

## OCCASIONS OF GRACE

**Author:** Roger White

**Published by:** George Ronald, Oxford, 1992, 177 pages

The average reader of poetry is rarely conscious of the existence of the poet behind the poem. Poetry written by someone at the end of the twentieth century seems a contradiction in terms. The poet—the reader imagines—surely belongs to an earlier age when the writing of poetry was considered an occupation for an unworldly dreamer dwelling hermitlike among the mountains, declaiming esoteric verse where no one listens, and rhythm and rhyme get lost among the trees, the birds, and the clouds in the sky.

I have known Roger White for a number of years. Ours is indeed a relationship based upon the writing and reading of poetry. This is a rare occurrence in anyone's life, for poets lecturing to large audiences and reading their poetry aloud on formal occasions partake of a public event that lacks the intimacy of a private encounter. But when poet and reader meet within the four walls of a booklined room and poetry is read, as it should be, in the silence of mutual understanding, the human being behind the poem is revealed as a person of flesh and blood, not the ghostlike emanation of solitude, but as one who stands at the very center of contemporary life, chosen, as it were, to articulate what matters most in a doomed civilization.

Roger White, the poet behind these poems, seems at first sight a retiring, private person, soft-spoken, tolerant, and unwilling to raise his voice, however great the provocation might be. Whenever we met, he brought along a batch of poems, which I read with ever-increasing admiration and awe. I who had been teaching poetry for over half a century found myself for the first time in the presence of a poet who was hardly aware of the gift that nature had bestowed upon him. What struck me then and still strikes me today is the extraordinary range of his poetry, indeed encompassing the lyric, the dramatic, the narrative, side by side with the gently ironic, the hilarious, the grotesque, and the fantastic. Each of these poems tells a story, for Roger White is a born storyteller, and each poem should be spoken in an atmosphere of emotion recollected in tranquillity, in a voice hardly above a whisper, as if communicating some secret knowledge shared between poet and reader. It is a knowledge founded upon experience that may evoke feelings of tragic or comic implication conveying a sense of absurdity or horror when the reader reexperiences in his or her mind's eye what should perhaps have remained invisible and unknown. Indeed, in many of these poems the gift of knowledge is a heavy burden to carry, and readers, in their search for grace, may well despair at the accumulated horror of death by execution, the sacrifice of the innocent, the holocaust of the true believer, the appalling occasions of grace that some of these poems embody.

There is nothing abstract about the poems, for the stories they tell deal with

the human condition in our time, originating not in dreams of wishful thinking but told "in mercy or madness / emphatically reversing the injurious judgment . . ." (103). These words occur in the barely believable story of the French poet Robert Desnos who was not Jewish and who "read the palms of prisoners on their way to the gas chambers at Buchenwald, and predicted good fortune for them" (102). Roger White writes this poem (called "Fortune") moved as he was by this "human gesture," this "desperate benevolence," erecting, as it were, a monument to the French poet and "the unappraisable silver of tears / freshly minted by their innocent, bewildered eyes" (103).

Roger White is that strange phenomenon in our time, a poet of faith who does not condemn the faithless, who does not judge those who have lost their faith because they feel cheated by life and have given up all hope. His poems express an understandable skepticism regarding human history, knowing as he does that "there are hazards all about us" (61) and that even if he could testify to the innocence of the victims, it would be no more than "grubbing and scrabbling with torn fingers / for the crystal words / which, emerged into daylight, / crumble to powder . . . / or fall thudding upon the page . . ." (163-64). Readers who can read between the lines will find here a poet who is forever struggling with words to give expression to the unimaginable and unspeakable, conscious as White is of the inadequacy of language to articulate, in compassion and love, those occasions of *gracé*. Now that these poems appear in print, the readers may—even if only from afar—share in these moments of recollection when the poet gently admonishes them to give life, "that notorious old cheat" (80), a chance in spite of our desperate gamble with what seems forever to elude us—an experience of undiluted happiness. For, ultimately, these occasions of grace are moments of spiritual fulfillment and self-realization.

ALEX ARONSON