

Out of Time

Gerald Dawe, *The Morning Train*. Gallery, £6.95

Peter Robinson, *About Time Too*. Carcanet, £8.95

The Jazz Age looms large in Gerald Dawe's imagination, not only as a backdrop to many of his guesthouse settings and beach retreats, but also as a kind of murmuring backbeat, more or less continuously present. There is a languid air about the whole collection that constantly reminds one of F. Scott Fitzgerald, or at least the glossy persona that still attaches itself to his name. In "The Minos Hotel", for example, an anonymous guest surveys the bay each night just before taking dinner. While the tourists come and go with "mats, bum-bags, li-los" and "sunhats", Dawe's Gatsbyesque figure seeks out an ambiguous "somewhere": "Like the Navigators who saw/ the blue glass of the ocean/ and decided to go beyond". Dawe's nautical "somewhere" is perhaps related to Gatsby's green light at the end of the harbour, where lies that inscrutable "something commensurate to his capacity for wonder". This desire to see through the visible world to something (or somewhere) akin to the sublime clearly fascinates both writers. Which is not to imply that Dawe's poetry is just a jazzed-up version of Fitzgerald's prose. His "capacity for wonder" is less solipsistic than Fitzgerald's, his desire to step out of the self more determined. And so while Dawe may be in love with Gatsby's world like many other readers, he still recognises the need to advance beyond the one tip of Long Island for bigger continents and geographies, exchanging the comings and goings of WASP society for the to-ings and fro-ings of every class of people.

Historical events on a different train to the dusty one depicted on the book's black-and-white cover, repeatedly sour Dawe's gaze yet perhaps make his vision wider. For while Fitzgerald died in Hollywood half a decade before the liberation of

Auschwitz; Dawe's childhood spanned the beginning of the Cold War and the onset of the Troubles. Although he never refers to any of these events directly, their aftermath adds a different pitch to his imaginative journeys. His poetry invites us to "[i]magine/ the nightly curfew, the daily raid" ("The Minos Hotel"). It places us in a room above which "the SS are polishing their boots" ("The Minos Hotel"). It even conjures up the terrors of Kristallnacht, asking us to "[o]bserve the distracted faces of these men/ who are Jews, attempting to march and look casual" ("Kristallnacht, 1938"). What is striking about this image is not just the precision with which fear is evoked but the unerring use of the present tense, the imperatives pinning us to the pavement or window pane not as the students of Holocaust but as the ongoing spectators. Words animate faces like a secretly recorded film, each verbal command the whispered instructions of a careful documentary maker. Which is where this particular poem unnerves us most. For the lens we are viewing the world through is actually that of a woman director (perhaps Leni Riefenstahl) whose "smiling face" reveals her fascist sympathies:

... do not miss the woman's shy smile
 and the three men under the trees
 who look in different directions all at once.
 This shot is seen through the eyes of a smiling woman.

Human emotion is displaced by the art of war as horrific images are translated into sequences, smiles and shots. What Dawe dramatises here is the ambiguous role of the war reporter who wishes to see things objectively whilst also constructing a frame or story, a terminal line that cuts the world in pieces. The presentness of the image and our awareness of the person that created it make most conclusions impossible. For although we know what happened after Kristallnacht, the extent to which civilians colluded in the night's events is still debated as is the role of film makers who continued to live and work in Germany throughout the war years. The poem thus destabilises our sense of past and present history because it underlines the mediated nature of "seen" images that regularly point "in different directions all at once". What we see depends not just on what is there but through whose eyes the image comes. Dawe's poems con-

tinually emphasise this point, animating the violence of shots against people and shots that obscure such crimes.

This quizzical manner has a comic side too. If Fitzgerald is Dawe's main artistic ghost, Magritte is an important supporting actor. In the opening poem, he "peeps out from behind/ his newspaper" ("The Minos Hotel") before quickly disappearing, later to take centre stage in the peculiar, "A Dream of Magritte", in which the poet sees no more than a profile of the vanishing painter:

A wisp of smoke curls into a question—
the profile of a man in a bowler hat
flies up into the blue-and-white sky—
But what am I really looking at, what?

