

*The Sun, the South*

Pearse Hutchinson, *Collected Poems*. Gallery Press, €30.00 (hbk),  
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A poet, Alexander Blok once wrote, is a human being by profession. In the present climate, where poetry is less a fate and more a career-choice, the imperative is to professionalise first and be human second. The level of conformity, from what is said and not said and about whom, to the invisible pecking order and the smart-casual dress code, makes a bankers convention, by comparison, seem a riot of anarchy. The template of late capitalism, that takes away as it gives, has made sure of one thing—it is no longer possible to write *against*. We are all implicated. No-one dwells in Bohemia anymore.

Unless perhaps Pearse Hutchinson, who is a human being by profession in Blok's sense of the word, and whose poems, moreover, belong to a moment when Us and Them was a concept that still held water. Subcultures, be they jazz, poetry, homosexuality or whatever, had yet to become Culture, let alone Heritage. "Lovers alone lovers protect", in Patrick Kavanagh's phrase, would appear to have been the watchword. It is all too easy to forget, from our own subsidised and sanitised artistic middle-ground, how stark the options then were. To go straight or go under, or to dwell, precariously, in a subculture and hope for the best. Is it any wonder then, that so many poems in this *Collected* are dedicated to friends, or mention people the reader will not be familiar with, as if entering a room where everyone has already been introduced and nothing, neither the multilingual argot of the poems or the names of the addressees, needs to be explained? The clique, in other words, as defensive shield against a threatening world, where a friend can throw together a delicious meal, or suggest an orgy as an antidote to the depression of ageing:

Paul you brought us in  
Nessa said Come to us

At three in the morning she said  
Come to us  
At four in the morning  
You opened your door to us

.....  
When the painting was done the painter sang and played;  
“Mi marido es un  
minero”, the Dies Iræ, Whack-fol-the-diddle and many more.

When the singing  
was done the guitarist went into the kitchen and cooked  
rinones al jerez, the  
best I’ve ever eaten. When the meal was over the chef began  
to sing again but  
after a while the drink ran out so we had to face the pub

.....  
As it turned out the orgy never happened,  
we just went on joking and getting drunker and drunker  
right where we were,  
and looking at maddening pictures and going a little madder  
than before  
but your exasperated generosity  
kept me younger for weeks.

The politics of the clique is the politics of personal or interpersonal authenticity before it had metamorphosed into the I’m-cool-but-you’re-not attitudinising of the late 1960s. Many poems take place on the fault-line where this authenticity comes up against the world in general, in small interfacing or facings-off of Us against Them—the petty tyrannies of branch post offices, the bus conductor collecting fares, the breakers-up of old currags, the mean shopkeepers and pub-owners who won’t allow music or singing. And on the other hand the gentle and vulnerable—the necessitous young prostitutes, the Yorkshire miners, the gays in a state of fear, the men with beards afraid to go out—and the Bohemian “irresponsibles” in general who cruise the margins of “acceptable” society.

We rode the canals  
we steered the locks  
we may have caught scabies

but never the pox  
we were happy just cruising  
and boxing the fox  
cruising the rivers of Dublin and  
foxing the cops

All this harmlessness, this living in and through an apparent inconsequentiality, hearkens back to the Patrick Kavanagh of the late 1950s and early '60s—the playing of “a true note on a dead slack string”, the hit-or-miss æsthetic that is forever rising like a phoenix from the ashes of its own sloppy-intuitive badness to enact a powerful meditation on language like “The Frost is All Over”, a historical witnessing like “Barnsley Main Seam” or a string of wonderful love poems from “Into their True Gentleness” and “Miracles” through to the late “For Alan”. The more formal “Malaga” though, from earlier in the career, remains unsurpassable:

The scent of unseen jasmine on the warm night beach.

The tram along the sea road all the way from town  
Through its wide open sides drank unseen jasmine down.  
Living was nothing all those nights but that strong flower,  
Whose hidden voice on darkness grew to such mad power  
I could have sworn for once I travelled through full peace  
And even love at last had perfect calm release  
Only by breathing in the unseen jasmine scent,  
That ruled us and the summer every hour we went.

All the dark mid-century Irish longing for the South is present in this poem. The South of wine, light and unrepressed sensuality that is given, almost prototypically, in Austin Clarke’s “The Straying Student”, as an airhole or a needle’s eye through which two generations of Irish writers and poets streamed, to a heaven of play and experiment. An essay has yet to be written on the effects of Spain and Spanish Civil War politics on Irish writing, but the language issue in Catalonia and the bitter anti-ecclesiasticism of the defeated Left have surely entered the consciousness and work of returnees like Paul Durcan, Michael Hartnett and Hutchinson himself. His stentorian bellow, the head-on choleric outburst in an age of cool irony and Horatian obliquity about

injustice, comes like a breath of fresh air:

Still as before  
Impossible to pick up a paper  
Without the familiar faces, the incomparable  
Cynical names incurable streaming out  
Like roaches from a kitchen wall.

All this, perhaps, is to run the risk of systematising what is casual and peripatetic, zigzagging between fragmentary and achieved utterance. Hutchinson's poems, which had barely emerged from the subcultures of the 1960s, in a strange way went underground again with the onset and hegemony of the Belfast *Weltanschauung*. Though never quite. Their re-emergence, in the form of this *Collected Poems*, is a reminder to a young generation inclined, just now, to echo Northern Irish poetics like Received Pronunciation, that there are other possibilities—the sun, the South, direct and passionate utterance, the re-invention of Bohemia.