

A POET WITH A KEEN SENSE OF IRONY

By Eleanor Berry

It was the handsome clothbound edition on the shelves of the Oregon Poetry Collection in the State Library that first drew my attention to John E. Bellamy's *Selected Poems 1952-1982*. This slim, elegant volume turned out to have been compiled not by the poet himself but by his colleagues, on the occasion of his retirement from the Humanities Department of what was then Western Oregon State College.

The title of the first poem, "New Mexico in Retrospect," immediately aroused my interest as I had just returned from New Mexico myself. A single sentence extended over twelve lines, it displays this poet's keen sense of irony, noting how the "retina of the mind" transforms experience so that "piled-up ash heaps ... / Become the purple mountains' majesty," and desert cotton fields "Seem set amid magnolia and moss."

Other poems reflect wryly on people the poet knew in life or through his reading. These poems include harsh satire. One called "The Genteel" skewers its subject:

He celebrated patriotism, ignored war,
composed forest hymns for worshiping before
stately vegetables;
filling up the lulls
between the murmurings of the pines and the hemlocks
with pious shivers and tiny shocks.

While occasionally hard on others, this poet does not spare himself. He acknowledges that his particular poetic art is not exalted: "We must settle for analysis // Who settle under vision. Here, / Among the grounded, I will watch."

He watches carefully, and his poems register his observations—often, as in "Past Salem, Sublimity" and "Old Man on Ferry Street," of people, places, and situations in the Salem area. The first of those poems, set in what could be St. Boniface Catholic Church in Sublimity, evokes

a moment of “frozen time” in which the holy water in the font, the icons on the altar, and even the air are “cold and still,” a state that the speaker ultimately experiences as “Beatitude.” The poem set on “Ferry Street”—likely Willamette Ferry St. in Independence—conveys a wry amusement more typical of Bellamy, describing the old man of the title as “Humpty/ Dumpty / ... / nudging the / mower a- / round shrubs and borders.”

Virtually all the poems in the book display skilled craftsmanship, most in rhymed, metrical verse. They include a good many sonnets and villanelles as well as stanzaic poems in various rhyme patterns. But, especially for imagistic lyrics such as the two just quoted, Bellamy uses free verse with adeptly controlled rhythm.

The most memorable poems for me are a few that speak in a more personal voice and show a considerable knowledge of pain and capacity for empathy. Among the book’s sonnets is one called “The Power of Sympathy,” which begins,

An old, lone woman knows her loneliness best
From dusk to bedtime, when the necessary work
And what she has invented no longer serve
To shut it out. That time is loneliest.

The longest poem in the book, “To My Father,” is a narrative of Bellamy’s father’s life in all its particular deprivations, frustrations, and disappointments. By achieving understanding of that life and how it bred resentment and rage, the poet resolves the hatred that repeated beatings had led him to feel and is finally able to say, “Father, I am your loving son”