

Seeking and Finding a Difficulty

Carol Ann Duffy, *Feminine Gospels*. Picador, £12.99stg (hbk)
 Alice Oswald, *Dart*. Faber, £8.99stg (hbk)

Carol Ann Duffy's gospels are mainly of the "honest—gospel truth" kind. There is some good news here, but very little evangelism. This might be a good thing. The poems in *Feminine Gospels* are assured and appealing, often very funny. Duffy creates personæ whose mixture of colloquial diction and hyperbolic ambition is instantly engaging. "Sub" is a tomboy's fantasy, in which the speaker, "substituted" for male heroes of exploration, sport and pop music, also writes, reads, drinks and becomes a mother. Duffy isn't afraid to admit that boys sometimes have more fun, while suggesting that a gendered society imposes some stringent limits on them too. "I felt the first kick/ of my child; whacked a century into the crowd" expresses a Utopianism which isn't without its evasions and elisions, as the final lines of the poem acknowledge: "to kneel, best of all, first woman there,/ on the Moon and gaze at the beautiful faraway earth—/ What I think to myself is this:".

The teachers and girls of the long poem "The Laughter of Stafford Girls' High" discover their destinies through a bout of hysterical laughter. Duffy's long line and cumulative syntax replicate both the dullness of the women's lives and the uncontrollable wave of laughter that changes them forever. The details of this poem exploit girls' school stories for their comic value—the school curriculum seems to consist of nothing but lists and over-inflected verse, the teachers have no first names, while the girls all have two (in a dig at her poetic foremothers, Duffy calls the school poet "Ursula Fleur"). But school stories also provide the model for a tender, witty love between women, which matures elegantly in the elegiac lyrics that conclude this collection, such as "White Writing", "Wish" and "Death and the Moon". In these

poems simple and resonant diction replaces the occasionally repetitive narrative roll of “The Laughter of Stafford Girls’ High”:

Nobody died. Nobody
wept. Nobody slept who couldn’t be woken
by the light. If I can only push open this heavy door
she’ll be standing there in the sun, dirty, tired,
wondering why do I shout, why do I run.

(“Wish”)

This poetry of intimacy, however, cannot sustain a reputation as stellar as Duffy’s (the press release for this collection describes her as “one of Britain’s most revered and best loved poets”, but, to be fair to Picador’s eager PR, it is hard to encapsulate the variety of responses to her work).

It is in this collection’s more public poems that problems emerge. “Tall” is about a woman who wishes for height and gets it:

But pilgrims came—
small women with questions and worries, men
on stilts. She was 30 foot, growing, could see for miles.

So day six, she upped sticks, horizon-bound
in seven-league boots. Local crowds swarmed
round her feet, chanting.

She cured no one.

Duffy astutely selects fairy-tale and B-movie imagery here, reflecting the limitations of our idea of the large or strong woman and the paucity of cultural material from which ambitious women must make their dreams. Sometimes, though, these images take a troubling turn, as in the final lines of “Tall”: “She stooped low/ and caught their souls in her hands as they fell/ from the burning towers.” The conflation of a Tarot card, King Kong and pictures of World Trade Center victims jumping from the burning buildings is surely meant to make us uneasy. We might legitimately ask, though, whether a poem should endorse the capture of painful, fearful, horrific deaths and their immediate transformation into archetype. A similar problem haunts “Loud”:

Down, she was pure sound, rumbling
like an avalanche. She bit radios, swallowed them, gargled

their News, till the words were—ran into the church and
the congregation with bullets no one has claimed—gibberish,
in the cave of her mouth.

What are we to make of this deafening woman who eats news, or rather, the News, as our allegorical media-savvy parlance has it? She ends the poem as the News, rather like Spenser's Malbecco, who begins his story as a type (the jealous cuckold) and becomes a personification of Jealousy. Like Malbecco, she is her own allegorical catalyst: it is her agonised reaction to news stories (the poem's epigraph describes mutilated children being turned away from an empty hospital in Afghanistan in October 2001) that prompts the expansion of her voice into the personified News. Unlike Malbecco, her "reduction" from the status of individual to abstraction gives her power, the power to devour the world: "She howled until every noise in the world/ sang in the spit of her tongue". This is still more troubling than the co-opting of victims of the September 11 attack into cultural iconography. Here, the suffering of the whole world is captured and put to work expressing the anger of one CNN viewer.

Other women in this collection engage in "feminine" activities in a similarly hyperbolic fashion: they diet, shop, do manual and domestic work fanatically, enormously, until they envelop the world which has marginalised and disparaged them. The dieter does this paradoxically, by becoming microscopic, swimming in tears, resting in nostrils and chapped lips, wallowing in fingernail-mud, ending up "inside the Fat Woman now,/ trying to get out". (I suggest a fifty-year moratorium on allusions to poor—thin—Orwell's threadbare epigram.) But the microcosm-macrocosm analogy is still there, insisting that because the self is inside the world, the world must also be inside the self. It is a (perhaps *the*) cherished feature of allegorical literature, but it offers little in the way of political liberation, only crazed competition with other selves who, one fears, might get to envelop the world first. Combined with the bodily introspection of feminist erotica, as in "The Map-Woman", it is suffocating. The protagonist, who has a map of all the places she has lived in and visited tattooed onto her skin, goes to a foreign country, to find "The map translated everything back to herself". Such solipsism is chilling, and not to be

sloughed off along with the map-skin at the poem's end: "Deep in the bone/ old streets tunnelled and burrowed, hunting for home". These "gospels" aim for transcendence of political, social and gender confines, but achieve only gigantism within them.

