

Review · *Peter Filkins*

Seamus Heaney. *The Haw Lantern*. Farrar Straus Giroux, 1987. 51 pp. \$12.95 (cloth).

Derek Walcott. *The Arkansas Testament*. Farrar Straus Giroux, 1987. 117 pp. \$14.95 (cloth).

Peter Viereck. *Archer in the Marrow*. W. W. Norton, 1987. 260 pp. \$6.95 (paper).

Few poets are fortunate enough to become the measure of the language by which they live and write within their own time. Seamus Heaney is one of them. With the appearance of *The Haw Lantern* he continues to display the grace and skill with which he has carved so many beautiful poems over the years, as well as the courage to press beyond the creature comforts of craft towards a deeper vision, unexplored ground. The vowelled intimacy by which he speaks *through* people and places rather than just writing of them is as alive here as ever, line after line demonstrating that he might indeed possess the best ear on the planet. More important, however, are the rigor and integrity that the book offers us as a whole. A slim volume of thirty-one poems, only two of which go beyond two pages in length, the book veers decidedly away from the epic-making of Heaney's last collection, *Station Island*. Instead, we are awarded the pared down purity of a successful and reknowned poet reassessing his art mid-career, chiseling away at any existent dross so that his own style does not overcome him. The result is a collection of gems, each of them cut and polished, faceted and set by a consciousness as vital as it is discriminating.

Heaney has always been celebrated as a poet of sure details. At times almost sentimental, at others the very best at inhabiting the landscape of childhood as if on a trip next door, he has always brought to his work a talent for mining an intimate, personal past as the source of larger meditations on art, nationhood, Irish politics, and history. The key to this is his knack for letting deft and precise description carry the weight of his message rather than impale his thought on an artificial "poetic" context. Here

in “Alphabets,” the book’s lead poem, he continues to shape and interpret the present as a ghost of the past, his eye and ear careful to let the shadows speak for themselves as he remembers back to his first encounter with language and writing as a schoolboy:

Two rafters and a cross-tie on the slate
Are the letter some call *ah*, some call *ay*.
There are charts, there are headlines, there is a right
Way to hold the pen and a wrong way.

First it is ‘copying out’, and then ‘English’
Marked correct with a little leaning hoe.
Smells of inkwells rise in the classroom hush.
A globe in the window tilts like a coloured O.

Like articles in a foundation’s time capsule, “rafters,” “cross-tie,” “slate,” “hoe,” and “inkwells” construct the boy’s reality. Meanwhile, the class distinction made between “*ah*” and “*ay*” prefigures the awareness that will turn him into an adult, while the “coloured O” of the globe bridges both worlds: that of the innocent schoolboy being initiated into the exotic, and that of the present poet who has traversed the living planet through vision and act. Hence, at the poem’s end we stand somewhere between the two, time being more flexible than space, and the poet realizing that language is what grants him transport between what he has become and how he came to it:

The globe has spun. He stands in a wooden O.
He alludes to Shakespeare. He alludes to Graves.
Time has bulldozed the school and school window. . . .

All gone, with the omega that kept

Watch above each door, the good luck horseshoe.
Yet shape-note language, absolute on air
As Constantine’s sky-lettered IN HOC SIGNO
Can still command him;

. . . As from his small window
The astronaut sees all he has sprung from,
The risen, aqueous, singular, lucent O
Like a magnified and buoyant ovum—

Or like my own wide pre-reflective stare
All agog at the plasterer on his ladder
Skimming our gable and writing our names there
With his trowel point, letter by strange letter.

