

by Jon Silkin

Social Darwinian optimism assesses a poet in terms of his ‘advance’ or ‘development’—thus the conventional blurb’s claim that Seamus Heaney’s ‘power is, if anything, stronger than before’. The immodesty of Faber’s claim might obscure one’s sense that something more subtle, and less inevitably even, is taking place in Heaney’s third book.¹ The book shows, for instance, the elements in his work as he assimilates himself into a variety of forms and tones of voice, some of which are modish, others achieved deftly but with creditable hesitation. In *Death of a Naturalist*, the title poem indicated Heaney’s capacity to formulate that revulsion which seems to be a fairly basic constituent of man’s relation to nature; (of the ‘gross-bellied frogs’).

The slap and plop were obscene threats. Some sat
Poised like mud grenades, their blunt heads farting.
I sickened, turned, and ran. The great slime kings
Were gathered there for vengeance

And in ‘Digging’, he articulated the conscious gap between his ancestors’ rootedness in the soil (by virtue of their working it) and his gradual but perceptible withdrawing from this into the role of fascinated observer (or naturalist):

But I’ve no spade to follow men like them.
Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests.
I’ll dig with it.

Thus in his second book *Door into the Dark*, ‘The Outlaw’ is in succession to ‘Death of a Naturalist’ (the poem) in that it avers a continuing relationship with rural life:

The door, unbolted, whacked back against the wall.
The illegal sire fumbled from his stall

Unhurried as an old steam engine shunting.

‘Whacked back’ is not merely descriptive; it asserts the forthrightness as well as the expressiveness of rural speech, but its observation is re-created in the poem in such a way as to indicate a gap between Heaney’s speech and that of his rural background. Again, ‘Requiem for the Croppies’ represents a similar consciousness to that of ‘For

¹*Wintering Out*, by Seamus Heaney. Faber, London, 1972. 80 pp. £1.

the Commander of the “Eliza”’ (*Death of a Naturalist*), but in the later poem the tone is less arch, less ironically polite and formal, and although it is more directly bitter, the operating restraint lets through a subtler more intimate sense of the deaths of Irishmen (at British hands). These are mourned as members of a community in such a way as to incorporate that bitterness into a sense of elegizing loss:

The hillside blushed, soaked in our broken wave.
They buried us without shroud or coffin
And in August the barley grew up out of the grave.

Thus the Irish element in Heaney’s work (without considering his use of Irish words) uses the two facets of self-conscious examination and assumed communal sanity. In *Wintering Out* the quite forthright tone of the earlier poems is often considerably scaled down, although it was evident, even in the first book, that a desire for smoothness, concision, and deftness, was one he could follow, were he to wish to. Poems that inter-relate places names and Gaelic word-sounds (‘Anahorish’, ‘Toome’, ‘Broagh’) to produce a quiet but self-defining ‘Irish Ireland’, represent Heaney’s saddened, cautious transmission of a political attachment to his ‘land’; his positive expression of this comes through his concern with the partly submerging Gaelic language. Even so, comparison of these three poems with ‘Requiem for the Croppies’ will show that for the gains in subtle interfusion and metaphysical insight, there is a corresponding loss of directness and pained shock.

‘Gifts of Rain’, however, indicates Heaney’s capacity to develop his strengths by the interfusing of elements, found in his earlier work, and which have combined in a powerfully suggestive way. ‘Gifts’ is ambiguous in that the rain as it is described in the poem floods the land. A man crossing a sunken field causes

a flower of mud-
water blooms up to his reflection

like a cut swaying
its red spores through a basin.

Apart from the ellipsis of ‘through’, there is not merely accuracy in these lines, but a fusing of the traditional concerns of the land with the modern analytic image, held finally together by ‘spores’, and which occurs in the contrasted perception of the *domestic* water safely contained by the wash-basin. The perceptions are revealed through images which fuse together two different consciousnesses, without strain or deftness. Here one notes the real advance in Heaney’s work. In the fourth section of this poem the river Moyola is said to be ‘bedding the locale’ and also that it rises

breathing its mists
 through vowels and history.
 A swollen river
 a mating call of sound
 rises to pleasure me, Dives,
 hoarder of common ground.

Once more, the pointing to a constituent of the area, through the Gaelic name, shows Heaney's commitment to his land—both he and the river are, syntactically, 'Dives', the proverbially rich man, who here loves and therefore 'hoards the land' he is enriched by.

'Summer Home' (in the second part of the book) represents Heaney in his more modernist role, but in that aspect where deftness is minimal, and the rhythms easily and naturally exploratory. Moreover, he is able, without naivety, to achieve a fresh tone while encompassing religious imagery:

These frank and falling blooms
 soon taint to a sweet chrism.
 Attend. Anoint the wound.

and

as you bend in the shower
 water lives down the tilting stoups of your breasts.

The look is not backwards. Love is not apparently summated in religion—but rather, religion used for its sacramental nature as it defines for Heaney the essential quality of his response to and value of the woman.

Such a use of the traditionally sacred, learned response is also evidenced in 'A Winter's Tale'. The runaway (suicidal?) daughter learns to express love among unmalicious neighbours; she is seen—

She stirred as from a winter
 Sleep. Smiled. Uncradled her breasts.

'Uncradled' uses the traditional feeling that bathes the child in its care 'cradle'—but re-associates the word, and, altering its form to 'uncradled', re-directs the traditional, emotive energy. We get an image of the girl, vulnerable, sensual, maternal, lifting out her breasts as if to feed a child who may or may not now exist (the poem is unexplicit).

There is a moment in Russian Formalist criticism (and its corresponding poetic practice) when an element of modernism is defined as² "making it strange" (*ostranenie*) and the device of impeded form. . . "the duration of perception". From this it is deduced that the deforming and stretching out of the image (deformation and pro-

²'The Theory of Formal Method', by Boris M. Ejxenbaum, in *Readings in Russian Poetics*, MIT, 1971, p. 13.

longation) is a crucially expressive factor in modern verse. Heaney's problem (one that brings into consideration the nature of his strength) is to lose as little of his inherited traditional means, through which he articulates his connexion with his society and its geography while, at the same time, to deform his reality in order to emphasize and prolong crucial apprehensions of it. Heaney's dangers seem to lie in his being able to fuse these elements over-deftly, doing justice to neither. At his best, and he is a good poet, the problem seems minimal in that more complex apprehensions—concerning love and social belonging, for instance—emerge. There is a critical difference between deftness and a complex naturalness.

March books from SCM Press

John A T Robinson

The Human Face of God

In his most substantial book to date, appearing ten years after the publication of *Honest to God*, Dr Robinson discusses these questions: how do we speak today of the humanity and divinity of Christ, or his historicity, his sinlessness, his uniqueness, his finality, his atoning work? £2.50

James Barr

The Bible in the Modern World

Fundamentalism is undergoing a new lease of life at a time when other Christians are almost prepared to write off the Bible. Biblical criticism abounds, but little notice is taken of it. Thought about the authority of the Bible is in a great muddle. Where do we go from here? £2.50