hearts" (*MC* 27).

It seems to me, therefore, that in "Mr Strugnell" Cope is writing a caricature of Larkin the character, but not a parody of Larkin's poetic style. To the extent that Larkin can be considered representative of The Movement's aesthetic, Cope can be seen as supporting this aesthetic. From this perspective, Strugnell-Larkin-the Movement poet has a lot in common with Cope. He has some moral foibles inherent to masculinity. Yet, as a poet, he is perhaps indistinguishable from Cope. If this is true, we can assume that Strugnell's point of view is more or less identical with Cope's.

However, this interpretation is not supported by the rest of the poems in the section, especially those signed by Strugnell. Among these, "Budgie Finds His Voice" (*MC* 47) is a case in point. The poem with its subtitle, "From *The Life and Songs of the Budgie* by Jake Strugnell," can be read as a parody of Ted Hughes's acclaimed book *Crow: From the Life and Songs of the Crow* (Hughes 1972). The ponderous image of the crow is replaced by that of the more domestic budgie, which seems to imply a criticism of Hughes's mythically charged style.

Yet Cope seems to have different views from Strugnell as far as Ted Hughes is concerned. In "A Policeman's Lot" (*MC* 15-16), she sympathizes

with him. She quotes Hughes in the epigraph —"The progress of any writer is marked by those moments when he manages to outwit his own inner police system." The poem is spoken by a not very bright policeman —he sings to a rhythm by W. S. Gilbert— who is "Patrolling the unconscious of Ted Hughes" and "Attempting to avert poetic thought ('etic thought"), and not succeeding. The poem corrects Hughes's notion of the "inner police system" —in "Cope's" more down-to-earth view, the "police system" is not so much a psychic reality as a social one. However, beyond this slight criticism, she definitely takes his side against a repressive society, and presents him as a poet of strong imagination, capable of defeating the "policeman."

But there are further complications for the reader. To go back to "Budgie Finds His Voice," it is probably a parody, but it is also in line with Hughes's style. The bathetic ending "Who's a pretty boy then? Budgie cried" is parallelled by some such moments in *Crow*, which after all revolves around a trickster figure, and is not without humour. Admittedly, it is more often than not gallows humour, whereas "Budgie" is light-hearted comedy. But "Budgie Finds His Voice" also contains some grim images —"And the last ear left on earth/ Lay on the beach, /Deaf as a shell"— which would probably not be out of place in *Crow*. Seen in this way, this poem is an imitation as much as, or perhaps rather than, a parody.

Of course, this hypothesis gives rise to further questions. If Strugnell is a poet with his own (Larkinesque) style, why is he imitating Hughes? I will venture one answer to this question, and it is that Strugnell is imitating Hughes, the present Poet Laureate, to share in his fame. From this perspective, the poem's title is ironic: Strugnell is not "finding his voice" at all, just aping somebody else's. If this is the case, "Budgie Finds His Voice" becomes a pastiche of Hughes by Jake Strugnell, and it is not intended as a parody of Hughes at all. In fact, the poem is Cope's parody of Jake Strugnell's imitation of Hughes...

Just in case all this seems far-fetched, let us look at "God and the Jolly Bored Bog-Mouse" (*MC* 55). The subtitle informs us that this is "Strugnell's entry for the Arvon/Observer Poetry Competition 1980. The competition was judged by Ted Hughes, Philip Larkin, Seamus Heaney and Charles Causley." We may infer that Strugnell has written this poem in the hope that all four judges will like it: "God" may please Causley, who is supposed to be a poet with a strong religious sensibility; "Bored" is in tune with Larkin's personae, the "Bog" is an emblem of Heaney's poetry, and the "Mouse" evokes Hughes's nature and animal poetry. So far, this confirms my theory of

Strugnell as an author of pastiche (at its commercial worst) rather than a witty parodist —and therefore a different entity from "Wendy Cope."