But close attention paid to physical details, coupled with images fleshed out by consonants and vowels conjured into a three-dimensional quality of sound, sense, and what Frost called “the sound of sense”; this is not news as far as Heaney’s development as a poet is concerned. Similarly, the notion that poetry provides a means for “digging” up the past in order that it reinhabit the present is something he has returned to over and over since his first mature poem by that same name. Even his style, careful and crafted as ever, remains essentially unchanged. “Clearances,” a sonnet sequence written for his recently deceased mother, not only harks back to the “Glanmore Sonnets” in *Field Work*, it also sustains the “confessional” nature of Heaney’s work and its corresponding tone of self-accusation. Standing at his mother’s deathbed, the poet captures the entire scene in a single sestet, but what the poem is really about is the way the scene echoes and reverberates through his own conscience over time:

So while the parish priest at her bedside
Went hammer and tongs at the prayers for the dying
And some were responding and some crying
I remembered her head bent towards my head,
Her breath in mine, our fluent dipping knives—
Never closer the whole rest of our lives.

Indeed, despite the suppleness Heaney demonstrates here as a sculptor of image, irony and cadence, the real achievement *The Haw Lantern* offers us is a unique vision gained through the handling of abstraction, thought, and consciousness as if they were entities as immediate and malleable as clay. This is not only reminiscent of territory staked out in late Yeats,

there is also enough of Stevens' brand of calculated objectivity to float the vision beyond the man himself. The result is a poetry of ideas, but one grounded in a vibrant, spoken tongue; and if nothing else it is a book which celebrates what the language can do at its finest.

Functioning like cornerstones to a larger architecture, there are four poems in the book which clearly address the nature of conscience and consciousness. Each of their titles addresses them as being written "From " the separate locales of "Frontier," "Republic," "Land," and "Canton" in the abstract realms of "Writing," "Conscience," "the Unspoken," and "Expectation," respectively. The equation thus set up is one of consciousness being as palpable as a landscape, the mind and its trajectory as immediate as an open field, whether mined or shimmering. Heaney is on his most familiar ground in the first where he sees a border check as corresponding to the "Frontier of Writing," art also involving measures of tension and control, moments of imminent danger, and the blessing of release, where

. . . suddenly you're through, arraigned yet freed,
as if you'd passed from behind a waterfall
on the black current of a tarmac road

past armour-plated vehicles, out between
the posted soldiers flowing and receding
like tree shadows into the polished windscreen.

The border traversed here, however, is that which lies between the "Republic of Conscience" and the everyday. Returning as an emissary from this second realm, where "Their sacred symbol is a stylized boat. / The sail is an ear, the mast a sloping pen, / The hull a mouth-shape, the keel an open eye. . . ," the poet faces larger responsibilities. In fact, they prove both burden and boon, for upon being asked to consider himself "a representative" sent out by the Republic, he also learns that "Their embassies . . . were everywhere / but operated independently / and no ambassador would ever be relieved."

What Heaney is so deftly accomplishing here is a fusion of the classical lyric mode with an epic vision generated by myth. By seeing his duties and allegiances as a poet to be more pressing and vital than his capabilities as a

human being, he almost forces the poems to relinquish his own presence. Hence, in the third of the four pieces, "From the Land of the Unspoken," an even broader voice is heard, one that speaks beyond the poet to what lies hidden and silenced in all of us:

We are a dispersed people whose history
is a sensation of opaque fidelity.
When or why our exile began
among the speech-ridden, we cannot tell
but solidarity comes flooding up in us
when we hear their legends of infants discovered
floating in coracles towards destiny
or of kings' biers heaved and borne away
on the river's shoulder or out into the sea roads.

To find this land on any map carved out by history would of course be impossible, yet its presence as part of the soul's landscape seems certain. The Unspoken lies within each of us, smothered and festering, while at the same time the poem asserts that "our unspoken assumptions have the force / of revelation." This could also be said of Heaney's quartet. The unexplained mystery or myth upon which each poem is based is the catalyst for our inhabiting a realm outside of history, past or present, or as hinted at in the last section of "From the Canton of Expectation," "what is past, or passing, or to come":

*What looks the strongest has outlived its term.
The future lies with what's affirmed from under.*
These things that corroborated us when we dwelt
under the aegis of our stealthy patron,
the guardian angel of passivity,
now sink a fang of menace in my shoulder.
I repeat the word 'stricken' to myself
and stand bareheaded under the banked clouds
edged more and more with brassy thunderlight.
I yearn for hammerblows on the clinkered planks,
the uncompromised report of driven thole-pins,
to know there is one among us who never swerved

from all his instincts told him was right action,
who stood his ground in the indicative,
whose boat will lift when the cloudburst happens.

