

REVIEWS

Seamus Heaney, *District and Circle*. New York: Farrar, 2006. 78pp. \$20

Charles Tomlinson, *Cracks in the Universe*. Manchester: Carcanet, 2006. 77pp. \$16.95

“The poet’s only hope,” Ted Hughes said, “is to be infinitely sensitive to what his gift is, and this in itself seems to be another gift that few poets possess.” Seamus Heaney is truest to his gift when he is praising, and his new collection, *District and Circle*, is largely about what can be fondly remembered. Well, so be it, seeing that it’s Seamus Heaney doing the remembering. Heaney plops back into childhood with instinctive accuracy, like a frog into a stream, and breathes happily in the sensuous mud. The book might have been called *There Was a Child Went Forth*; it takes back Heaney’s childhood and youth from marauding time. The same spirit is in him now as then, the desire to be thigh-wader-deep in the “give and take” of life’s “deepest, draggiest purchase.”

Heaney can reverse time as few other writers have done because he has a genius for inhabiting his own life—he makes you glad that a life *can* be so lived, so loved, so known, so rich in observation and feeling—and because his other genius, his ear, jumps in the dark of sound and lands, you’d swear it, precisely on that unforeseeable mark where experience is—was—is again. In this book he once again compacts accents and compounds (“clamp-on meat-mincer”) with coughing assonance, consonance, and alliteration (“troughs of slops, / hotter than body heat”). His ear is so earthy it allows no empty gaps. Adroitly he varies the “snub and clot” of monosyllables with “the splitter-splatter” of slightly bigger words, all of them harking faithfully to the circle of life in rural Co. Derry. Oh, to be a word in one of Heaney’s lines, loved and sharp as the taste of a raw turnip, knowing its exact worth. Such wholesome virtuosity. Take as an example the following section of “Moyulla”:

Milk-fevered river,
Froth at the mouth
of the discharge pipe,
gidsome flotsam...

Barefooted on the bank,
glad-eyed, ankle-grassed,
I saw it all
and loved it at the time—

bleatings, beestings,
creamery spillage
on her cleanly, comely
sally trees and alders.

The “gidsome” river is virtually a wet nurse. To the boy, her frothy milk and mouth are not lost objects, in the Lacanian sense, so long as, “ankle-grassed” (lovely invention), the boy can view her with a giddiness of his own.

Together with Robert Graves and Ted Hughes, Heaney broke the crust of the centuries’ old snow that had been covering the Green Goddess. In *District and Circle*, there’s little left of his self-quickening quickening of the myth. But “Moyulla” is happily complemented by the stunning short poem “A Haggling Match,” which presents the goddess in her most formidable guise, namely, as hag. Domestic, this particular hag (while still and always an archetype) chops wood outside the house, and the thumps rock the speaker’s psyche “like wave-hits through / a night ferry.” Simply by virtue of being a woman, his wife incorporates every aspect of the goddess, including her power to drown the frail, floating, ferried male psyche. Ah, but there’s nothing, no one, else for the speaker to cling to: “you / whom I cleave to, hew to, / splitting firewood.” The speaker takes up the words “cleave” and “hew” on the clinging-child side, leaving the violent side to the axe-wielding hag. He can afford to: after all she’s splitting firewood; she’s taking care of the two of them.

The new collection is otherwise an assortment of poems in which boys and men dominate. Poems on childhood anxieties (e.g., getting your hair clipped in “Harry Boyle’s one-room, one-chimney house,” “the plain mysteriousness / Of your sheeted self inside the neck-tied cope— / Half sleeveless surplice, half hoodless Ku Klux cape”) are answered by poems on adult male accomplishments, for instance “To Mick Joyce in Heaven”:

The weight of the trowel,
That’s what surprised me.
You’d lift its lozenge-shaped
Blade in the air
To sever a brick
In a flash, and then twirl it
Fondly and lightly.

Joining these last are several elegies on male poets, dead, but still mighty—in-deed, all but alive. In “Stern,” the powerful short elegy on Ted Hughes, for instance, Heaney cleaves to a stern master of the end-stop, an altogether different prepotency from the chop-chop rhythm of the warming and destroying goddess.

Now it seems
I'm standing on a pierhead watching him
All the while watching me as he rows out
And a wooden end-stopped stern
Labours and shimmers and dips,
Making no real headway.

