

The Book of Disclosures

George Szirtes, *An English Apocalypse*. Bloodaxe, £8.95 (pbk)

In the preface to *An English Apocalypse*, George Szirtes steers us towards the pastoral. Trained in the visual arts, this poet is regularly praised for his painterly style—canvas strokes, the odd detail, coloured wash. His poems are often short, generally descriptive, lucid, and unpretentious. In this, his latest collection, Szirtes makes direct reference to certain forebears in the visual arts: George Stubbs, Birkett-Foster, Hogarth. The precision of Stubbs is lacking here, but he gets a nod in the deft portraits of horses. Otherwise the poetry veers comfortably from the fanciful, forgettable pastel pastorals of Birkett-Foster to the undersweep of sinister foreboding of a Hogarth sketch.

But to place Szirtes' poetry within this essentially English tradition would be an error, in part because there is none of the luxurious country domesticity so essential to the English pastoral. Nor does Szirtes mention Constable or Turner, both of whom would otherwise appear relevant to this collection's plush landscapes and turbulent seas. Instead, he resides in what he calls the "haunted and sometimes bloody ghostscape" of James Fenton and Peter Reading. He is a late arrival.

And, more importantly, the premise of much of the book is precisely the foreignness of the writer. Specifically, his Hungarian origin provides the distance with which to critique and observe modern England. The poet is quietly outraged at the England he sees. At tabloid culture. At having to be "servant to that commonplace tribe" in "Tinseltown". At a drunken yob in "Offence" ("He's shit. Scum"). At the racist gang who beat up his brother—satisfaction at their subsequent failed lives, ultimately dismissal of "the whole island race". Szirtes, we are constantly reminded, is an outsider. There is little sympathy for, or faith in, the English in particular or humanity in general. Rather the poems are gently misanthropic.

I first came across George Szirtes in Budapest in 1994, when I picked up a copy of the nineteenth-century classic, Imre Madách's *The Tragedy of Man*. Around the same time I was asked to review *The Blood of the Walsungs* by the late Ottó Orbán. The two works, irreducibly dissimilar in style and era, were both translated by Szirtes. The first is a self-conscious attempt at national epic, a Faustian canter through history, imbued with technological pessimism and a Herder-like adherence to race science. Reading the English edition is remarkable—the fluid intelligence of the translated dialogue appears to struggle (heroically) with the drama's stodgy raw material. But if Szirtes buried Madách, albeit gracefully, the poems of Ottó Orbán fully deserve and withstand the powerful spotlight Szirtes shines on them. These are sharp, poignant observations, etched in quick strokes with an evocative historical tone, rendered in sharp, poignant English.

That was a decade after Szirtes himself had returned to Hungary, where he apparently set himself the formidable task of internationalising its national literature. Hungary is saturated in poetry: the roll-call of the great is long and domestically illustrious. Largely insulated from other traditions by its comparatively arcane language, the Hungarian poetic tradition is idiosyncratic, highly self-referential and often opaque to the outsider. Poetry publication thrives as do poetry readings: commendably democratic events where the next generation mixes freely with (and alludes liberally to) the incumbents. Despite this, only a handful of Hungarian poets exist in good English translation, fewer by decent publishing houses, and of those virtually none have credible impact abroad. In the past seventeen years, Szirtes has arguably done more than any other individual (alongside Bloodaxe's Neil Astley, publisher of this volume) to rectify this, producing solid translations of a broad spectrum of the Hungarian canon.

In return, perhaps, Hungary is present in the bones of this volume, in its strict forms and fascination with rhyme, especially internal, in its understated but pervasive sense of playful absurdity (Sándor Weöres, Dezső Tandori, Lajos Parti Nagy), and its undertow of pessimism about all human endeavour (János Pilinszky, Agnès Nemes Nagy, György Petri). Just as a life lived in England informs the Hungary-centred poetry of his collection, *The Budapest File* (2000), so a life not lived in Hungary is an unspoken counterpoint to the landscapes of *An English Apocalypse*.

The sea (compare Hungary's puszta), the vast skies (Hungary's Carpathian basin vista is more modest). The curiosities of privacy ("call it diffidence, call it reserve") and courtesy. Perhaps most of all the calm progress of English history, which, however eventful, appears placid beside the unstable stream of discontinuities and reversals that is Hungary's modern past.