This is apocalypse devoid of advertising. Though the flood may come, high tide already on the rise, Heaney is not content to toll the bells of doom for the sake of making headlines. Instead, it is a “Canton of Expectation,” grim and tightlipped, but at the same time asserting a wish, if only through the “Canto” of song hidden in the poem’s title, that the best of humankind will somehow continue to flourish.

In a strange way Heaney himself comments upon the import this book should hold for decades to come, though no doubt it is my own conjuration rather than his. In “The Mud Vision,” its title indicative of the grounded myth-making in so many of the poems, we are given snapshots from our contemporary surround as recognizable as the evening news:

Statues with exposed hearts and barbed-wire crowns
Still stood in the alcoves, hares flitted beneath
The dozing bellies of jets, our menu-writers
And punks with aerosol sprays held their own
With the best of them. Satellite link-ups
Wafted over us the blessings of popes, heliports
Maintained a charmed circle for idols on tour
And casualties on their stretchers.

Enter into this “Our mud vision, as if a rose window of mud / had invented itself out of the glittery damp, / A gossamer wheel, concentric with its own hub / Of nebulous dirt, sullied yet lucent.” Not only does this seem as good a description of Heaney’s poetry as any, it also enters into the poem in much the same manner as the best of his work comes to us: unexplained and unimpeachable, language become pure act and revelation. Hence, the consequences of our reading can become as amplified as those which follow upon the vision:

A generation who had seen a sign!
Those nights when we stood in an umber dew and smelled
Mould in the verbena, or woke to a light

Furrow-breath on the pillow, when the talk
Was all about who had seen it and our fear
Was touched with a secret pride, only ourselves
Could be adequate then to our lives.

Appropriately the poet goes on to admit, “We lived, of course, to learn the folly of that,” but the advantage poetry holds over events lies in its ability to increase, rather than decrease, its impact over time. Visions check in and out of our everyday world like delegates to a political convention, but the appearance of a book as fine as *The Haw Lantern* cannot help but command our attention. Otherwise we may suffer the same missed opportunity as the dispirited witnesses Heaney writes of, their disillusionment complete once “the experts / Began their *post factum* jabber,” and

Just like that, we forgot that the vision was ours,
Our one chance to know the incomparable
And dive to the future. What might have been origin
We dissipated in news. The clarified place
Had retrieved neither us nor itself—except
You could say we survived.

* * *

To follow on the heels of a review advocating someone else’s book as one of the most important to appear in a generation is as unlucky as it is unfair. What further complicates misfortune is that Derek Walcott’s new collection, *The Arkansas Testament*, happens to be dedicated to Heaney. *Il miglior fabbro* one is tempted to add, for though Walcott has once again provided us with some of the most volcanic and incantatory writing to be found anywhere, the book as a whole suffers from an unbecoming slackness in both content and craft. Few poets writing today can infuse their work with as much drama as can Walcott at his best, but even his last collection, *Midsummer*, made it possible to question whether he was writing about the self embattled by history, or if somehow the threads of too many potentially fine poems got severed by the mangling self-drama erupting within them.

As in his other works, Walcott’s most compelling theme remains the division he feels as a man born to a subject nation while knowing that his

own liberation has been gained by mastering the speech of those who have enslaved his people for centuries. *The Arkansas Testament* graphically illustrates this unbridgeable gap in presenting two sections, "Here" and "Elsewhere," much like the "North" and "South" division of *The Fortunate Traveller*. Similarly, in "Cul de Sac Valley," as well as in most of the poems set in Trinidad, Walcott directly addresses his need to pay homage to his heritage, though most often the tribute is made in the king's finest:

A panel of sunrise
on a hillside shop
gave these stanzas
their stilted shape.

