Poetry in Brief

James Harpur
THE MONK’S DREAM
61 pp, April 1795
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James Harpur’s second book, The Monk’s Dream, is disciplined, intelligent, and repays several readings. Like Ian Duguid, but with less tenebrous effect, he plunges old literatures for sto- ries, translations and meditations. His sources are the Bible, the Arabian, Beoic and Irish legends. But Harpur doesn’t flirt with Harpur. The Monk’s Dream is an intricate exploration of a monk’s sleep. It is of Eltis West, but the mystery of the book rounds the experience. In one poem, the story of Lazarus is imagined as a modern-day near-death encounter, with Lazarus hovering over his shrunk body until Jesus demands his return. Over the forty years which follow, Lazarus repeatedly calls “rebel the charioteer one more time.” The spur for the collection is the death of Harpur’s father, which is described in the central poem. Harpur’s poetry is at times a collection of such personal poems, which have developed an austere sensual technique.

Tobias Hill
MIDNIGHT IN THE CITY OF CLOCKS
0 19 28323 4X

Tobias Hill wrote last year in the Sunday Tele- graph that he may be the only major poet making a living from poetry competitions. Such success might lead us to think that his poems are more about himself or his life, but he has developed an austere sensual technique.

His method comes from Japan, where he lived for two years. Hill specializes in the type of roll of effect found in haiku and tanka, where intuitions seem to glow and multiply in the unaltered. Hence, at the end of one alert poem about being shaven by a woman in a barber’s shop, we find “Red moon / spreaded in ripple / over the silence of his face.” This might be inter- preted as a search for pure image. The poems concern themselves with travel and return. Car- nivals in Rio, stubles standing in the sun, gardeners killing scorpions, Hiroshima, the alienation of the type of sense and that deeply moved the twenty-seven- year-old Hill has been with the sights and societies, and how anxiously he is to impart their full impact. Hill favours free verse, portentous, short...

Elysian Elegies
THE OXENPRA ELEGIES
Translated by David Connolly
85 pp, Reading: Harrow Academic Gordon and Breach, £36 (paperback, £12).
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In the thankless discipline of translating poetry, certain combinations of author and language are particularly intractable; and few texts can be translated with as much success as this version of Elysian Elegies’ late poems. The prob- lems stem partly from the poet’s adoption of a declarative, highly rhetorical and at times wordy, noble poetry style—a style no less than Whitman has successfully imported in English, and which at its most heated is more likely to provoke ridicule than awe. The greatest diffi- culty, however, remains Elysian’s language, with its almost rococo love of flourish and ornamenta- tion; the English equivalent is indiscernible unless learned by innert, a quality in which these poems are entirely lacking. David Connolly makes a competent attempt at Elysian’s late sequence, The Oxenpere Elegies: he but handicapped himself by choosing to adopt, at the poet’s insistence, “as close a correspondence as possible. . .to the original word or phrase itself...” in preference to what he calls the “re-creation” approach to translation. This leads him inevitably to abstractions such as “The earth is flat...thought it is not.” But Elysian’s is “The earth seems unsuspecting. . .But not...” At other times, the original’s rewording of adjectives and subordinate clauses causes a linguistic pile-up.

In a violet-blue land with tempests’ wilder waves Engaged in shining shells and other finds of sun

...as though your mind’s cease not had forgot already

A nature passed through all the flowers of the Frame Structures“cross. . .force to another field of force”, with Marcel Duchamp: “Shakespeare, and the eighteenth- century surveyor William Byrd among diverse motive impuces. The poems also trace Howe’s introduction to Frame Structures, presages her poet: personal history is set against the backdrop of large-scale upheaval, and apparent coincidences acquire the grandeur of casual relations.

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