Indeed, the poem is a mixture of styles. It is written in regular stanzas, and rhymed, which approaches it to the style of Causley and Larkin, but the imagery is stereotypical *Crow*-Hughes ("Mouse dreamed a Universe of Blood) and stereotypical Heaney ("Mouse squelched away across the bog"). As an imitator, however, Strugnell is far from succeeding, because the mixture is odd —it shows the lack of commitment characteristic of pastiche. It could also be argued that Strugnell was trying to write a parody. However, the writing is so recognizably Strugnell's —the stereotypically English "jolly" that he uses as a refrain can only be a mark of his own style—, that the parody loses its edge. A good parodist would not let his own style interfere with the style of the poets he is making fun of. He would simply draw on their distinctive traits, and exaggerate them.

However, having reached this point in my argument, some more complexities need to be considered. One detail in the subtitle is thought-provoking. Strugnell has entered the Arvon/Observer Poetry Competition, and Wendy Cope has been both a student and a teacher in the Arvon courses (Grove 1992: 1). Is Cope criticizing herself here? Cope's involvement with the Arvon courses as a teacher probably came after the publication of *Making Cocoa for Kingsley Amis* (she was an unpublished poet before that). Nevertheless, perhaps Wendy Cope is criticizing here her own aspirations to fame in the literary business. In this respect, Strugnell is indeed a parody of herself.

This leads me to the provisional conclusion that the main objects of Cope's satire are Strugnell and Cope herself (to the extent that she shares Strugnell's values), and not so much the Great Poets that Strugnell imitates. If we take a poem like "Duffa Rex" (*MC* 51), for example, the nominal object of parody is Geoffrey Hill, since the poem imitates Hill's style in *Mercian Hymns*. But the poem makes more fun of Strugnell than it ridicules Hill. Strugnell is not explicitly mentioned, but there is an allusion to him as "King of the primeval avenues, the municipal parklands: architect of the Tulse Hill Poetry Group" —in "Mr Strugnell" (*MC* 45-46) we were told that the character had lived on Tulse Hill before he moved to Hull. In "Duffa Rex" Strugnell is a ludicrous king named "Duffa," and in spite of the grand-sounding language —"Treasure accrued in a sparse week, to be invested in precious liquid"—, he is in fact an anti-hero, a duffer who gets drunk in the pub.

As I argued before, the poem makes fun of Strugnell, not so much of Geoffrey Hill. If we consider the opening section of his 1971 collection *Mercian Hymns*, it is as ironic and anachronistic as "Duffa Rex": for example, Hill's King Offa (a medieval king of Mercia) is "King of the perennial holly-groves, the riven sandstone: overlord of the M5" (Hill 1985: 105). Cope's style is certainly more light-hearted and less complex than Hill's. Nevertheless, Hill is himself a parodist (in this case of medieval state-poetry) among other things, and in this respect Cope —like Strugnell in the poems where he is the "author"— dutifully imitates rather than parodies the poetry she draws from.

However, the distinction is not so clear. To the extent that Cope deflates the poetic style that she imitates, "Duffa Rex" can also be read as a conventional parody, and the same probably applies to other poems in the book. Cope's "parodies" are ambiguous, and it is difficult to tell whether this is a deliberate strategy, or just the product of unresolved conflicts in Cope's mind. At any rate, the results are intriguing, and perhaps slightly disorienting.

In my opinion, this is especially true of a series of poems where Cope apparently makes fun of the archetypal Great Poet: "From Strugnell's Sonnets" (*MC* 56-62). On a first level of interpretation, Strugnell's seven sonnets are parodies of Shakespeare. This is evident from the humorous misquotes —"Let me not to the marriage of true swine/ Admit impediments" (sonnet vi) would be a representative instance. Moreover, the refinements of spiritual love in Shakespeare's sonnets are transmuted here into a vulgar, unidealistic sexual business: "I had this bird called Sharon, fond of gin — / Could knock back six or seven. At the price/ I paid a high wage for each hour of sin/ and that was why I only had her twice" (sonnet i). The love that Shakespeare describes is supposed to last when immortalized by poetry, whereas Strugnell's love is much more commonplace, and his poetry ephemeral: "Your beauty and my name will be forgotten — / My love is true, but all my verse is rotten." (sonnet iv)

Cope seems to be criticizing courtly-love poetry written from a man's perspective, which she presents as unrealistic. This is in tune with the rest of love poems in *Making Cocoa for Kingsley Amis*, for example "Fom June to December" (*MC* 31-35), where a love affair that started in romantic fashion ends with the woman hating the man: "Decapitating the spring onions,/ She made this mental note:/ You can tell it's love, the real thing,/ When you dream of slitting his throat." Here and in other poems, Cope presents sexual

relationships in a domestic urban environment, and concentrates on the mediocrities of the partners, especially the men.

