



The Decree

VOLUME XVII, NUMBER 8

N.C. WESLEYAN COLLEGE, ROCKY MOUNT, N.C.

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 1, 1977

Roland Flint's poetry:

A preliminary consideration

This literary historian thinks the poem "Follow," printed elsewhere in this newspaper, tells us a lot about the sort of poet Roland Flint is. It's the first poem of *And Morning*, aside from "Skin," which occupies a special place before the pagination of the book even begins, and because of its place in the volume, it's natural that it serve as an introduction to the poet's central concerns, his way of dealing with them, and even his own sense of his place in the world of contemporary poets.

The subject of "Follow" is the biblical story of Christ's calling his disciples from their everyday tasks to follow Him. The poet seeks to imagine how the minds and hearts of these "ordinary working stiff" (as he calls them) can respond to such a call. The poem questions rather than celebrates the occasion, the key lines being

But how does a man whose movement,
day after day after day,
absolutely trusts the shape it fills
put everything down and walk away?

The importance of these lines is underlined by their use of traditional means for achieving heightened language; in a poem which does not make use of rhyme and meter they are written in a combination of meters too complicated to unravel here and they contain the only rhyme I have yet discovered in the poem. But the question they ask is the heart of the poem and at the heart of all Flint's poetry I have yet read. The poem itself is the answer to the question it poses. The shape it fills presents the reader with a palpable working stiff and makes us feel, first, the miraculous loveliness in his ordinary endeavor, and only secondly, the miracle of Christ's power in drawing him away from it.

I offer my own experience in reading the poem as evidence of this. It wasn't until my third reading that I managed to understand that the poem's subject was biblical. The figure of Christ is all but absent from the poem and the fisherman is at its center. My response during the first few readings was entirely to this figure a man who describes the settled shape of his life every time his hands make and snug a perfect knot.

And I still think that the poem means, essentially, to present us with this figure, to insist on the miraculous loveliness of our ordinary being.

But the poem also insists that we consider more conventional miracles, such as Christ's ability to draw such

men from the settled shape of their lives. It concludes by stating a preference for this sort of miracle over others, generally considered more

dramatic.
I'd pass up all the fancy stunting
with Lazarus and the lepers to see that one.

Here Flint is not just distinguishing between sorts of miracles to be found in the Bible, but between sorts of poems to be found in the

contemporary world. For some twenty years the most dominant strain of poetry in England and American has been the so-called "extremist" or "confessional" school of poets. It is these poets -- Robert Lowell, recently dead, is the most admired practitioner -- who have been received most enthusiastically by the critics. These poets seek to show us the realities of our world by presenting their own usually warped psyches as exemplary of the condition of man in the contemporary world. This tradition has produced some extraordinary poetry, notably from Lowell, John Berryman, and most sensationally from Sylvia Plath, a suicide at 32 in 1963.

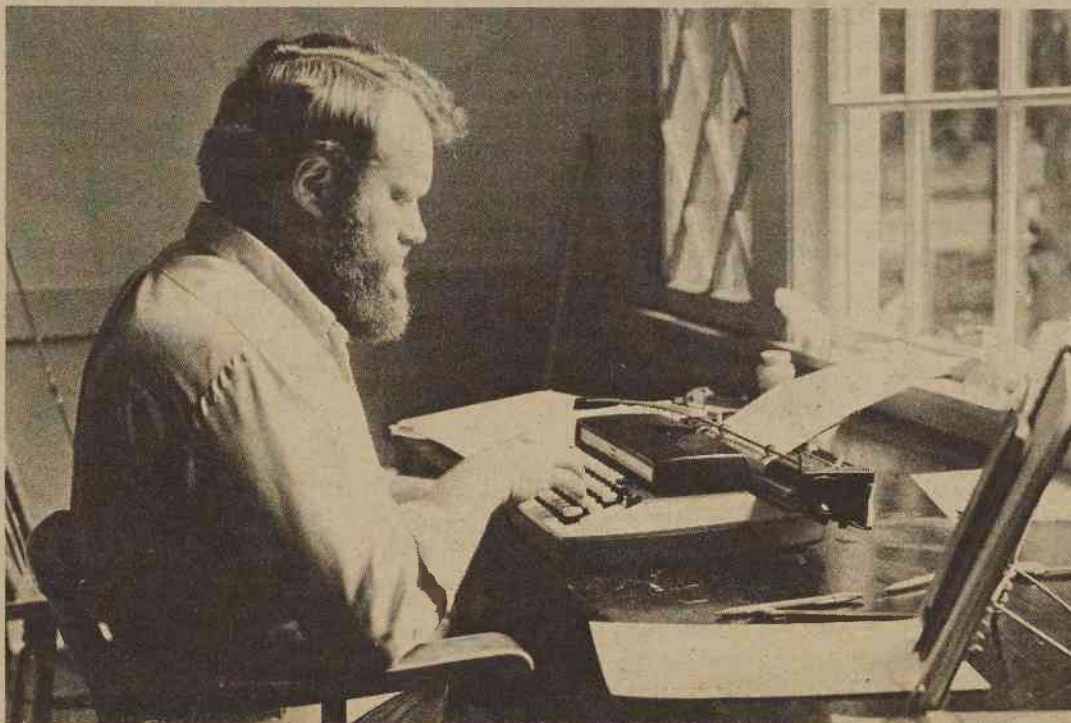
The last lines of "Follow" refer directly to her poetry. Plath is notorious particularly for two poems, written during the last months of her life, "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus," both of which are well described in the phrase "the fancy stunting-with Lazarus." Listen to part of "Lady Lazarus," a poem in which Plath examines her own attempts at suicide. She imagines herself a sideshow performer acting before a large crowd. "Dying is an art," she says, and it is one she has mastered. But, she continues

