

REVIEW:

Mona Van Duyn, *TO SEE, TO TAKE* (Atheneum, 1970)
94 pp., \$3.95

IT MAY BE PRESUMPTUOUS OR AT LEAST BESIDE THE POINT TO review a book which has already won the National Book Award, but because I had not read the book and because I so admired two other nominees, W. S. Merwin's *A Carrier of Ladders* and Mark Strand's *Darker*, I took on the task, to see why critics were so enamored with *To See, To Take*. Now, after having read the book several times, I can say it is a good book, and I greatly respect Mona Van Duyn's craftsmanship and sensibility, but it is not a book which moves me very much.

First of all, it is unabashedly academic: it relies on elevated diction, a strong sense of conventional rhythm and meter, the use of abstractions, and even mythical references. Miss Van Duyn has been influenced by Yeats (she mentions the poet and his work several times) and displays Yeats' ability to make rhyme disappear into music. Take the first ten lines of "Remedies, Maladies, Reasons:"

Her voice, that scooped me out of the games of others
to dump me in bed at seven for twelve years,

and welled me up to my feet if I sat on the ground,
liable to catch pneumonia, and each year penned

the feet, that wanted to walk bare, or hike
or wade, in the cramping, pygmy shoes of the chronic

invalid, intoned each time I raged or cried
the old story of how I'd nearly died

at six weeks from nursing a serum she'd taken
so I'd never be well. Each day all over again . . .

It is this musical quality that pervades the poems and which I admire. But this very poem, which goes on for five long pages, points up my major criticism of the book, that many of the poems are simply too long. And if I am drawn into her poems by their sense of music, I am not kept there by her subject matter or her poetic vision. Her images are just not striking enough, the perceptions just not original enough to sustain her poems for four or five pages. And it is not because there is a lack of intelligence behind the poems; it is rather that the intelligence so controls the poems that often the experiences in the poems are lost. Sometimes the poems are so "talky" they become absolutely tiresome.

My life—it was all I could have wanted, after I left home.
I held my spotted wand before the copulating world,
and it threw forth images ring-straked, speckled and grisled.
I believed in the power of words, both birthright and blessing.
I'd make a name for myself sooner or later,
and I could trust the men in my life to sit tight on household
 matters;
in some ways they are more domestic than women.

— "Outlandish Agon"

One can also detect a more immediate and less constructive influence on Miss Van Duyn's work, that of Howard Nemerov (who is also granted mention in the book). Often she will display a facile wit to her advantage, but just as often that wit reduces itself to the cheap joke or the occasional pun. She most obviously fails when she is uncomfortable with her subject matter, as in her poems which deal with the "current generation." One of the best examples of this fall from taste is "Billings and Coatings from 'The Berkeley Barb' (Want-Ads section)." Here is a random sample:

Gay guy needs, for a few conventional
dances and such, fem Lez to pose as date,
in return for which she can really have a ball
her butch friend at parties he'll give in private.

*How bright the scholars who use a previous schooling,
to get the further enlightenment they want!*

Well-rounded girl will do it hung from the ceiling
by ropes in exchange for a used copy of Kant.

There is little need to comment on such passages, except to say that it is interesting to note that even Miss Van Duyn's sense of rhythm fails her in these lines, and she displays the same kind of sensibility in passages of "Eros to Howard Nemerov" and "Leda Reconsidered."

There are many interesting moments in the book, but only one poem, "First Flight," strikes me as truly outstanding, because while it shares with the other long confessional poems an authentic and intelligent tone of voice, it also maintains a sense of particularity and visual impression that the other poems lack. The poem, four pages long, is too long to quote in its entirety, but the last part of the final section is strong enough to illustrate what I mean.

When I touch you I know what I am doing.
Nothing is inconsequential.
Gatsby is dead in his swimming pool.
Stupid children chart the wood with breadcrumbs.
I believe everything except
the smoothness of this diminishing.

I fall into your arms of towers and foliage.
At the little bump of heart on heart
you begin to tell me I couldn't have lived without you.
I look into your hard eyes
since I am home and all is forgiven,
but liar, love, I see you against the sky.

So *To See, To Take* may be a good book, certainly skillfully written, but finally it wins more of my respect than affection. I am tempted to say that much of the poetry here is a throwback to the classicism of the fifties, that it does not reflect what is going on now in contemporary American poetry, but I know that assumes an arrogance I am not willing to commit myself to on paper. So I will settle for saying that the book is too academic for my taste, and as intelligent and skillful as Miss Van Duyn is, she does not win me over. I cast my uncounted vote for Mark Strand's *Darker*.

— IRA SADOFF