In this respect, Strugnell's sonnets parody and correct Shakespeare's. This would suggest that Strugnell is neither a pathetic imitator not a postmodern author of pastiche, but a true parodist. However, the authorial position is not so simple. On the one hand, Strugnell is laughing at Shakespeare. And yet he is not simply critical of Shakespeare and contented with his own style and personality. On the contrary, he is aware of his own shortcomings:

> My glass shall not persuade me I'm senescent,
> Nor that it's time to curb my virile hunger.
> I'm still as randy as an adolescent
> And didn't have much fun when I was younger.
> Pursuing girls was hopeless with my looks
> (I used to pick my spots and make them worse)
> So I consoled myself by reading books—
> Philosophy, pornography and verse.
> For years I poured my unfulfilled desire
> Into sad songs —and now, to my delight,
> Find women love a bard, however dire,
> And overlook my paunch because I write.
> One doesn't need much literary skill
> To be the Casanova of Tulse Hill.
>
> (sonnet iii)

From this point of view, Strugnell resembles an Eliotian anti-hero, a sort of Prufrock who knows he is not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be, yet lacks the moral courage to raise himself above mediocrity. However, Strugnell is probably more cynical and arrogant: "One day I'll make my mark,/ Although I'm not from Ulster or from Mars, / And when I'm published in some classy mag/ You'll rue the day you scarpered in his Jag," he warns the woman who has left him for a wealthier man. Strugnell is jealous of other poets' achievements, and hungry for literary fame, which he equates with sexual success. In this respect, he is a stereotypical masculine figure and therefore the target of Cope's satire.

And yet, since Cope publishes in "classy mags" (the symbol of Strugnell's ambition), the figure of Strugnell has something in common with the nominal author of *Making Cocoa for Kingsley Amis*. Both Cope and Strugnell criticize their own literary ambition, and yet they also imply that

they have a right to be ambitious. They are critical of poetic tradition, and yet strive to be accepted by the literary status quo. From this perspective, therefore, Cope and Strugnell are very similar to each other. However, my point is that they are not identical. It is difficult to know to what extent we are meant to read Strugnell's words as an expression of Cope's position since irony is so pervasive. At any rate, the authorial point of view is not at all clear.

For example, in the last sonnet of the sequence, Strugnell quotes Andrew Motion: "At the moment, if you're seen reading poetry in a train, the carriage empties instantly." The author of *Making Cocoa for Kingsley Amis*, "Wendy Cope," would probably sympathize with Motion's concern about Britain's lack of interest in poetry. In "Engineer's Corner" (*MC* 13), for instance, she takes an advertisement where the Engineering Council complains that "in Britain we've always made more fuss of a ballad than a blueprint," and she writes an ironic poem that apparently supports this view, and yet shows its absurdity: "That's why so many poets end up rich, / While engineers scrape in cheerless garrets." Strugnell, however, sees nothing wrong with Britain's lack of interest in poetry. In fact, he enjoys it: "A few choice bits from Motion's new anthology/ And you'll be lonelier than any cloud. / This stratagem's a godsend to recluses/ and demonstrates that poetry has its uses."

