

Michael Rossetti's PRB Journal* serves as a reminder that the brothers were beginners still far too young to have a glimmering of their own beliefs, or that how difficult it was going to be to do them. There is Rossetti's own idolizing two Beatrices, Lizzie Siddal and Morris, besides catering for the fleshly as his own nature by accommodating the fine Fanny Cornforth. There is Millais, acting up as part of an idealistic conspiracy to knight and benighted, as a super-grocer of the arts.

trouble was their intellectual dishonesty is Rossetti's *Astarte Syriaca* for which, in which Janey Morris, whom he loved with the kind of guilt-racked consciousness we might have expected of a man who would allow a pet peacock to expire dead behind his sofa, is endowed with the deep despair and rippling shoulders of a wrestler. But then, all these painted ladies of the Pre-Raphaelite Sisterhood, in whose so many pints of paint were splashed, consumed with love as to be utterly The truth is that neither Rossetti nor any of the rest of them were quite the figures they felt it their duty to be in. Confusing solemnity with profundity, truck dramatic attitudes in paint and ones in life, and never the twain did meet. As Ford Madox Ford later wrote, "I never about Rossetti, nor about Burne Jones or about Morris was there any inclination to give out the smell of the lily." Why, then, do the paintings convey an air of impenetrable gloom; to those ladies, alone and palely loitering in their gilt frames, seem to be trying to remember where they have mislaid their souls, well-bred though they are to, make any inquiries to that end? According to the painting and consistently bogus morality which many PRB paintings peddled, these ladies are supposed to be sh Spoiled and yet admirable. However, it is not always wise to take this Sunday School art at its own word, as is demonstrated by the wonderful confusion surrounding one of its most notorious manifestations, Holman Hunt's *Awakening Conscience*.

According to Hunt this work was supposed to embody some frivolous comment on fornication which the artist would perhaps have been better advised to knit as a sampler. In it a young lady goggles into space while seated on her boyfriend's lap, the idea being that having committed the error of her ways, she is about to announce the devil, with whom, by the way, she was apparently in constant touch. Under these circumstances it was inevitable that Ruskin would have approved. After all, a painting which propagates the idea of no sexual expression outside marriage is bound to appeal to a man incapable of it even inside marriage. Ruskin took one look at *The Awakening Conscience* and declared it was "an example of painting taking its place beside literature." This was wrong. The proper place of painting is not beside literature but on the same level as it, which is what Whistler meant when he was talking to Rossetti after the latter had composed a sonnet to accompany a painting, and why not take out the picture and frame the sonnet?

Ruskin actually said of Hunt's religious tract "I even the very hem of this poor girl's dress is a story in it, if we think how soon its pure cleanliness may be soiled with dust and rain, her feet fast falling in the street," at which we can only goggle with a stupefaction even more profound than that of the girl in the painting. Of course people Mario Praz has substantiated Ruskin's barmy claim by saying that the tragedy of the girl's lost virtue is suggested in the details that surround her—the luxurious vulgar

furnishings, the cat playing with a dead bird on the carpet, the gilded tapestry, the picture above the fireplace . . .

In other words, we are given to understand that only in scarlet households do cats eat birds, that luxury is synonymous with sin, that the paintings people choose to put on their walls are a precise representation of their own moral condition (the PRB was inspired by the belief that precisely the opposite is true), and that bad taste in furnishings is an inevitable consequence of immorality, to which Wilde would no doubt have retorted that on the contrary, good taste in furnishings is never a consequence of morality. In any case, Millais confided to a friend that Hunt never meant anything of the kind by his painting, and had to go quietly because Ruskin was the brotherhood's lone champion at the time.

Of such delicious contradictions are the Pre-Raphaelites compounded. Geniuses at living the comic life, plodders and pedants when it came to their work; they remain the most endearing bunch of bohemians ever to pop up on the horizons of English art.

Fiction

Fads

Peter Ackroyd

See *The Old Lady Decently* B. S. Johnson (Hutchinson £3.25)
Snipe's Spinster Jeff Nuttall (Calder and Boyars £2.95)

I know that it's very fashionable to read and even to enjoy B. S. Johnson, and somehow he manages to please everybody. The more robust and Anglo-Saxon critics can forgive him his lamentably archaic 'experimentation' on the grounds that, deep down, he is yet another pawky humourist in the tradition of Sterne; the more effete but no less conventional experimentalists (although the English critics, to a man and woman, wouldn't know a modern novel if it got up and stuffed its words down their throats — which one day it will) can forgive him the earthy humour for the sake of his cut-ups, his word games and his preoccupation with the processes of his own invention: I do not myself think that these qualities are interesting or significant on their own terms, especially when they are exhibited — as they are in this posthumous novel — without props, scenery or characters.