If my craft is blest;
if this hand is as
accurate, as honest
as their carpenter's,

every frame, intent
on its angles, would
echo this settlement
of unpainted wood

as consonants scroll
off my shaving plane
in the fragrant Creole
of their native grain.

But the problem, of course, is that they do not; Walcott is as entrapped as ever in having to tell us about the well point of his life and art rather than demonstrating it through its own native vibrancy. This is not to say that it's an uninteresting paradox, nor that the poet is not aware of it himself. Since poems as beautiful as "The Schooner *Flight*" and the epic *Another Life* have shown how ably he can handle and integrate the island *patois* within strict English lyrics, it is clearly not just a problem of the poet having abandoned his past and its speech completely. Instead, the real issue at stake is the grey area where poetry reluctantly crosses over into politics.

Writing again about Trinidad, its people, their subjugation, and his relationship to each, Walcott directs his most pointed accusation at himself when speaking of “Roseau Valley”:

How green and sweet I kept it
to my aging soul! It shines
when a muscular wind has swept it
with a shadowy scythe, but my lines

led to what? They provided
no comfort like the French priests’
or the Workers Hymn that divided
heaven from a wage increase,

this language that offered its
love few could read, those croppers
who shared communion’s profits
or the Union’s, for a few coppers.

However true or painful the sentiment expressed here might sound, it also asks for too much. Walcott possesses an educated and incisive mind; “those croppers” do not. Therefore, to ask that his lines fulfill the same immediacy as communion or the Workers Hymn, or simply to regret that they have not, is to run the risk of abusing his position as a poet by desiring political popularity rather than attending to poetry’s solitary vocation.

What this boils down to is a problem of both stature and stance outweighing the poem’s subject matter. In “A Latin Primer,” Walcott turns again to his childhood and the mythic struggle by which he discovered a haven in language:

I had nothing against which
to notch the growth of my work
but the horizon, no language
but the shallows in my long walk

home, so I shook all the help
my young right hand could use
from the sand-crusted kelp
of distant literatures.

The battle of the self to attain definition is clearly the subject of the poem, and there is no doubt whatsoever that it is a compelling story. The difficulty, however, lies in the poem being much too self-conscious of its own ends. We know almost from the beginning how the poem will work out, “nothing,” “horizon,” “language,” “shallows,” and the phrasing of “young right hand,” “sand-crusted kelp,” and “distant literatures” setting up a melodramatic pattern of down-and-out transformed to saved-and-soaring as predictable as embroidery. This may seem a bit hard, but sure enough, by the end of the poem the speaker finds his “voice” when a frigate bird sails into the harbor, raises “its emblem in the cirrus,” and then flies off “beyond the sheep-nibbled columns / of fallen marble trees, / or the roofless pillars once / sacred to Hercules.” All said and done, we are left with a pose rather than a point, and it is easy to feel cheated no matter how striking the pose may be.

At his best, Walcott himself argues against such attitudinizing. Whenever he returns his sights to horizon level and lets the eye simply report what the soul must bear, the effect can be chilling. Here is the end of “Gros-Ilet,” another poem set in the Caribbean:

There are different candles and customs here, the dead
are different. Different shells guard their graves.
There are distinctions beyond the paradise
of our horizon. This is not the grape-purple Aegean.
There is no wine here, no cheese, the almonds are green,
the sea grapes bitter, the language is that of slaves.

Ironically, he denies here the very same Herculean stage props which marred the earlier poem. The “horizon” and “language” show up once again, but they are mentioned rather than chanted, are part of a woven fabric rather than a surface effect, and it is a grim, relentless cadence which carries the lines as opposed to allusions and gesturings propping up the set.