However, this is only one possible reading. If we read "Engineer's Corner" as an ironic poem, why argue that Strugnell is speaking in earnest in sonnet vii? The obvious answer is that Cope is not Strugnell —Strugnell is an impostor poet who does not really care about poetry, except as a means to literary fame and sexual conquest. But, as I have argued throughout, the distinction between Cope and Strugnell is not so clear. As I said in connection with her poem "Manifesto," Cope dislikes chauvinistic men and "bloodless literary farts" who dismiss poetry when it is "too personal." According to this definition, Motion is a "bloodless literary fart": in the anthology that Strugnell is probably referring to, *The Penguin Book of Contemporary Poetry* (co-edited with Blake Morrison), Motion implicitly rejects "candid personal poetry" (Morrison and Motion 1982: 12).

Moreover, Motion includes poets like Seamus Heaney and Craig Raine in this anthology —poets who are targets of Cope's parody, and also of Strugnell's ("Ulster" and "Mars" in sonnet vi). If we consider, therefore, that at least in that instance "Cope" coincides with Strugnell, she seems to be saying that institutional poetry is to blame for British people's rejection of poetry in general. Strugnell/Cope offers an alternative with his/her more accessible, down-to-earth, personal style. However, considering *Making*

Cocoa for Kingsley Amis as a whole, it is very difficult to decide what Wendy Cope's stand is. The authorial point of view in the book is not stable, and the reader can never be quite sure whether Cope agrees with Motion or not, whether a certain poem is ironic or not, whether it parody, pastiche or straightforward imitation.

Whether this is intended or not, such ambiguities and contradictions seem to be an essential part of Cope's style, and they are everywhere in the book, even in its dedication. Significantly, Cope dedicates *Making Cocoa for Kingsley Amis* "To Arthur S. Couch and everyone else who helped" (*MC* 7). As Cope has explained in interviews (Dickson 1992: 47), the appositely named Mr Couch is her psychiatrist —a masculine figure with patriarchal connotations, since he plays the symbolic role of father, priest and judge. As such, he is the recipient of Cope's "confessions," especially in the poems where she deals with the problems of heterosexual relationships. On the one hand, Cope's confessions are bold and critical of traditional patriarchal morality. On the other, her female speaker is keen on "Good, old-fashioned men like you" ("Message," *MC* 40) —suggesting a patriarchal father-lover figure—, and she seems eager to seduce such men with her poems.

More strikingly, perhaps, the name "Arthur S. Couch" evokes "Sir Arthur Quiller Couch": the man who was the first professor of English at Cambridge, and used to address his predominantly female audience as "Gentlemen" (Eagleton 1983: 28 and 30). This figure probably stands for the traditional masculinist bias of literary institutions, and Cope's dedication to him "and to everyone else who helped" can be read as ironic —if Couch and his ilk have helped, it is as targets of Cope's satire. However, I have argued here that Cope's parodies of male poetic tradition and her attitude to the masculine canon are ambiguous. From this point of view, her explicit dedication of the book to Couch and her implicit dedication to Amis are not altogether ironic.

Indeed, in *Making Cocoa for Kingsley Amis* the poetic fathers can be laughed at, but within limits, because they are powerful and therefore dangerous. It is significant that in the only poem in the book where Cope mentions a poetic mother, "Emily Dickinson" (*MC* 23), the female precursor is seen as an impossible model: "Nowadays, faced with such / Idiosyncrasy, / Critics and editors / Send for the cops." Cope praises Dickinson, and yet implicitly rejects her as a poetic model. To follow the "idiosyncratic" mother is to become vulnerable, and much of Cope's writing in the book seems geared to avoid prosecution from the literary "cops."

"Manifesto" (*MC* 42), a poem that stands at the centre of *Making Cocoa for Kingsley Amis*, takes this attitude to the extreme. The poem is addressed to a "you" by a female poet who sounds quite proud of herself as a writer and as a woman: "I am no beauty but I'm pretty smart / And I intend to be your favourite — / I'll work, for there's new purpose in my art." However, this woman's self-confidence is not as strong as it might seem. She writes to be a "favourite" rather than to be herself, and she intends to "write the poems that will win your heart."

The woman speaking in the poem does not say whose heart this is, but since "Manifesto" comes after a series of love poems addressed to men, we can assume that she is addressing a masculine figure —a lover, or perhaps Kingsley Amis, or perhaps the Great Tradition of (Male) Poetry that serves as a background to the book. This puts Cope's female speaker in a position of subservience. Her tone is defiant —"And if some bloodless literary fart/ Says that it's too personal, I'll spit"—, but she has no other powers than the stereotypical female teaser's powers of seduction. Ultimately, her strategy is one of survival.