It's the theatrical
Comeback in broad day
To the same place, the same
face, the same brute
Amused shout:
"A miracle!"
That knocks me out.

This is "fancy stunting-with Lazarus" with a vengeance. Flint's poem "Follow" asserts its interest in a different sort of miracle than this. Let us listen to a bit more of Plath's poem.

There is a charge
For the eyeing of my scars,
there is a charge
For the hearing of my heart--
It really goes.
And there is a charge, a very
large charge,
For a word or a touch
Or a bit of blood
Or a piece of my hair or my
clothes.
For me, though its excellence
is evident, this is really scary
stuff; whether its charge is
electrical or financial it needs
opposing, and Flint's
"Follow" announces this
opposition. The poems which
follow carry out the opposition
by presenting us with or-
dinary things, even ordinary
madness ("His Good Time")
and ordinary suicide ("Dead
Friend"). And *Morning* thus
makes a valuable contribution
to the unsettled shape of
contemporary poetry. We
should be happy to have its
author with us.

by Leverett T. Smith, Jr.



The poet Flint

FOLLOW

Now here is this man mending
his nets
after a long day, his fingers
nicked, here and there, by
ropes and hooks,
pain like tomorrow in the
small of his back,
his feet blue with his name,
stinking of baits,
his mind on a pint and supper--
nothing else--
a man who describes the
settled shape
of his life every time his hands
make and snug a perfect knot.

I want to understand, if only
for the story,
how a man like this,
a man like my father in
harvest,
like Bunk Mac Vane in the
stench of lobstering,
or a teamster, a steelworker,
how an ordinary working stiff,
even a high tempered one,
could just be called away.

It's only in one account
he first brings in a netful--
in all the others he just calls,
they return the look or stare
and then
they 'straightaway' leave
their nets to follow.
That's all there is. You have to
figure
what was in that call, that
look.

(And I wouldn't try it on a
tired working man
unless I was God's son--
he'd kick your ass right off the
pier.)

If they had been vagrants,
poets or minstrels, I'd un-
derstand that,
men who would follow a dif-
ferent dog.

But how does a man whose
movement,
day after day after day,
absolutely trusts the shape it
fills
put everything down and walk
away?

I'd pass up all the fancy
stunting
with Lazarus and the lepers
to see that one.

Roland Flint

MEMENTO

When you make a coat of me
you'll need to lengthen the
sleeves,
my arms are short, the hands
already gone,
from falt to baize to nothing--
rubbed away,
you'll have to add the lace,
and pockets,
stitch some emblem on the
breast,
with a legend--anything
except death before dishonor
will do,
cut the legs off at the knees,
and put me on, take me off,
hang me up and say to anyone,
it's not a great coat (and it
may be)
but it's a good coat, it will do.
I got it from the poet Flint,
second hand but serviceable.
Try it on--it fits almost
anyone.
At first look you wouldn't see
the reds
so of course it's gray--they
were miners
in Wales, West Virginia, In-
diana,
farmers in North Dakota,
gray, a little dull.
But he said you'll find the red
blood coat
of the living man, I promise,
if you remember--and wear it
well.

Roland Flint