Even the Tolland Man, the exhumed Danish bog body celebrated in Heaney's third book, *Wintering Out* (1972), as a sad figure of sacrifice to the goddess, returns here as a strengthener, sacrifice-free. He has spring's spunk (the poem is called "The Tolland Man in Springtime"); his re-emergence from the bog is a resurrection. In the earlier poem the speaker thinks that, were he to visit "the old man-killing parishes" of Jutland, he'd feel "lost, / Unhappy and at home." But in the new poem (an over-extended, six-sonnet sequence), he identifies with the liberated body: "I...felt benefit / And spirited myself into the street."

In sum, then, a book seeking and finding reassurance in male strength—as typified by the father who praises the "forged fang" of the harrow-pin, "a true dead ringer // Out of a harder time." In it, Father Craftsman replaces Mother Bounty. The Creator Goddess gives way to Man the Maker. With the exceptions noted, Heaney has covered over again the deep-psyche universality of the goddess myth in favor of on-the-surface poems with a local pop-up vigor and isolation, celebrating the competent, social, stoical male spirit.

The title *District and Circle* is thus accurate as to the book's loving provinciality. For Heaney all but writes as a vocational shut-in: the satisfaction he takes in promoting the image of the talented, disciplined male, the type of himself as poet, is patent—though Heaney wouldn't be Heaney without his exquisite tact. The great Circle of the goddess isn't answered, in this book, by the great, broken Circle of Humanity. As it might have been? Despite the root-seeking nature of Heaney's "gift"? Heaney's earlier, Northern Ireland-based involvement in questions of adversity and atrocity (which sent him in quest of the goddess), at least provoked the gift into tension and anguish, and forced it to be resourceful. Heaney has no doubt written the book he needed to; but though the writing in *District and Circle* has real distinction, the book itself lacks importance. To put it another way: the world has changed, but Heaney's art has not, except to ask somewhat less of itself than before, in all but the golden craft.

The English poet Charles Tomlinson writes with much the same sense of implicit rebuke to our everyday heartlessness toward the earth, but he shifts the theme into present-tense gear. He is more discursive and a good deal less in the language—lacking, as he does, as everyone does, Heaney's creamery and grain-golden ear.

Like Heaney's, Tomlinson's work isn't what it used to be. It never had any fury, but its meditations on spatial happenings were more arresting than they are now; they had written all over them the necessity of discovery. Tomlinson pored over nature's processes as if searching for the microbes of meaning. And his descriptions were often lovely—for example, the rose in "Frondes Agrestes," in *Seeing is Believing*, seen

Gathered up into its own translucence
Where there is no shade save colour

or, in "Prometheus," in *The Way of a World*, the trees that

Continue raining though the rain has ceased
In a cooled world of incessant codas

At his best he wrote with a breath-held intensity. Now, he seems to practice a somewhat easy observation for its own sake, trusting it to be virtue's path.

Cracks in the Universe could not be a less apt title for this new collection: its violent ontology is betrayed by the shock-proof sphere in which Tomlinson moves, where placid poems track nature's gradual changes. The phrase comes from "A View from the Shore," which trumps up a "crisis in the environment" out of the "aquatic ivy" that has suddenly "festooned" Brooklyn Bridge. My guess is ice, or frost, or snow—any of which would qualify "aquatic ivy" as old-fashioned poetic diction. In any case, the crisis is already pouring "itself back / through this crack in the universe," a crack located, by way of a sudden, asymmetrical wrench, "on this outflanked riverbank." Which all seems to mean: no crisis, really. Like Heaney's, Tomlinson's imaginative sphere is short on catastrophes. When he does go after one, as here, he can only do so deliberately, and even then only figuratively.

As "A View from the Shore" illustrates, Tomlinson no longer *thinks* well in his poems; his verse has softened into gesture and sentiment. Keenly sensible it's not. For instance, in "New Jersey—New York," he writes of

a million cars, each one
A travelling eye
Letting things occur, letting them appear
As they will, the city itself another nature

There are so many things wrong with this statement—the exaggeration of "a million cars" pouring into one darkened "thoroughfare," the poet-mirroring personification of each car as "A traveling eye," the fantasy that cars have a choice as to letting things "appear / As they will," the potentially disastrous mistake of seeing the city itself as "another nature"—so many things that it

gives Tomlinson's brand of aesthetic impressionism a bad name. It's writing as a dreamy maundering. In "In the Mirror" Tomlinson congratulates himself on not being a Narcissus—he knows the mirror's "margins are where true happenings are." But effectively he writes in a folded-in triptych of mirrors. He describes objects as if they were virtuous, harmless, sentient, observant—in other words, as if they were so many Tomlinsons.