To conclude, I believe that the uncertainties of Cope's parodic style may be a symptom of the postmodern condition but, above all, they derive from her special position as a female poet: a female poet who feels oppressed by the weight of the masculine canon and yet strives for a place in it. Her ambivalent parodies betray an unease towards the poetic forefathers, a conflicted relationship to poetic tradition that is specific to women's poetry.

As Harold Bloom has argued in his famous book *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973), every new generation of poets, consciously or not, perceives the canonical poetic tradition as a threat as well as a source of power. From a Freudian point of view, Bloom argues that male poets become engaged in an Oedipal struggle against the poetic fathers, a bitter fight for dominance that involves imitating, but also rewriting, "misreading" and subverting the canonical texts. Bloom, oddly enough, does not use any female examples, but in the case of female poets the "anxiety of influence" can be overwhelming. The canon has always been masculine, and there has always been room in it for new male poets, but very rarely for women poets. Marginalized by literary history, systematically obliterated or denigrated by the literary institutions, women poets have tended to perceive the dominant poetic tradition as an oppressive weight: "those patriarchal interdictions that have historically caused women poets from Finch to Plath anxiety and guilt about attempting the pen" (Gilbert and Gubar 1979: xxiii).

Feminist criticism has studied the ways in which women relate to their poetic forefathers. The relationship is often overtly oppositional. Significantly, Alicia Suskin Ostriker's feminist study of the emergence of women's poetry in America is titled *Stealing the Language*. Female poets have often subverted the dominant poetic traditions in an attempt to reshape literary history and thus gain a space for themselves within the established canon. Ostriker, for example, studies the ways in which American women poets have rewritten patriarchal myths of femininity. Their point of departure is poetic tradition, but they adapt it to their own needs (Ostriker 1986: 10-238).

In some cases however, the subversion is more radical. Women writers sometimes try to produce a language of their own outside the dominant language. I am referring especially to avant-garde, experimental poets who try to "write the body" and who reject not only poetic tradition, but the very notion of language as it is understood in the patriarchal world. However, these radically subversive tendencies coexist with the will of many women poets to simply "steal the language" of men and usurp their power. In Cora Kaplan's words:

> The decision to storm the walls and occupy the forbidden place is a recognition of the value and importance of high language, and often contradicts and undercuts a more radical critique in women's poetry of the values embedded in formal language itself (Kaplan 1986: 58).

Indeed, the attempt to "occupy the forbidden place" sometimes involves imitating masculine models in an absolute manner, at least at some stage of the female poet's career (the poetry that Adrienne Rich published before she became a militant feminist is a clear example of this). However, in some cases sheepish imitation can become a permanent habit, since her cultural environment makes it particularly difficult for a woman poet to break free from patriarchal restrictions.

As Julia Kristeva puts it in an analysis of women's writing:

> There are two extremes in their writing experiences: the first tends to valorize phallic dominance, associated with the privileged father-daughter relationship, which gives rise to the tendency towards mastery, science, philosophy, professorships, etc. . . . On the other hand, we flee everything considered "phallic" to find refuge in the valorization of a silent underwater body, thus abdicating any entry into history. (Kristeva 1981: 166)

Kristeva's reference to the "silent underwater body" is probably an allusion to "écriture feminine," a kind of language propounded by French feminists: avant-garde writing of the body and the instinctual, ungrammatical and unbounded. Kristeva's argument here suggests that women writers are in a no-win situation: either they reject patriarchal language altogether, thus remaining marginal, inaudible and powerless, or they resign themselves to becoming "honorary men." Certainly, if the dominant poetic language is the language of power, it is understandable that many women poets try to invade the canon rather than be outside it in a position of marginality.

