

Anthony Thwaite

Discovering Dunn

DISAPPOINTED POETS SOMETIMES SEEM to suppose that success is achieved by meeting the right people in the right places at the right time. This wasn't my experience as a literary editor. The unexpected arrival of good stuff (with an accompanying stamped self-addressed envelope) is cause for jubilation. A batch posted from Belfast in the early 1960s to me at the *Listener* heralded one such experience. This was the young Seamus Heaney. Another was in the spring of 1968, when I was literary editor of the *New Statesman*.

In her collection *Several Strangers* ('Writing from Three Decades') Claire Tomalin tells how, when she was my assistant on the *New Statesman*, one afternoon she was working through a pile of poems submitted to us and came on some so good that she burst into my office saying 'Here's a real poet!' This was a batch by Douglas Dunn, a name quite unknown to us. I agreed with Claire and took 'Belle and Beau', 'A Removal from Terry Street', 'The Silences', and 'The Worst of All Loves'; a little later, 'A Poem in Praise of the British', among others. All these became ingredients in *Terry Street*, which on its appearance from Faber I reviewed in the *New Statesman* in October 1969.

I was very enthusiastic about the book. Here was a fresh voice, talking about the familiar and the ordinary (that slummy part of Hull, now long since demolished) in a vivid, circumstantial, memorable way. It certainly wasn't 'slum pastoral' (Douglas's own rueful phrase). There were touching love poems, too, and some extraordinary bravura performances, such as 'A Poem in Praise of the British'.

After the review was published, I invited Douglas and his wife to have lunch with me in London. I remember being surprised, and perhaps facetiously off-putting, when they ordered pigeon, which in grimy old London I considered hazardous. Douglas inscribed my copy of *Terry Street*, nevertheless, 'After the best lunch in London'. I began to use him as a reviewer in the *New Statesman*, and indeed later as the regular reviewer of poetry for a time in *Encounter* when I moved to that journal in 1973. For reasons I now can't recall, I evidently disagreed with his tactics at some point in the 1970s, because in a letter dated 29 January 1978, Larkin asks: 'How's the battle with Douglas going?' and invents a future critical comment: 'As an editor, Thwaite is chiefly remembered for his efforts to import some of the savagery of the nineteenth century into the literary life of his time...'

After *Terry Street*, it seems to me that Douglas went through a succession of stages or phases: doggedly worrying away at class warfare and Marxism, discovering the French Symbolists, rediscovering his Scottishness, and (most poignantly) writing about Lesley and loss in *Elegies*. He has always been marvellous

at memory, at capturing moments from the past, perhaps most perfectly in ‘Long Ago’ in which ‘An old man sang “Long Ago and Far Away”’

To a rocking-horse, a friend’s grandfather
Whose first-born son was lost at sea
Half-a-century before
In a ship whose name I have forgotten.

Wherever that sad song is played or sung
I’m in that house again, by that same door.
A woman tugs my sleeve. ‘Come away,’
She says. ‘Leave him alone.’
He sings, but he’s no longer there.
The rocking horse is rocking like the sea.
Ocean is everywhere
And the room is wind and rain.

Douglas and I have worked and read together, at Arvon Foundation endurance tests of ‘creative writing’, at festivals (such as Edinburgh—and Struga in Macedonia, at which Douglas was Scotland, Paul Durcan was Ireland, and I was England, for several days of compulsory inebriation and poetry saturation), and at the Philip Larkin Society, of which he is a vice-president. But I haven’t seen enough of him over these forty-odd years: I feel great affection for his work, and for him. His latest collection, *Invisible Ink*, published last year, is as good as any he has written. I’m proud of taking those early poems of his in 1968.