Magritte's effervescent presence is an appropriate metaphor for his well-known artistic games. While the "profile of a man in a bowler hat" is instantly recognisable as Magritte, it also represents nothing important about him. The artist's life is a pose too, a caricature of the private person. Dawe owns up to this and to his own fascination with an artist's biographical remains, even if they are as elusive as a curling, smoky question: "*But what am I really looking at, what?*" The question is ridiculous. For the poem is a blurred account of a blurred dream of an equally blurred artist. Seeing things well is thus also a subject of humour for the poet, or at least a subject of farce.

Dawe's jazz sensibilities—his continued "capacity for wonder"—frequently clash with a keen sense of the past's stubborn ambiguity. This conflict is made literal in the collection's most beguiling poem, "In Ron's Place", in which the narrator is listening to Charlie Parker's "April in Paris" while at the same time remembering a train ride through what seems like Eastern Europe. Parker's bebop jazz—music that Philip Larkin once compared to literary high modernism—is appropriately intercut with allusions to T.S. Eliot, especially to *The Waste Land*. In Dawe's own work, art's lyricism is also set against the jarring aftermath of war, much as Parker played with the jazz score to create space for discordance within the brightest of melodies. As the speaker falls asleep in Ron's place, these undertones come through, the "brazen light of day" replaced by a darkened train at night:

And I fall back to sleep,
 this time in a couchette,
 listening to the wheels brace and tack
 to miles and miles of railway track.

At one station—
 its long name in black and white,
 the row of lorries parked in
 a yellowish light from the waiting room—

the deadpan voice announces
 where we are and where we are going next
 as we arrive and depart
 the all-night factories, the cubist blocks

of flats, the shapes of installations
 in the darkness, snowy embankments,
 sidings, cranes, sheds,
 and then nothing again.

Dawe's poem moves on from an idyllic mountain village—where lizards slip in and out of “the warming roof tiles”—to a desolate wasteland of cubes and darkness. It is difficult not to think of other travellers in far less comfortable couchettes to this one, not only during the Second World War but also yesterday, today and tomorrow in other trains and vehicles. In Ron's Place, listening to jazz, is where many of us sit. Do we go on dozing in the sun or should we listen in to “the wheels brace and tack”? *The Morning Train* is full of similar commuters and exiles travelling side by side. But we have to know where to look and how to see to find them.

Dawe's poems frequently uncover past crimes and misdemeanours. Like Elizabeth Bishop's *Man-Moth*, he has a curious tendency to face the wrong way, hurtling down the tunnel of history away from the present. His favourite landing-point is somewhere between 1900 and 1950. Almost every poem refers to this time, not so much as a golden age but certainly as a period of wonder. The backward glance is always a piercing one, however. In a neat reverse of Stevie Smith's famous suicide, Dawe looks at the past with an intelligent smirk: “I'm not drowning, I'm waving/ at all you folks out there/ in the rising

tide” (“The Minos Hotel”). If this interest in the past seems, like Gatsby’s, almost an obsession, it is at the same time devoid of nostalgia or sentimentality. Dawe is to the Jazz Age what Charlie Parker was to Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington: a faithful if quizzical friend, holding on to the melodies that mattered.

Peter Robinson’s *About Time Too* demonstrates a similar concern for the recording and rewriting of history. He takes as his epigraph Byron’s brooding on “the present—the future—& even the colouring of the past”. While Dawe’s terrain is bordered on the west by New York City and on the east by Berlin and Prague; Robinson’s map spans the entire globe, upsetting the limits of what George Bush recently described as “the civilised world”. This does not make Robinson’s vision wider but it does move on our questions of travel to countries outside an afternoon’s flying time. “After Bansui”, for example, takes issue with the politics of isolationism, poking fun at W.H. Auden’s assumption that “maps can really point to places/ where life is evil now”. In a cultural and political climate in which such statements are again being made in the light of the events of September 11, Robinson’s careful use of language is a welcome treasure.