The most noticeable quality of the book is the way in which the publisher, the writer of the preface and Mr Johnson himself have managed to whip themselves up into a frenzy about its supposed novelty. There, on the jacket, is the slogan of a bright, new world of fiction: "If you do not like this part, or the other, then skip ahead or back to a part you did enjoy. It is no part of my intention to provide a continuous narrative. . . ." This of course is a technique that reaches as far back as poor Sterne himself (he is being blamed for a great deal of second-rate writing nowadays) but, more importantly, it has been a creaking convention,

Rolf Dieter Brinkmann

The death in a road accident, last week, of the German poet Rolf Dieter Brinkmann was a tragic end to his successful appearance at the recent Cambridge Poetry Festival. Herr Brinkmann, who was born in 1940, had lived with his family in Cologne for many years. Among his books were *Die Piloten* and *Grass*; his vital presence will be missed both in Europe and in England, where his work has been widely translated.

among novelists ever since the late 'fifties; it's a little late to pick out Mr Johnson's words in gilt, and then to fall down and worship them. The problem with the whole book, in fact, is that it is actually an anachronism masquerading as something different and new.

A great many tricks have been employed to that end. There are a number of disparate sections *à la carte*; extracts from a thesis, fictional dialogue, autobiography are all labelled with a series of letters to denote their status: "The extracts from Neumann are marked by the sign N . . ." and so on. I shall mark my own copy of the book with VBW, which may mean Very Bad Writing, and also with IOHHAOI, which will mean If Only He Had An Original Idea. The central problem is that Mr Johnson has set himself a 'serious theme'; and there is no easier way of ruining the language than to write about something which already exists as a complete idea. Here, in what was meant to be the first of a trilogy, Mr Johnson intended to interweave the death of his mother, who had recently died of cancer, with the history of our nation which is, presumably, meant to be suffering a less painful but no less inevitable death.

So there are passages of documentary history, in which for some reason the nouns have been misplaced (the way John Ashbery used to do back in 1962), there are celebrations of 'place' (the way Carlos Williams did it in 1951), there are letters, straight biography and even passages of personal reminiscence — these last, incidentally, written with a sort of innocent inventiveness which suggests that Mr Johnson is more capable than he appears — "I shall take this pad with me. The next sentence you read will have been written on location in Chester Square." But once the dazzling fact has been established that different types of language — whether history, biography or historiography — are merely different types of fiction there is not much else for Mr Johnson to do. He aspired to being a modern and became merely contemporary.

But this is at least one notch above Jeff Nuttall, whose *Snipe's Spinster* must have turned yellow with age even as it was being written. Its first paragraph contains all of the detritus of a false culture: "Happenings, lightshows, electronic music, '68 and '69 busking and talking to local anarchist youth groups up and down the land, Edinburgh in 1970 for the Festival . . . The closure of the Arts Lab." And the closure of everything else as well — life, imagination and intelligence being merely the first qualities to spring to mind. There are so many old-timers in the book saying "Man" and "motherfucker" that I would have sworn that the book was written by a faded and ageing hipster, but the photograph on the dust-jacket shows Mr Nuttall to be a rather ordinary, middle-aged man wearing a cheeky hat.

The novel would be a cute find for lovers of nostalgia, if only Mr Nuttall were an intelligent or an interesting writer. But the mindless recital of cheap values leads to tackiness — "The wayward and magical formulations described by real proletarian culture. Bob Dylan, who knew at that time just exactly what was 'blowing in the wind' . . ." and to a stale and derivative prose — "The anguish of despair became the vision of possibility." When a writer is duped by commercial values and fashionable trends — there is a great deal in this book about something known as a 'protest march' — his imagination will seize up and his writing will atrophy. *Snipe's Spinster* is a worthless and self-indulgent book, which might conceivably be helped by the occasional misprint but which can only be harmed by a blurb so foolish ("We feel this is an important book . . . for the possibilities it opens for the novel . . . Jeff Nuttall has given the novel a whole new voice to work with") that I am forced to doubt if there is anyone left at Calder and Boyars who can read or write. But, then, trendiness has always been a fickle companion.