Similarly, in "Oceano Nox," Walcott again cuts against the grain of his learning by refusing the stance of the classical poet writing about the moon's bright mystery, surprising even himself when he focuses his attention on the blackness surrounding it:

"Black is the beauty of the brightest day,"
black the circumference around her rings
that radiate from black invisibly,
black is the music which her round mouth sings,
black is the backcloth on which diadems shine,
black, night's perfection, which conceals its flaws
except the crack of the horizon line;
now all is changing but my focus was
once on the full moon, not what surrounds the moon,
upon a watchman's flashlight not the watchman,
the mesmerizing wake of History.

Liberating and incantatory, his voice returns here to the high road, but for quite different reasons. This is a poet investigating the argument of and with himself in the face of History while at the same time bracing himself for human defeat. Because his consciousness arrives at nothing more than "that blank face / . . . History's innocence or its remorse," there is nothing left but to accept and embrace, both the poet and the poem giving themselves over in the last stanza to the deep sleep necessary to reawakening:

A scribbling plague of rainflies. Go to bed.
After the morning rain, the shuddering almond
will shake the seat of nightmare from its bent head.
The surf will smooth the sand's page and even
the cumuli change their idea of heaven
as the sun wipes the nib of a palm frond,
and from the wet hills, parishes of birds
test a new tongue, because these are their shores,
while the old moon gapes at a loss for words
like any ghost at cockcrow, as a force
threshes the palms, lifting their hearts and yours.

If there is one advantage to the unevenness of the volume as a whole it is that Walcott is clearly struggling with his role as a poet who has dedicated his career to writing about the victim's circumstances. In "Elsewhere," a poem dedicated to Stephen Spender, he faces the crippling paradox shared by all twentieth-century artists, namely, how to address the horrors suffered by the masses without simply consuming such suffering as artistic fodder. The answer is problematic, but to ask the question is the first step, and there is a hard-lined nobility involved in the way in which Walcott owns up to the predicament:

Through these black bars
hollowed faces stare. Fingers
grip the cross bars of these stanzas
and it is here, because somewhere else

their stares fog into oblivion
thinly, like the faceless numbers
that bewilder you in your telephone
diary. Like last year's massacres.

The world is blameless. The darker crime
is to make a career of conscience,
to feel through our own nerves the silent scream
of winter branches, wonders read as signs.

One could easily wish for more contemporary work as engaged and probing as this, as well as for more of it in the book's second half. Though there are compelling poems about the difficulty of portraying history, "Steam" and "Sunday in the Old Republic" being two of the best, there are also a number of more personal pieces about love and loss that are often clouded by self-indulgence. Only with the collection's title poem does Walcott display his most pressing concern, one which marks the first new turn in his poetry in recent years.

Consisting of twenty-four sections of sixteen-line stanzas, "The Arkansas Testament" is Walcott's most distinctly American poem to date. Though he has previously demonstrated his talent for summing up the American scene in a flash much like Lowell, the plainness of both diction

and imagery sets this work apart. Gone are the exotic surrounds of the Caribbean, as well as the lofty borrowings from literature and myth. Located simply in a dingy motel room in Fayetteville, Arkansas, the poem tempers its own message by allowing itself to filter naturally out of the localized scene. Hence, when returning to the motel after searching out coffee in the early hours and feeling his rage against prejudice erupting, his urge to name it as being inherent to the hills shadowing his path is all the more convincing:

On front porches every weak lamp
went out; on the frame windows
day broadened into the prose
of an average mid-American town.
My meter dropped its limp.
Sunlight flooded Arkansas.
Cold sunshine. I had to draw
my coat tight from the cold, or
suffer the nips of arthritis,
the small arrows that come with age;
the sun began to massage
the needles in the hill's shoulder
with its balsam, but hairs
fall on my collar as I write this
in shorter days, darker years,
more hatred, more racial rage.