This veneration for the materiality of words is particularly apparent in the virtuoso poem, “The Bargain”, in which the narrator’s search for a junk shop bargain yields “a few job lots of words” in among the pottery and paperbacks. After haggling a little, the narrator secures his surreal bargain and carries it home:

Naturally enough, they’d seen better days
and smelt quite high, but you never can tell
when a word will come in handy... Well,
although the chap there said he’d no idea
where the stuff came from (filling in for someone),
as he told me I could have them for a song
I knocked him down a bit and took them home.

Curious to see what I’d bought, needless to say,
I tipped my plastic bag out on the table
and there, *disarmed, inert, inarticulate*, they lay:
province, bungalow, pale, slogan, char, veranda,
abacus, divan, dosh, audit, serf, indenture,

annihilate, cancel, snuff, silence, disappear,
not to mention ones like *station, race* or *gender*.

Why not clean them up, they'll be as good as new?
Then I borrowed Brasso, silver polish, perfume;
yet no amount of elbow grease or corporation pop
would cut through centuries of use and blame.
So I took them back along the Albert Road,
but the man had gone, the owner didn't want them,
and no one else either, though I tried every shop—

“Sorry, mate”, they said, “we’ve already got the same.”

Aside from the Pythonesque absurdity of it all, this is obviously a poem about poetry, particularly about the anxiety of saying anything new. Robinson also refers to the cultural barbs and snares that have always hung around language, the possibilities of miscommunication, silence or even abuse. For words like “race or gender” continually provoke dissent, regardless of how much caution or discretion is applied. “Centuries of use and blame” unsurprisingly show through. Robinson’s conceit is brilliantly executed. This is a comic poem with an erudite punch line, or should that be an erudite poem with a throwaway finish? The words let us choose and reconsider again and again.

“Variations on the theme of time” might well be the best subtitle for this volume. Eliot’s *Four Quartets* offers obvious parallels though contemporary writers like Italo Calvino and Haruki Murakami seem equally influential. The beautiful “Some Notes”, for example, has several Eliot echoes, particularly the way in which Robinson phrases the closing stanza like a wobbly cyclist negotiating a sticky path, the voice glued up by the mind’s hesitations:

I read old love names
scored in a bench’s wood, and time’s
signatures marked by white splotches,
stains; the pianist repeats her phrases,
alters attack till satisfied with how
it went, or goes, or should go—
how it went or it goes or should go.

Indecision becomes lyric here much as the pianist's repetitions bring out the underlying motifs. The literal scratches of name upon name on a bench's wood suggest the scoring of readers' names on a book's pages or simply the rereading of poems and songs by successive voices. In the poem's penultimate line, the narrator even practises his conclusion, the commas spacing out his obvious lack of breath. Although the final words are almost exactly the same, the absence of punctuation forces us to read on to a verbal crescendo: "how it went or it goes or should go". Poetry, like life, is just a few notes we continually practise to play better. While we could relate such ideas to postmodernist theories of space and time, they are perhaps better understood within a simple regard for the past, the "splotches" and "stains" that make our world historical.

If there is a problem with Robinson's approach, it is that he spins out too many variations on the same well-worn theme. Almost every stanza comes back to the subject of time recovered or squandered, shards of detail broken up by philosophical passages which sound almost translated. While individual lines and phrases do lift off, the overall effect can often be frustrating. Yet it is ultimately worth bearing with a poet who can still develop the following leaps of fancy, a spider plant gradually becoming an engine's flight path:

... spider plant
 leaves are a world map's air routes
 to spots we had or hadn't been
 on the double-page spread
 of a flight magazine.

Robinson is a poet keen on leaving the expected image or link behind. He is at his best when his seriousness makes way for humour, at his worst when seriousness is all there is. While Gerald Dawe is to some extent out of tune with the present, happier in a more responsible Jazz Age; Peter Robinson seems out of time completely, neither here nor there but rather in an imaginative somewhere of his own making. Although this vision of life makes his poetry more daring, its ambition often flies off the map, leaving the words (and reader) flailing.