

## SCAFFOLDING

By Jane Cooper

In 1974, when I was a student at City College, I told Adrienne Rich that I thought of her as my "literary mother," to which she responded that she had felt that way about Simone De Beauvoir. At that moment, I perceived something even stronger than the thickening fabric of the women's liberation movement: a feminist literary tradition. Now, a generation later, reading Jane Cooper's *Scaffolding*, I am reminded of the roots and continuity of this tradition

*Scaffolding* is divided into seven sections, six of which are selections of poetry--some published, some "reclaimed"--written from 1947 through 1983. The second section, a long, personally and historically reflective essay, probes the political and esthetic context within with Jane Cooper--as many women poets at mid-century--struggled toward authenticity and integrity. When I first scanned the contents page, I wondered why the essay, titled "Nothing Has Been Used in the Manufacture of This Poetry That Could Have Been Used in the Manufacture of Bread (1974) was placed out of chronological sequence between the poems of part 1 (1947-1951) and part 3 (1954-1965). It became clear, after first reading the poetry, then returning to the prose of Part 2, that the essay literally re-replaces the years of silence and self-denial in this poet's writing life. Together with Cooper's "Forward" and notes to the poems, it adds dimension and depth to a selected arrangement of poems that in and of themselves are a testament to artistic excellence.

How can a woman poet (whose identity is split into conflicting "woman" and "poet") articulate--perhaps transform--experience? Jane Cooper's early studies in astronomy and physics in-form her thinking in the early poems (1947-1951): a boy is born "head first, face down," into the violence of war and confining, patriarchal rationality of "Mercator's World," out of a "concrete womb with its round concrete walls..." "Bitten by the tides of knowledge" the poet sees herself "imprisoned in the mirror," the "lady he wrote the sonnets to." While "Thinking of Kepler," who "gave himself over to his power" and "caged the sky," she raises the questions that will redirect her journey over the next 30 years:

Where is the simple myth we used to have...  
That infinitesimal act, creation  
Which shocks two cells so that they melt and solve  
A riddle of light and all our darkness tears  
With meanings like struck water round a stone?  
Is it all gone? Are the meanings gone?

It became all but impossible to write between 1951 and 1954; The essay of Part 2 tells us why. It takes its title from a post war Paris department store window sign, "Nothing has Been Used in The Manufacture of This Furniture That Could Have Been Used in the Manufacture of Bread," substituting "poetry" for "furniture." This essay, generically compatible to Adrienne Rich's "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Revision, Tillie Olson's *Silences*, even Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, is a series of meditative explorations on why she wrote what she wrote when she wrote; why she did not; while unravelling often startling truths about the nature of a woman artist's life and work: her (non-participatory) role in World War II, believing that she was "writing a book of war poems from a civilian's, a woman's, point of view;" her sense of guilt, especially since she

found the post-war "desolation...the bombed out landscape...virtually beautiful."

It would become important to understand this aesthetic attraction even as she found herself "climbing the scaffolding of some new postwar housing because I was excited about architecture." The architecture of Self; of poetry; the furniture of sensibility would have to be rebuilt and replaced. What she had believed, for example, to be a woman's indirect treatment of war in her poems, she later understood as a metaphoric rendering of the condition of love, the "rapid wearing away of assumptions about what a love relationship should and can be between two people." The domestic realities of marriage and children may not, moreover, be the great inhibitor to our creativity; the tension may spring from an oscillating push-pull longing for/distrust of a patriarchally determined sexuality and lifestyle and their interference in our work.

We also read of her study at Oxford and Princeton; the workshops with John Berryman, and her bewilderment in "the company of poets," one of whom told her that "to be a woman poet was 'a contradiction in terms'"; teaching at Sarah Lawrence; and finally, the New York City walk-up, "A Room of My Own, with Windows," in which she kept the journal that would give rise to a changed consciousness. The experiences and perceptions are rendered not as autobiography, but rather as threads of a tapestry which are pulled, tugged, examined, and re-stitched to form a prose piece that documents survival strategies of a women artist at mid-century. The journal "speaks of the necessity for changing myself, for finding a new style both of being and writing, to go with the changed realities I now perceived...it suggests that a new imagery must be found, less like a crustacean's shell. But to change one's images is like trying to revolutionize one's dreams. It can't be done overnight."

From the silence of those years emerged that new imagery, rendered in looser forms, along with the central metaphor of "scaffolding," the place and method by which the woman poet can re-build imagination:

All these dreams, this obsession with bare boards:  
scaffolding, with only a few objects  
in an ecstasy of space...How to begin?

Hers becomes a poetics of space: in its most abstract -- "how strangely space is playing the part

of time;" and concrete--the body "cries out...from its secret cave...stiff and resistant/clenched

around empty space." From the darker privacy, humanity and poetry: "Let compassion breathe in and out of you/filling you and/singing." And later, in "Flute Song,"

...Space  
was always my demon, the unreachable.  
From a black hole, a waver  
flute song, readable.

We learn that while "toiling on houses," or new forms authentic to women poets, we must come to terms with individual isolation, and old torn identities. She is "alone in a vast room/where

a vain woman once slept...and still sleeps...trapped in my body," while "waiting...for some insight, some musical phrase."

The volume moves toward recognition and acceptance of the tenuous balance between isolation and community. Objects and memories--"souvenirs" and inherited influences--must be simultaneously assimilated and re-imagined: "So why hang onto a particular postcard...?"

Houses, houses, we lodge in such husks!  
inhabit such promises, seeking the unborn  
in a worn-out photograph, hoping to break free  
even of our violent and faithful lives.

By the final section of poems (1975-1983), she becomes "the poet with her torch of words in exile," "not at the source yet," but "finding her way home." By fifty years of age, she can praise her work: with both "earth" and "stone" she has "built a few unexpected bridges." The metaphor of scaffolding changes to "bridges," and finally to "threads," as if it is not the finished form that is critical, but the connections that continue to shape our identities and our lives.

To wit: in the closing poem, "Threads: Rosa Luxemburg from Prison" the poet speaks in the voice a woman who spent most of World War I as a political prisoner in German prisons. Based on Luxemburg's letters to her friend, Sophie Liebknecht, the poem exudes compassion, hope, and humanity by the juxtaposition of natural imagery against a tapestry of violence and isolation. Dualism is transformed to multiplicity issued from a central core, and the will to write prevails:

Thus passing out of my cell in all directions  
are fine threads connecting me  
with thousands of birds and beasts  
    You too, Sonitchka, are one of this urgent  
    company  
    to which my whole self throbs, responsive  
Write soon.

My young student-poets at Nassau Community College readily acknowledge their sense of isolation in a violent world, yet the young women often insist they feel no "split" between "woman" and "poet." I say this may be the unconscious beast of denial; but if it is true, it is the result of poetic foremothers like Jane Cooper who have re-imagined a context within which women artists can create and connect from places of integrity and faith. It is a book we all should read, and read again.

Pat Falk