

Seamus Heaney

Belderg

“They just kept turning up
And were thought of as foreign”—
One-eyed and benign
They lie about his house,
Quernstones out of a bog.

To lift the lid of the peat
And find this pupil dreaming
Of neolithic wheat!
When he stripped off blanket bog
The soft-piled centuries

Fell open like a glib:
There were the first plough-marks,
The stone-age fields, the tomb,
Corbelled, turfed and chambered,
Floored with dry turf-coomb.

A landscape fossilised,
Its stone-wall patternings
Repeated before our eyes
In the stone walls of Mayo.
Before I turned to go

He talked about persistence,
A congruence of lives,
How, stubbed and cleared of stones,
His home accrued growth rings
Of iron, flint and bronze.

So I talked of Mossbawn,
A bogland name. “But *moss*?”
He crossed my old home’s music
With older strains of Norse.
I told how its foundation

Was mutable as sound
And how I could derive
A forked root from that ground
And make *bawn* an English fort,
A planter’s walled-in mound,

Or else find sanctuary
And think of it as Irish,
Persistent if outworn.
“But the Norse ring on your tree?”
I passed through the eye of the quern,

Grist to an ancient mill,
And in my mind’s eye saw
A world-tree of balanced stones,
Querns piled like vertebrae,
The marrow crushed to grounds.

THEATRE

Metaphysical Voids

On Ayckbourn & Nichols—By JOHN WEIGHTMAN



THE THEATRE is such an ancient and well-tried bag of tricks that many, perhaps even most, of the plays put on are not dramatic “works” in the full sense but rather patchworks of theatrical devices, stitched more or less carefully together to provide actors with something to do and audiences with something to occupy their attention during the course of an evening. This is true not only in the case of out-and-out rubbish, such as *Let My People Come* or *The 120 Days of Sodom*, which are at present dishonouring the boards; it is a noticeable tendency even in worthier theatrical enterprises. The true theatre addict, I suppose, does not really mind the absence of a centre or a backbone to the performance. He enjoys this piece of stage business or that directorial effect, without worrying too much about whether or not there is any aesthetic or intellectual line running between them. He laughs here and he sheds a tear there and, provided the stimulus is maintained, he does not ask every time for coherence or a higher meaning.

I myself can adopt such an approach to television. I can watch an indifferent serial or play for the sake of a particular actor or actress, or because of the ingenuity of the costumes or the interior decoration, and if the flickering images lose their interest, they usually cease to be anything at all except a gentle soporific. But in the theatre, where there are real actors and a collective audience, I remain obstinately awake and I need to sense the play as an organic whole working itself out to some conclusion—a conclusion that may not be easily definable even in retrospect, but which can at least be felt as having obscurely satisfied the general sensibility. When the satisfaction is achieved, it is a wonderful sensation; when it fails, I suffer, in varying degrees, from discomfort, distress or even *Angst*,

and I am not happy again until I have tried to determine why, or until the experience has had time to fade. This probably shows that I am no true adept of Theatre, and why I incline to irascibility as a critic. But what is a critic, if not an impatient non-producer who demands that other people should provide him continuously with perfect art?

ALL THIS BY WAY OF introduction to the discussion of two mild attacks of *Angst*, caused by authors with whom I feel myself on the whole to be in sympathy. There is something centrally wrong—or so it seems to me—both with Alan Ayckbourn’s trilogy, *The Norman Conquests*, an established success at the Globe Theatre, and with Peter Nichols’ new play, *The Freeway*, which has recently come on at the National.

Both are very English works and purport to deal with contemporary English manners and customs (although *The Freeway* is set at some unspecified time in the near future, possibly 1984). The first is an unpretentious domestic comedy; the second is clearly meant to convey the Plight of the Nation by means of a major symbol. Mr Ayckbourn starts from technique, and his modest endeavour is to construct an efficient theatrical machine that will not hiccup at any point. Mr Nichols has begun from the idea that we must have a play about the way we live now and has looked round for a method of illustrating the idea with characters and tableaux. As it happens, Mr Ayckbourn succeeds and Mr Nichols fails; but they belong together, as it were, in a middle zone of spiritual emptiness, of British anti-metaphysical dowdiness and whimsy. The theatre, as comment on the contemporary scene, may be in as healthy a state in London as anywhere else, but that is not saying a great deal, if these offerings are representative. Our brow, like our general political morale, is rather low.

MR AYCKBOURN is to be congratulated, however, on having done something which, so far as I know, is quite novel in the theatre. His three plays, *Table Manners*, *Living Together*, and *Round and Round the Garden* are not a trilogy in the usual sense. They are not three consecutive treatments of the same situation or characters, nor do they present a single problem seen from