

Too Much Confectionery?

Seamus Heaney, *Electric Light*. Faber and Faber, STG£14.99
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A book of epiphanies, eclogues and elegies *Electric Light* reaffirms—even flaunts—Seamus Heaney’s deepest poetic structures. Heaney also continues to affirm poetry itself on every possible occasion. Perhaps his will-to-affirm, desire to “credit marvels”, sometimes blurs (for poet and reader alike) the line between success and excess. These poems exude a brooding mellow fruitfulness that turns a little overripe when the images or adjectives pile up—“Lupin spires,otics of the future./ Lip-brush of the blue and earth’s deep purchase”, “the shamrock/ With its twining, binding, creepery, tough, thin roots”. A sequence called “Sonnets from Hellas” begins: “It was opulence and amen on the mountain road”, and the line catches a characteristic flavour. Since (apart from Robert Potts in the *Guardian*, Adam Newey in the *New Statesman*) *Electric Light* has been rather uncritically reviewed, I want to consider what its opulence implies about Heaney’s current artistic direction. To quote Philip Larkin, has he a taste for “Too much confectionery, too rich”? Are there enough hard centres?

Tennyson (a poet I like) keeps coming to mind. Yet Heaney’s gloss on *Electric Light*, in the *Poetry Book Society Bulletin*, confirms the indelibly Wordsworthian shape of memory in his poetry: “incidents from childhood and the recent past swim up into memory: moments that were radiant or distressful at the time come back in the light of a more distanced and more informed consciousness”. Echoing his 1978 lecture “The Makings of a Music”, Heaney explains how emotion recollected in tranquillity works as artistic process: “in the writing of any poem, there’s usually a line being cast from the circumference of your whole understanding towards intuitions and images down there in the

memory pool". Epiphanic poems like "Nights of '57" crystallise from this process:

It wasn't asphodel but mown grass
 We practised on each night after night prayers
 When we lapped the college front lawn in bare feet,

Heel-bone and heart-thud, open-mouthed for summer.
 The older I get, the quicker and the closer
 I hear those labouring breaths and feel the coolth.

Such vivid recalls seek to reconcile past and present by bringing the past tangibly back *as poetry*. "The Gaeltacht", a memory of youthful friendship (one friend being dead), ends with the wish that "this sonnet... Could be the wildtrack of our gabble across the sea". Imprinted by ageing, nostalgia and loss, the quoted poems work because they fail to complete the would-be reconciling circle. They violate what elsewhere may become over-determined: a loop-tape of Heaney's imagination. In "The Border Campaign", for instance, the speaker says: "All that was written/ And to come I was a part of then". A complementary trope, since *Seeing Things*, is the notion of being "entered" by an experience: "the utter mountain mirrored in the lake/ Entered us like a wedge knocked sweetly home/ Into core timber" ("Ballynahinch Lake"). The Heaney-speaker, the poet-fisher in the memory pool, alternates between being at the core and at the circumference of a poem's cognitive field: between being part of everything and everything being part of him. At its most self-conscious, this structural pattern potentially engrosses too much within the poet's subjectivity.

The over-insistence in Heaney's weaker poems—where the word "all" has much to do—derives from a mis-match between the lyric "I" and the sensory images so intensely apprehended. This can inflate either the "I" or the image: to say of lupins "They stood. And stood for something", and that "none of this passed our understanding", is to state what should be implied and perhaps to neglect what could be. Neither quidditas (standing) nor self-ratifying solipsism (understanding) is quite enough—the reader has to be brought into the loop. Heaney strains, as throughout *Seeing Things*, to assert his aesthetic as a metaphysic. But he is, of course, a highly resourceful poet, alert

to the possible exhaustion of old seams. Hence several interesting experiments with structure and genre. He says of a few poems written in a looser-wristed, more discursive style: "Different sections of the poems represent the different casts made. The pleasure of doing it that way was in following each new impulse, finding and trusting approaches that allowed both oneself and the subject to stretch their wings."

This method works best in "The Loose Box" which moves from a long-remembered stable, to the stable of the Nativity, to an image of Michael Collins as a boy throwing himself into hay and "com[ing] unscathed/Through a dazzle of pollen scarves to breathe the air". Another marvellous passage evokes a disappointing Christmas set-piece with its "out-of-scale,/ Too crockery, kneeling cow". "Crockery" as adjective is brilliant. Yet these sections might cross-fertilise more tellingly if there were less "talk about the loose box" (to quote the poem's refrain). Some lines are just literary or verbal free-association: "Stable child, grown stabler when I read/ In adolescence Thomas *dolens* Hardy". Others paraphrase more concrete effects in earlier poems: "Sandy, glarry,/ Mossy, heavy, cold, the actual soil/ Almost doesn't matter; the main thing is/ An inner restitution".