The rhyme of "age" with "rage" indicates here a personal fury which Walcott sometimes too easily turns into a sweeping historical pronouncement in so many of his poems. Instead, by giving himself over to such anger and allowing it to speak openly and without flourish, he establishes a certain sense of emotional authority. At the poem's climax this also allows him to charge God, Country, and Government by standing before them as a flesh and blood victim rather than just a member of a poetic tribe:

this, Sir, is my Office,
my Arkansas Testament,

my two cupfuls of Cowardice,
my sure, unshaven Salvation,
my people's predicament.
Bless the increasing bliss
of truck tires over asphalt,
and these stains I cannot remove
from the self-soiled heart. This
noon, some broad-backed maid,
half-Indian perhaps, will smooth
this wheat-coloured double bed,
and afternoon sun will reprint
the bars of a flag whose cloth—
over motel, steeple, and precinct—
must heal the stripes and the scars.

Though somewhat grandiose and rhetorical, the language here adheres to the occasion rather than being the occasion itself. Within it is the essence of hellfire speech so common to the urge for justice and change in the American democratic experience. Clearly, Walcott is writing with his ear to ground here, and one almost wishes that he would dedicate his next book to a pure strain of American speech and imagery. This might cut against his need to again come to terms with Trinidad and his heritage, but without Lowell's volcanic genius to guide us, we are often lost to the provinces in a country this large. Walcott might be able to produce a vision of ourselves which we are either too caught up in or befuddled by to see clearly. In any case, he knows the culture as well as we do, if not better, for the exile's vision is, almost by necessity, twenty-twenty.

* * *

Peter Viereck has attempted what, to many, would seem the impossible. *Archer in the Marrow* is none other than a religious epic written as a verse drama with God, the Son, and Man as its principle characters. On top of this, it is in no way meant to be taken as just another piece of scholarly classicism, for its argument is directed specifically at twentieth-century humankind. Written in a jazzy idiom punctuated by countless quips and one-liners, its reach extends from Galilee to L.A., Olympus to Auschwitz, and covers in between such diverse topics as The Fall, evolution,

technology, the Holocaust, nature, computers, and even porn movies. It is brilliant and ambitious, a contemporary *Paradise Lost* twenty years in the making, and in many ways a key gloss to all of human history. However, as a poem it is also deeply flawed; but more on this later.

The shadow Viereck wishes to please throughout the book is that of Nietzsche. He himself points out in a footnote that quotes from Nietzsche headline a majority of the twenty-eight sections, eighteen of which are labeled as “cycles,” while an epigraph to Part Three is perhaps the best summation of Viereck’s own aesthetic throughout. Writing in *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche states, “I obey my Dionysian nature, which does not know how to separate negation from affirmation.” There is an incredible amount of negation in this book, but its vector does indeed point to an affirming flame. God is portrayed as a leering brute, cold and devoid of compassion, his wise-crack icy retorts to the pleas of the Son and You (Viereck’s pronoun for a male/female inner voice located in the present) addressing each as a plaything for his lurid pleasure. It goes without saying that neither the Son or You is happy with this role, but for the greater part of the book not much can be done about it. The Son, clearly representing Jesus, but also linked to the sacrificed Dionysius, wishes to rewrite his lines and wash his hands of any spiritual shenanigans cooked up for him by the Father. Meanwhile, You is trapped somewhere between the two, the Son having taken his side, though his own struggle with necessity, death, and creation pits him head to head against the Father.

This is the basic dramatic premise of the poem, both its development and expression sharing this kind of jaunty approach. Under the Vaudevillean surface texture, however, Viereck has been extremely careful to set up a system of motifs that constantly weave in and out of each other and support the argument’s structure as a whole. In fact, in one of his prefaces he goes so far as to pull out the essential stand taken by each of the characters, the Son beginning with:

Toys don’t know they’re toys.
If they do, they’re not.
A thing or not a thing?
A circle or a dot?

“Toys” representing human beings and the manner in which they are the playthings of the Father’s omnipotence, the question of “circle” or “dot” revolves on whether an individual is just a thing or an ever expanding circle of consciousness and being. If the latter, then God’s throttle-hold on creation is challenged by man’s ability to imagine and make. The Father, however, seems quite confident of his power, claiming:

When dots are circles, staring back,
And yes affirms them less than no,
When down gets uppity and up swings low,
Not till then can heaven crack.