And Hungary is also present in the diction: something non-English underlying the syntax and tone. In his preface to *The Budapest File*, Szirtes admits to his language having "an air of the synthetic". This is a frank disclosure and a curious formulation. "There is nothing honest that can be done to 'mend' this, and poetry is, in the end, a matter of honesty". Writers like him—"migrants, floaters, drifters and shadows"—can never, he says, adopt the culturally assured tone of a Seamus Heaney or Tony Harrison. "I may envy the rooted, but I cannot enter their territory... Writers like me cannot intrude into such specificity". This, he says, "represents a certain loss". Of course, the English of the migrant is necessarily synthetic—cobbled together from a jumble of post-colonial Englishes, spliced with CNN and teacherly RP—but this could just as well be a certain gain. Many more waves of migration have washed over England since Szirtes' arrival in 1956—Indians, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, "West Indians", "East African Asians", Tamils, Kurds, Roma. London (if Szirtes and his family had arrived in 2002, they would have been "dispersed" to a more distant corner of the country) has been Jerusalem and Babylon; today it is Babel. This creative destruction of England might have been the apocalypse of the title. But Szirtes is not referring to the creative English of the migrant, but to the stilted timbre of the displaced.

So perhaps it is no surprise that this is a volume of loss and yearning punctuated with nostalgia and disaffection. The "apocalypse" of the title is a quiet affair, returning to its root meaning of revelation or disclosure. The poet discloses his own estrangement, and reveals England to us as seen from without. A land of comic-books and tabloids, "Brighton rock, Sid James, Diana Dors, Brylcreem and Phyllosan and Lucozade", foxhunters, jukeboxes, and gunsmiths, "a green nonsense of lawns and roses". It is past its prime and clapped out. "Sky. The video shop./ Broken windows. The sheer boredom. The alarm/ wailing at two am. The police presence./ Pastoral graffiti on the bus stop". It is the country Szirtes once found captured in the word "poshbeckhamy".

From his urban disgust he turns to "nature":

How beautiful it is, this silence waiting
on salt. The disused railway lines between
wild blackberries. The faint hum of stray flies
on windowsills.

(*"Backwaters: Norfolk Fields"*)

Ringed this scruffy countryside, England's ocean perimeter is ever-present, at the entrances and exits, at the beginning of memory and the end of empire. At one delicious moment, "a terrible gaiety rustles the sea like a dress it must discard". "You come to the place by water, and you land on salt-sprayed concrete." Water aligns with language itself in "Punctuation": "The glottal swell/ of waves as its long tongue came pitching in/ lapping at land." The sea shapes "The Child I Never Was", who "makes poetry of memories of landscape haunted by sea" (is the child also the progeny of Ariel with his "twin abalone ears, sharp auger teeth,/ an open scalloped lung, a nautilus/ for codpiece, cowrie knuckles"?). But, like the migration of fifty-sixers, the engagement is one-way: "the English schoolboy cannot understand/ a country that is set in seas of land".

The book follows a loose chronological narrative. A first set of previously published poems ("early English") gathers the material. England is coldly receptive in "Acclimatisation", rushing colour to a small boy's cheeks as he remembers the language and etiquette, the teachers who "tried terribly to forgive us". There are fine portraits of these patient individuals in "Miss Pickering" ("She coaxed and ruttled tiny words of praise") and "Mr Reason" (who "waits, a part of sunlight, dusk, the seashore and the puzzle of archaic words"). Further in, British life is sketched in snapshots of neighbourhoods, occupations and pastimes. Plenty of the poet's habitual toolkit here: flowers, modern detritus (cars, TV, streetlight), autumn (lots of leaves; "dry they are, as delicate as dead skin")—and much of what you'd expect in a meditation on that timeless notion—"England": homely local shops, mugs of tea, sheep, manners, foxhunts. The mix, under the grip of controlled diction, works well. Many of this first batch are shot through with a sense of loss, or being lost, explicit in "A Walk Across Fields", "A Greek Musée". They rhyme unobtrusively, are occasionally impressionist, almost imagist scenes coloured by

mood. There is an admirably efficient build up to the note of panic which creeps in later:

...the grass was rotting baize.
The fields of rape hummed at a ragged sky,
long strips of surgical tape were laid across
young lettuce. I watched the hulks of sleeping sheep emboss
a pasture, having dragged along a hedge
their trail of dirty candy floss.

(“Preludes”)

This sets the tone for the following, eponymous, section (leaving aside the unmemorable pseudo-Irish “Prayer for my Daughter”) and the approaching apocalypse. In these, Russian tanks occasionally rumble in the background. (Foreign tanks do not, of course, visit England, except metaphorically. Who knows what a collision of memory and history is here?) We visit the former bunkers of the London Underground to find, in “War Is Over”, that “there was little joy/ on the faces, it was much as usual. Permanent night/ down here. Upstairs, the emergence into daylight”. England has been waiting, since Blake at least it seems, for its apocalypse.