Heaney's *PBSB* commentary may provide a key to what makes me uneasy about aspects of this approach and this book. It suggests that he has completed a trajectory from an aesthetic that stresses the poem—or poem and poet equally as in "The Forge"—to one that stresses the poet. In both his poetry and prose he now favours the "impulse of writing" over its object. His commentary does indeed refer to accumulated "knowledge and understanding", "throwing a shape" to "match and make sense of your excitement". But excitement seems primary, not co-terminous with craft, while metaphors of fishing (casting a line) clash with metaphors of sculpture or pottery (throwing a shape). And, indeed, "The Loose Box", like "Lupins", indicates that "understanding" is a word to which Heaney attaches a Romantic mystique: "pacing it in words that make you feel/ You've found your feet in what 'surefooted' means/ And in the ground of your own understanding". It is sometimes as if Heaney's poems are distracted by the need to assure their author of his inspiration.

All poetry talks about poetry. And to call Heaney a Romantic, a believer in inspiration, will hardly amaze anybody.

But his affirmations of the poet's special status—*being* a poet, poetic *vision*—reach a new pitch in this collection. They also merge into literary travelogue: “Known World” is based on a diary of the Struga Poetry Festival in 1978, and the “Sonnets from Hellas” find it difficult to forget Parnassus. In “Pylos”, for instance, the speaker's self-as-poet overwhelms the poem's occasion. It subsumes Apollo's lyre, Homer, Homeric characters and Homer's translator:

I woke to the world there like Telemachos,
 Young again in the whitewashed light of morning
 That flashed on the ceiling like an early warning
 From myself to be more myself in the mast-bending
 Marine breeze, to key the understanding
 To that image of the bow strung as a lyre
 Robert Fitzgerald spoke of: Harvard Nestor,
 Sponsor and host, translator of all Homer,
 His wasted face in profile, ceiling-staring,
 As he schooled me in the course...

Electric Light ends with a group of elegies which are mainly elegies for poets: Hughes, Brodsky, the Scottish quartet MacCaig, Crichton Smith, MacLean and Mackay Brown. It is, of course, axiomatic that any elegy for a poet (“Lycidas”, “Adonais”) involves both mythology and self-elegy. In doing so, however, it simultaneously invokes the collective spirit of poetry. At their best, Heaney's elegies render personal loss and poetry's losses as poignantly as an effect he memorably attributes to Crichton Smith: “Iain's poem/ Where sorrow just sits and rocks”. Yet he is also tempted to over-mythologise so that the dead poets remain in the realm of the poetic. “Would They Had Stayed” (my favourite among these poems) only just gets away with figuring the Scottish poets as a set of stags. Hughes as King Hrethel from *Beowulf* is certainly excessive. And to commemorate Brodsky in a pastiche of Auden's elegy for Yeats is asking for trouble.

Heaney, calls *Electric Light* full of “the names of real people”. If I have suggested that “real people” and phenomena tend to be over-written by the poet's consciousness, I also recognise that masking is the name of the lyric game, and do not look for self-abnegating documentary. This, to judge from a laboured memoir of his school-chums acting in Shakespeare, is not Heaney's

forte anyway: "So will it be/ Ariel or the real name, the already/ Featly, sweetly tuneful Philip Coulter?" As Larkin says, novels are about other people, (lyric) poems are about yourself. In this review I have not questioned Heaney's entire aesthetic demeanour but what happens when he does not bring off the trick he has so often so wonderfully managed: the trick of turning himself inside out. Paradoxically, it is his most "artificial" poems—three eclogues—that open out most to the world by explicitly going inside the poet's head, by assuming the voice of *vates*. Here, too, "the erotics of the future" (rather than the past) are most persuasively conjured into the present. Heaney's version of Virgil's "Golden Age" eclogue captures history's momentum in its rhythm as well as images: "Your pram awaits in the corner./ Cows are let out. They're sluicing the milk-house floor".

The eclogues also sustain their length better than some of Heaney's impulse-flows. A poem called "The Fragment", seemingly about a failed poet, may be relevant. It ends:

"Since when," he asked,
"Are the first line and last line of any poem
Where the poem begins and ends?"

Of course, this is true in two senses: Valéry's sense, and in signifying a poem's life between its multiple origins and multiple audiences. But the reflexive counter-truth is Donne's "seal that makes it current". What makes a poem current is the distinctive form that issues from the entangling of different casts. And distinctive form is also the distinction between writing poems and writing "poetry". A sequence called "Ten Glosses" displays Heaney's excellence as a writer of short poems:

Overheard at a party, like wet snow
That slumps down off a roof, the unexpected,
Softly powerful name of Wilfred Owen.
Mud in your eye. Artillery in heaven.

Here the poet's stylus, a trifle fluffy elsewhere, is diamond-sharp. All the poem's elements are "unexpected". Nor is this an inbred poem about poetry but a powerful distillation of poetry's power.