On the other hand, in taking the side of You, the Son is quick to note that man’s consciousness of his own end is also what keeps You from remaining a perfect toy, wordless and blank:

My father who looks aside
Assumed blank faces on the toys he tried.
I have learnt different, being sent inside.
In autumn only man is heavy-eyed.

Besides challenging his father, the Son is also adamant about his taking his place beside You while “defecting to the side of clay.” Along with this he calls the Father “a demon” who exiled Dionysius, Aphrodite, and Eve as spirits who were the last vestiges of man’s humanity before necessity turned him into a simple tool. Hence, the choice left open to You is whether or not he will seize his love and knowledge (Eve and the Garden’s apple), as well as his capacity for growth and beauty (Dionysius and Aphrodite), and thus transform and refashion Christ’s burdensome cross by carving its applewood into arrows aimed at God’s zealotry:

*“If a cross is but lumber God borrows
From a tree that’s untouchably Gods’,
If Eve’s but an exile God harrows
From the greenest of all the world’s woods,
If the foamborn ghost in our marrows
Is but frozen, awaiting spring floods,
Can we carve warm applewood arrows to arm
Touchable gods?”*

The answer to this would appear to be a foregone “yes,” but just how it is arrived at and what shape the answer will take is what concerns Viereck. Since the son no longer wishes to be part of his father’s road show, and You does not seem capable of single-handedly overthrowing God’s power, some other being or system of belief must appear as the catalyst for man to once again know nature and invention as well as his “lungfish” ancestor did when sucking his first mouthful of air as preparation for what the poet calls “the sky-invading weapon known as human song.”

Suffice it to say that “The Archer” who arrives in the poem’s last cycle is an amalgam of Christ, Dionysius, Eve, and Aphrodite, a “goatfoot Jesus on the village green” in the eyes of You. Viereck’s progress towards this end is much too long and complex an undertaking to summarize here in detail, while it is also true that, as with any good read, one is reluctant to give away the plot. Leaning more towards the question of “who will do it?” as opposed to “whodunit?,” Viereck’s drama is presented as a reconsideration of the place of humankind in relation to both itself and the heavens. For him, we are at the final brink, and the pressure he mounts through stage directions which read as commands—“you think . . . you feel . . . you argue”—is a tactic for involving us directly in the crisis experienced by the generic You. Thus, we are as much a part of the argument as the characters themselves, Viereck’s catechism of Nietzschean revolt being aimed at our own salvation.

But whether or not it is good poetry is quite another question. The fact that Viereck attempts to resuscitate epic, dramatic, and didactic verse all in one shot is in itself troublesome. But so be it. There is nothing wrong with reinvigorating poetic tradition, and it can be refreshing to read something which dares to step beyond the standard lyric mode. Similarly, Viereck has worked very hard to enliven his speech with syncopated, street-wise rhythms which lend it a contemporary flavor given deeper sustenance through the poet’s attention to form. The problem, however, is when such an attempt remains all too obvious and blatant in its effort to join the canon. There is something noble about the fact that in this hasty age someone would spend twenty years working on a single book-length poem, but a painful sadness also exists when this really shows. However brilliant or provocative, *Archer in the Marrow* is simply too polished to be perfect; its intricate architecture of symbols, allusions, and motifs deny it the feel of having sprung from necessity rather than a clever notion, or from genius as opposed to honest and broad learning.

This is not to say that every work of note must strike home as the be-all and end-all of its genre, for it is important to emphasize that Viereck's is a stunning achievement. Yet the two areas where it runs into trouble are in its voice and its dramatic integrity. There are countless examples of the former's slapstick nature, this mini-dialogue between You and God working as well as any:

(you phoning, the father: *Long Distance*)
"Clickclick. Connect me with the father. What's the fee?"
The fee is you. Sir, please insert your dust.
"Can't I plunk coins in? Must-it-be?"
This is a recording: yes-it-must.