Childhood memory is given much room and poems remembering his father are among the most astute. “The Yellow Dress My Father Fell in Love with” is dedicated to Seamus Heaney and has all the earthy tenderness of an early Heaney poem (with the “rootedness” shrugged away). Although dad, as is so often the case, features mainly in sports outings, the device nevertheless appears fresh in “White Hart Lane”, which succeeds with the authentic intimacy of a rediscovered rite of passage. “You were and were not the crowd,/ its passions high, ironic, understated,// brutal, like an earthquake just beginning/ with a drumming of feet and the small roar/ rising as teams appeared on the far side// dappling the pitch”. Of course, this could equally be Hungary, and we feel his father has never lost his Magyariness. Watching Tibor the wrestler slapped by Big Daddy in “All In”, “we feel indecent in the foreign commotion”. Their sense of foreignness is their shared point of commonality and also of departure. “My father and I recoil from violence./ He hits me once and there’s an end of that./ I don’t hit back. We’re living in a tense/ empire that could fall and squash us flat”.

End of empire is a subtext throughout the book's second half, offered explicitly in broad strokes of disintegration in "Backwaters: Norfolk Fields", probably the book's finest moment: "We're at the end. It might simply be of weather/ or empire or of something else altogether". In "Great Yarmouth" we see "England, shouting at the sea,/ a single bent figure glaring behind the change desk,/ surveying its domain, the new grotesque." The sea, we realise, has come to mean England's limit, no longer its bridgehead to the rest of the world:

I used to wonder at the old ones sitting
 in cars parked neatly opposite the sea
 with Sunday papers in their laps, steadily
 dozing near uneventful water, knitting
 in silence, reading, waiting. What was the sense
 of congregating here with weathered faces
 beside these terminal railings in places
 that signalled departure and indifference?
 The sadness of the English, I thought. Odd
 how they folded in on themselves at last.
 ("Cromer Green at the Regency Café")

The sea and the old. "Old men in betting shops peering to check/ the odds. Old men, natty in white, creaking/ over bowls, with Beryl cook elegance./ Old men tottering sticking out a neck/ at the neighbour while the latter is speaking./ Old men in the church hall learning to dance". Although not an old man (Szirtes is in his early fifties), his tone sometimes belies him: he is indignant, disapproving, aged, weary, bored.

But throughout, in keeping with the objective of "honesty" and the apocalypse/disclosure of the title, we learn more about the poet than about modern England. In truth, there is little of twentieth- or twenty-first-century England here. He luxuriates in dated and outdated colloquialisms and references. Music is a case in point—we all remember Dusty Springfield, Elvis, Chuck Berry, Ella, Billie, Parker, Dizzy, Miles. As though poetry was conditioned on the past, memory stoked into life, nostalgia camouflaged. Those waves of immigrants like himself, the demographic metamorphosis at the heart of modern England, barely get a look in—"an Asian girl reading Jane Austen" here, a Pakistani reading *The Yorkshire Mart* elsewhere. That's about all: incidental, jarring

or perhaps amusing? England since 1956 has had no greater event than this massive cultural transformation, and here's their potential spokesperson fumbling the ball. The one time they are addressed directly, they are blended too simply, with each other and with the poet, with the English themselves, into the passive subjects of a failed empire:

And what
are you doing here, yes, you and your friend
from Morocco, Uganda, St Kitts, or Pakistan?
Whatever has brought you to this far, flat

kingdom with its glum farmers? Surely you
don't think this is America, where dreams
are the given, where you swear allegiance
to a new self? Have you somehow fallen through
the net of the world to be lost among reams
of legislature in these alien regions?

("Backwaters: Norfolk Fields")

So the apocalypse, when it comes, misses the cataclysm. But it does open promisingly with a neat reversal, in Jerusalem, of Blake's motif:

...a forsaken garden
where the sun is always about to set

on an empire laying down its burden.
Which is what pastoral means: life in a field
of death, natural activity as boredom,

the air crowded with unreconciled
facts: dust, light, insects, birds, sheer noise
.....

the air is thick
with the noise of the past, so it is hard to see
what it is made of, what all this rhetoric

is actually about. Something is ominously
gathering in the sky....

("Cromer Green at the Regency Café")

But from here the collage of themes—boredom, age, empire, dust and rain, meaninglessness, tabloid headlines, obscene entertain-

ment, the persistence of dying language and notions—is gathered and restated in a series of brief, slightly tart ruminations, spiced with uncomfortable humour. The book ends frustrated, in a moment of bland redemption, courtesy of the obliging sun, “hazy, perfectly spherical”.

Here nature redeems not by renewing humankind, but by outliving us, by simply surviving. The pastoral functions as it always has done—an escape for the bored, the lost, the degenerate, the frustrated. A safety net:

I could imagine being one of the old,
staying here forever, staring past
the lit pier and searching the overcast
sky for the moon in the growing cold.
Nature was peopled with coherent signs
that anyone could read.