Consider the "rose, reader / of the book / of light" in "A Rose from Fronteira": after the exotic title, Tomlinson domesticates the rose to a fault, until there isn't anything "rose is a rose is a rose" about it:

Head of a rose:
above the vase
a gaze widening—
hardly a face, and yet
the warmth has brought it forth
out of itself,
with all its folds, flakes, layers
gathered towards the world
beyond the window,
as bright as features,
as directed as a look

Here, personification injects its ichor into a natural object. "Head" destines the rose to have a face, even if "hardly a face," thence a "gaze." Features, as a generic item, are levered up as "bright," but to no good end, since "layers" can't really be seen as features or "gathered towards the world." In all, the labyrinthine rose is more or less flattened out so as to have an intelligent face, in mutuality with the observer. Hasn't humanity had a sickening amount of itself by now? Why is the rose enlisted in its ranks?

At the pen-tip of a Rilke, personification trembles and sings; of a Tomlinson, it cozies up to the universe. Nature, for Tomlinson, is an excellently-designed system of reciprocities. On the one hand, the earth exists to be seen by us; our eyes are its providence. On the other, its purpose is to excite our reflective activity and trigger comparisons, not least to ourselves. In the opening poem, the poet uncharacteristically finds pathos in our being earthbound, saying of pigeons that burst "into dowdy flower" (a tellingly de-energizing metaphor) that they become "in feathery mid-air...all that we shall never be, condemned to sit," etc. But he's actually the least Faustian of poets; his is a physics of the near. He specializes in small jobs of observation governed by the law of classical Greek aesthetics: the actual is what one sees. (Fernando Pessoa in *The Book of Disquiet*: "The sufficiency of things fills my weightless, translucent heart, and just to look is a sweet satisfaction. I've never been more than a bodiless gaze.")

In Tomlinson's dialectic, "letting things occur" stands over against the corresponding occurrence in himself, qua poet, of a "second creation, / as intricately unforeseen / as the first" ("Fantasia in Limestone"). Seeing and making—it's Heaney's dialectic, too, but in Heaney's work it benefits from greater passion. Tomlinson, however, is quicker than Heaney to introduce layers of sentiment, and he is even more impelled to dedicate his art to peace. (To which one may object, *pace* Heaney's superb earlier poem, "The Harvest Bow," that peace is the end of vegetables, not of art.) Tomlinson doesn't write of pain with real power: "a lament of all you lose / in life's constrictions / like a wounded violin" doesn't touch it. He can't help it. He was born to be a beautiful soul. "My weightless, translucent heart," etc.

The theme that "nothing is king / in this weather-swept world" prompts his style to meet its subject on equal terms. Thus it can't enjoy salience, has no beehives in its yard, doesn't cascade toward the stupid far end of the world. The language is innocent of Anglo-Saxon grunts, tangy sensations, defamiliarization. To say that "the year is repeating itself afresh," a not untypical statement, fails to make the year *feel* fresh; it's all excess of polite communication. And the rhythms (sometimes metrical, sometimes free) never pass with a tingle into the body.

District and Circle and *Cracks in the Universe*, especially when placed together, suggest that nature poetry and her sister, the poetry of reminiscence, can't be contemporary. They want to rest their chin on a country wall and gaze; they want everything to be agreeable. In the words of Gertrude Stein's Saint Chavez, "The envelopes are all on the fruit of the fruit trees." Meanwhile, all around, catastrophe is picking up speed.

Calvin Bedient

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J.H. Prynne, *Poems*. Northumberland: Bloodaxe, 2005. 590pp. \$41.95

J.H. Prynne, hailed by some critics as the most vital contemporary British poet—a designation at once useful in its emphasis and silly, since poetry is more conversation than competition—writes poems so distinct from the sort of thing by which, say, the *Times Literary Supplement* represents British poetry, that Prynne's work might (and should) be taken for a different genre altogether. Certainly, his poems don't serve up solace or easy pleasures. Instead, their catawampous energy, disjunctive tones, and indeterminate syntax, as well as the author's unusual thematic material and harmonic planning—about which more soon—disconnect us from the automatic language