"Click. Information. Am locked in my room."
For Operator dial 0 in tomb.
"My heart clicks faster in the warmer O,
Tombs hackneyed womb-rhyme."—What a way to go.

"Gods prowl both ooms (ask Lazarus, ask Mary)
Like plainclothes-men in airports."—Either quarry
(Ask Orpheus before and after) knows
My name is—
"Eros?"
—Eros-Thanatos.

The compressed learning and invention of these lines is unquestionable, but to sustain this kind of sardonic hilarity over some two-hundred pages is asking for trouble. For one thing, when characters largely function as a means for rattling off the next joke, they quickly lose significance. Secondly, like comics playing the crowd on a roll, they leap at the next laugh rather than get off the stage in time for the next act. Some twenty-five pages later we are treated to yet another song and dance by God and You, but the question that lingers is whether or not the narrative has progressed in the meantime:

"Free both my life-saps to flow home to the sea."
Patronize your local gallows-tree.

"The stench of sagging fruit? Fruit's homeward ooze?"
It's always autumn in a hangman's noose.
"Can there be waters only fires quench?"
When hanged and hangman pair
Through the fierce wood they share,
It's three who mate. — *"And mix their brines*
Of white and red and oak-sap wines—"
Till shivering crab lice flee the cooling hair.

Clearly it has not, no matter how clever or daring the wit that comes between, and this makes it easy to become impatient.

Such abuse of the poem's characters also prevents the work from ever sustaining an extended sense of drama. Too often we are forced to go back over familiar ground, though it does appear this is part of Viereck's intent in trying to involve us in the process of purgation. But in a panache devoid of characters in flux it is hard to stick around for the entire ride. The only true fluctuation we get in action is when You or the Son addresses an off-stage female figure representing Eve, Aphrodite, and what the poet sees as the healing warmth of women. In fact, these are the times when the poet himself seems to enter into the poem, the tenderness with which the Son speaks the following lines being out of context with the rest of the poem:

If blossoms could blossom
One petal of petals
To whom all other blooms are
As leaves are to flowers,
It would be to the others
As you are, my daughter,
to all other daughters
Whom songs are adoring.
For what am I here for
If not to make love-songs
Of all the world's beauty
Whose birthday we share?

One might be quick to criticize Viereck's stylized diction here, but he is clear about allegiance to form, even going so far as to include a lengthy appendix discussing his views on rhythm, rhyme, and meter. The larger problem is that the epic demands both variation *and* consistency from its characters such that we grow through them and are not just yanked by the nose towards the poet's vision. By contrast it is useful to consider Milton's Satan, a figure whose princely nature is organic to the poem's drama. While the fact that he is given such a terrific part is what informs us about the poet's own daring. Nowhere does Viereck seem to be gambling such high stakes, though his motivation and intent certainly are pressing. In the end, *Archer in the Marrow* remains all too programmatic to be compelling as either poem or drama, Viereck having burdened his characters with too much of his own designing much like the cruel necessity they so fervently battle against.

Poetry geared towards as extensive and elaborate a vision as this has been out of style for quite some time now. Interestingly enough, though Heaney and Walcott remain faithful to the classical lyric, they are also attempting to drive their poems beyond the narrow limits of fixed experience, and in all three cases the results are both instructive and liberating. Each of these volumes is ambitious; and each deserves our attention. Though Viereck takes the greater risk, and in a way is risking the most worthwhile of failures, each of these poets demonstrates a willingness to infuse his work with new direction, vision reborn. One might even go so far as to say that with work as vigorous and worldly as is evident here, poetry might have a chance of escaping its current plain style doldrums, as well as its lack of something to say beyond the limited "I exist." No doubt it is a tall order to fill, but to jump back to Heaney's own "Mud Vision" and its final assertion, perhaps this is the spur such a possibility needs:

So say that, and watch us
Who had our chance to be mud-men, convinced and estranged,
Figure in our own eyes for the eyes of the world.