However, in doing this, they risk reproducing the values that they set out to attack. To some extent pastiche —a non-committal, and therefore potentially disrespectful replica of canonical models— can overcome these dangers. However, to go back to the article by Jameson that I quoted from at the start, pastiche is politically ambivalent:

> There is an agreement that the older modernism functioned against its society in ways which are variously described as critical, negative, contestatory, subversive, oppositional and the like. Can anything of the sort be affirmed about postmodernism and its social moment? We have seen that there is a way in which postmodernism replicates or reproduces —reinforces— the logic of consumer capitalism; the more significant question is whether there is also a way in which it resists that logic. But that is a question we must leave open. (Jameson 1988: 29)

Answering this question at large is beyond my scope here. Yet it seems to me that, to the extent that Cope's poems exceed the limits of both parody and pastiche, they resist the patriarchal logic that in other ways dominates her writing. Far from replicating her models neutrally, Cope problematizes them. In this respect, although her style is different from theirs, there are similarities between Cope and other British female poets of her generation. I am thinking of writers like Liz Lochhead, Wendy Mulford, Grace Nichols or Denise Riley —just to mention some poets whose writing had some impact, if only in academic environments, in the eighties.[5] They are more experimental and more liberated from poetic tradition. Yet, like Cope's, their writing often wavers between feminist parody and postmodernist pastiche. For example, they often use with feminine stereotypes while presenting them in a critical light. As Lochhead puts it in a poem titled "Bawd":

> I' ll rouge my cleavage, flaunt myself, my heels
> will be perilously high, oh
> but I won't sway.
> I'll shrug everything off the shoulder,
> make wisecracks, be witty off the cuff.
> Tell blue jokes in mixed company.
>
> I'll be a bad lot.
> I've a brass neck. There is mayhem in my smile.
> No one will guess it's not my style.
>
> (Lochhead 1984: 76)

Lochhead theorizes on one possible model of rebellious behaviour that is open to women in a sexist world: to explode clichés by taking them to the extreme and using them in a self-conscious, somewhat cynical way. Wendy Cope also flaunts herself and "tells blue jokes in mixed company," posing as a seductress yet often implying that this is not her true "style."

However, whereas the above mentioned women poets make it clear to the reader that they are playing roles in a comedy of their own making, Cope's stand is less well-defined —it is often impossible to "guess" whether this is her style or not. While her peers effectively challenge the canon by creating their own experimental styles, in many ways Cope remains trapped in the language of the forefathers, whether she uses parody or pastiche.

On the other hand, since she published *Making Cocoa for Kingsley Amis*, Cope has started to speak more in her own style, and this suggests that the book helped her move towards a more personal kind of poetry. In her 1992 book *Serious Concerns* she seems less willing to seduce and more eager to shock:

> Write to amuse? What an appalling suggestion!
> I write to make people anxious and miserable and to worsen their indigestion.
>
> (Cope 1992: 15)

Given the limitations and contradictions of her style, it is doubtful that she will achieve this, and yet Wendy Cope's parodies can be seen as resulting from "serious concerns." Even in *Making Cocoa for Kingsley Amis*, there is more to her poetry than light-hearted comedy. Whatever the dubious

connotations of her fame —she can be seen as playing into the hands of the literary establishment—, I personally believe that Cope deserves the attention that she has received. She definitely has a gift for communicating with her audience. What she communicates may not worsen anybody's indigestion, and yet her poetry raises some questions: to what extent are women writers free to challenge the masculine literary tradition? How do women fit in with this tradition? What happens when a woman "makes cocoa for Kingsley Amis"? Cope does not answer, and perhaps she does not even ask. But her writing may encourage her readers to consider such disturbing questions. a

NOTES

1. *Making Cocoa for Kingsley Amis*, hereafter *MC.*

2. For example, this is one of the two poems by Kingsley Amis that appear in *The Penguin Book of Contemporary Verse 1918-60* (Allott 1962: 331-332).

3. A poem from *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964). See *Collected Poems* (Larkin 1988: 102-103).

4. A poem from Larkin's *High Windows* (1974). See *Collected Poems* (Larkin 1988: 167).

5. Like Cope, they all published books in the mid-eighties. See "References."

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