Alice Oswald's *Dart* attempts a different kind of largeness, expansive rather than massive. The poem follows the eponymous river from its source, on a remote part of Dartmoor, to the sea at Dartmouth. Oswald spent two years researching the work of the river, speaking to and recording those who make a living from or spend their leisure time on or in it, and exploring myth and folklore surrounding it. The poem, she explains in a headnote, "is made from the language of people who live and work on the Dart". It is a "sound-map of the river, a songline from the source to the sea". Her use of a term popularised by Bruce Chatwin's creative, quasi-fictional anthropology alerts the reader to a central struggle in this poem, between a mythicising and exoticising discourse, which presents Devonshire and its people as subjects for anthropological study, and a more democratic, historical and experiential discourse, which is rich in informationist nuggets: we learn about sewage, wool and milk processing, for instance. Oswald is careful not to let any of her personæ dominate the poem and furthermore, the voices of the poem "do not refer to real people or even fixed fictions" and "should be read as the river's mutterings". This attempt at total withdrawal of personality, we might feel, is a little disingenuous. Oswald has too good an ear to resist the found poetry that ordinary speech sometimes throws up: "I wear green for the sake of kingfishers" says a river bailiff, while a forester comments "They say all rivers were once fallen trees", and the water abstractor asks "was it offish? Did you increase the magnetite?" These give us a sense, however fallacious, of "real people" (or "fixed fictions") with their own recognisable idioms.

More problematically, Oswald's stance of impersonality can sometimes lead her into a lax anthropomorphism. The poem begins with a Wordsworthian sighting of a old man moving across the moor, "seeking and finding a difficulty". Oswald needs a device to start the man speaking, and instead of inventing a poetic persona to ask him his business, she has the emerging river do it for her: "The Dart, lying low in darkness, calls out Who is it?/ trying to summon itself by speaking". This, like Duffy's poems, creates the uncomfortable feeling that something superhuman

has been captured and assimilated to a very trivial human use. Oswald does at least explore this feeling, but it's hard to be sure to what extent she recognises that her own poem participates in the process. Personification of the natural world can never be wholly benign, for it represents the legitimisation of the self's illegitimate desire to dominate that which is not the self. Cool impersonality like Oswald's has the potential to expose that desire to dominate, but more often, perhaps, domesticates and naturalises it.

Dart is a technically accomplished poem, showing particular skill in extracting poetic language from accounts of technical processes (many of which are themselves about extraction, of tin, or gold, or pure water). Where Oswald confronts myth (as opposed to folklore—her evocation of Jan Coo, the familiar spirit of the Dart, is sure, even if the archetypal character of Jan Coo hardly allows for originality) her tone wavers worryingly:

God how I
wish I could
bury death deep

under the river
like that canoeist
just testing his

strokes in the
quick moving water
which buried him

O Flumen Dialis
let him be
the magical flame

come spring that
lights one oak
off the next

and the fields
and workers bursting
into light amen

The short, open line doesn't guard against the reader's inclination to put an absurd construction on the imagery (canoe as phallic

Jovian thunderbolt, anyone?). Nor does it conceal infelicities of language, “magical flame”, “bursting/ into light” and the facility with which a horrible, frightening death is made into an ecstatic pagan prayer. By the end of the poem, though, Oswald’s handling of mythic material seems to have grown surer:

This is me, anonymous, water’s soliloquy,

all names, all voices, Slip-Shape, this is Proteus,
whoever that is, the shepherd of the seals,
driving my many selves from cave to cave ...

Proteus, with his “many selves”, is a figure who might allow for a confrontation with the problems of *prosopopœia* mentioned above, as long as Oswald does not allow him to become a symbol of the vapid celebration of “diversity” or “variety”. *Dart* consistently approaches, and then shies away from, the possibility that language may be as intractably and indomitably non-human as the river itself.

Dart is a poem that promises much, and its failure to deliver on all its promises provokes an irritation which should be read as a measure of its achievement. It uses apparently open forms (on inspection, they’re more closed than they look) and marginal glosses (mostly helpful, but occasionally emitting a pleasing resistance to interpretation and explication) to articulate a poetry of place. This has become a rare combination in British and Irish poetry. In Randolph Healy’s words, the poetic mainstream has erected “checkpoints [...] at every entrance to the tradition into which one could not pass without a certified ‘sense of place’”. The response of critics sympathetic to the avant-garde has usually been to erect a checkpoint going the other way, ensuring that any trace of humanism in the prospective immigrant to the territory of linguistic innovation is expunged, or at least thoroughly sneered at. On the evidence of *Dart*, Oswald seems unwilling to accept confinement to the literary refugee camp between these lines of patrolling critics, and for that alone deserves our attention and commendation.