

GHOST WRITING



Justin Quinn

JAMES LASDUN, *The Revenant*, Cape, stg £7.00

1995 must have been the year of the ghost. Two ghost trains from Frank Ormsby and Sean O'Brien, an orchid from Michael Longley, and then a revenant from James Lasdun. For apart from simply meaning a person who returns somewhere, a revenant is a ghost, once who returns to the place where it lived for a few years, or maybe to where it came to a grisly end. This kind of revenant is disconnected from the life that continues in that place. It floats through observing things, people, colours. It has no responsibilities—it doesn't have to water the flowers, vote, look after its tax returns, because it knows that it is no longer truly a part of things. All that kind of business is for the people who live there. It might cast its ironic gaze on those who are beleaguered with a desire to achieve something such as raising a family or pursuing a career. The revenant sees the vanity of their striving since it knows precisely how it will end. The revenant will not get upset because it will not get involved: that is both its advantage and its handicap.

The title poem of James Lasdun's book has him returning to visit England from America, where, the inside back cover tells us, he now lives and works:

Jetlag, a jumpcut dawn, distempered
Daze of brickdust and rosedust,
Ache of memory, insomniac mumble of June [...]

you stand in the exfoliated green of your own past,
Between the pond and the bench where the blind men sat;
Chestnuts ploughing the light—domed emerald rubble—
And a rain of birdsong gibbering like a language
You no longer speak or understand.

This sense of detachment pervades the book, as Lasdun's ghost floats through Italy, New York, Rome, Mexico, old love affairs, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*; it enhances his powers of observation—Lasdun's details glitter with exactitude ("Jetlag, a jumpcut dawn [...])"—and imbues *The*

Revenant with a wry, enervated air. The persona of the poems is louche, ironic, elegant, and will not be ruffled even by the spectre of Berlusconi's Forza Italia (in retrospect, a wise judgment). The ghost engages our sympathies even while refusing to get itself involved in the word at hand.

Problems arise when Lasdun tries to combine his dexterity handling brilliant particulars with larger abstractions. "Monday Morning, Penn Stations" in this respect is very unconvincing. The poem starts with the poet in the transit room of the station and by the second stanza he's on the train as it pulls out into the industrial landscape. So far, fine. But then it lurches from these particulars (he even tells us about the panhandler's sores at the station) to the high rhetorical tone of the following:

Swollen planet, bloated ball,
Is it for this the mighty fall?

That the one inalienable right
Be the pursuit of appetite [...]
Hurling across the plains
A million bilious fast-food chains [...]

As a whole the collection is insubstantial (his lengthy version of the story of Erysichthon, while connecting with some of the themes in the preceding poems, doesn't seem balanced by the other, mostly shorter pieces). Lasdun's editor might have asked him to wait another two years. But then again there are some wonderful individual poems here whose pattern, on one reading, was branded on my mind for weeks after, for instance, "Plague Years", "Interstate", "Bag Slashers at the Terminal Terrestre" and "The Calling of the Apostle Matthew". It is moments like these that confirm Lasdun as a very gifted poet indeed.

DIGESTIBLES



David Wheatley

MARK STRAND, Selected Poems, *Carcenet*, stg. £9.95

This book is long overdue. Why some American poets and not others get signed up by British publishers has always been a murky question, but Mark Strand's unavailability on this side of the Atlantic has been a major irritant for years. This selection draws on seven books, from *Sleeping With One Eye Open* (1964) to *Dark Harbour* (1993), and reveals a distinctive voice producing work with few parallels in Irish or British writing today. Edward Hopper is a figure frequently invoked in discussions of Strand's poetry, and Strand shares with the painter an ability to create a naturalistic, narrative surface underpinned with a sense of detachment and mystery also reminiscent of di Chirico (on whom he has written). He characteristically produces complex effects from simple means, as in a fine short lyric like "The Dress":

But if you step out of your dress and move into the shade,
the mole will find you, so will the owl, and so will the poem,
and you will fall into another darkness, one you will find
yourself making and remaking until it is perfect.

Despite Donald Davie's best efforts, the phrase "poetic diction", I think, is still more commonly used as a term of abuse than of praise; but if there is one area in which Strand can truly be said to excel, it is his diction, which is endlessly supple and adaptable. He handles large philosophical abstractions as naturally as he does mailing a pair of pyjamas or making love to his wife, avoiding portentousness and bathos alike. Poems like the "The Story of Our Lives", whose Mallarmean characters "are the book" that they read "and ... nothing else", and "Elegy for my Father" with its spare, pained phrasing, sit side by side with Wordsworthian narratives like "A Morning" and the remarkable "Shooting Whales", with no sense of jarring imbalance. He moves unfussily from the experiential to the self-referential and back again, as on a convenient Jacob's ladder, able to be colloquial or formal as the occasion demands. Like many another philosophical poet,

Strand also has a rich vein of humour, tending towards the drily macabre, as in "The Way It Is" or "The Accident", where he shows himself both an inheritor from Stevens (the Stevens of "Cortege for Rosenbloom") and a distinguished contemporary of Ashbery (the Ashbery of "Daffy Duck in Hollywood"). He sustains both comparisons lightly.

Strand's style seems to be acquiring added breadth in recent years, to judge from *The Continuous Life* (1990) and *Dark Harbour* (1993). The lines have been getting longer, the syntax more adventurous (cf. the stately cadences of "Orpheus Alone"), the tone ever more elegiac:

When the weight of the past leans against nothing, and the sky

Is no more than remembered light, and the stories of cirrus
And cumulus come to a close, and all the birds are suspended in
flight,

Not every man know what is waiting for him, or what he shall sing
When the ship he is on slips into darkness, there at the end. ("The
End")

The final sequence *Dark Harbour* is especially rewarding, its regrettable incompleteness leading me to my only gripe. One of Strand's better-known pieces is "Eating Poetry", and at a slim hundred and four pages to represent over thirty years of work, one has to wonder whether his English publishers, unable to believe their luck, succumbed to temptation and ate the seventy or eighty more pages this book should contain. The lessons this fine American poet has to teach us are too many and too urgent for his work not to be available in greater abundance than this. More, please.