

First Words

Alan Gillis, *Somebody, Somewhere*. Gallery Press, €17.50 (hbk),
€11.40 (pbk)

Matthew Welton, *The Book of Matthew*. Carcanet, £7.95 (pbk)

Alan Gillis's first collection opens with a poem that seems designed to make the reader sit up and take heed, heralding what is to come. Punningly titled "The Ulster Way" and so calling to attention the poet's interest in the doubleness of words, it suggests at once the notion of a local standard practice but also the long-distance walking route through Northern Ireland's areas of natural beauty. And this it appears is emphatically a poetry that is not to be concerned with the rural, the pastoral, nor it seems with traditional modes of Irish poetry; "This is not about burns or hedges./ There will be no gorse" rather here there is only the urban, the urbane, a post-modern, technologically-ridden, globalised and somewhat dehumanised Belfast. As the blurb, penned by an enthusiastic Ciaran Carson—an obvious precursor—proclaims, Gillis's Belfast is "not a conventional 'Troubles' landscape". The poet here—as most Irish poets of this generation have done—eschews usual representations of political and religious divides, of binary oppositions in terms of Ireland and England; for "this is not about horizons, in their curving limitations". Nor is it accidental that Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* is referred to in the last stanza of "Thou Hast Enlarged Me" for something of that work's preoccupation with cities real and imagined must be driving Gillis's own.

The city then is coloured, filtered through the flâneur's zany, post-modern consciousness, entirely taken over by contemporary experience, as a film or virtual reality game, and through language that is all extravagant metaphor and simile. Thus, "Casualty" speaks of vision distorted by drugs: "the doctor's amphetamine glint in her eye". The city itself is explicitly addressed in "To

Belfast” as having “the grace of a diva on a crackling screen” as no boundaries between a factual reality and various simulated experience, between the literal and the figurative, exist. Much mention is made of screens, computer games, mobile phones, DVDs, Xboxes, the cinema. Belfast is a text made up of arbitrary signs: names of places, products summoned—“a bar called Galaxy”—revealing their inherent meaninglessness. Advertising slogans feature; “It’s good to talk”, in this modern day climate of consumerism and commercialisation. Indeed, “Porter” seems to use the technique from the Guinness advertising campaigns where an image of black on white—here, a girl’s black hair, white face—comes to form itself into the pint of Guinness itself. The “porter” of the title suggesting too a door that opens from one image into another. Although most of the poems address a “you” and refer to other characters, it is clear that the human element is remote: people are isolated in separate artificial realities (as in the games arcade) then only connecting electronically (by text messages).

It may not be poetry that is to concern itself, as the opening poem declares, with the “rhythm of a songline”. However, references to pop music—here the reference to Joy Division’s “Atmosphere”—prepare the reader for the onslaught of endless references to pop culture. Indeed the title of the collection must be from Chicago’s song of the same name. “Don’t You” is a patchwork of song lyrics by Talking Heads, Duran Duran, Eurythmics and others, while “12th October, 1994” is carried along by a soundtrack of popular hits, set in the “Twilight Zone” which, with its eerie sci-fi overtones, points both to the amusement arcade of that name in Belfast’s sectarian North Street as well as to the idea of Belfast as the no-man’s land of the “Troubles” and Belfast as a locale of random violence on virtual reality screens. The expected literary references are here too: “Niamh”, with its refrain from Yeats’ “The Hosting of the Sidhe” has Niamh brought forward to a bar in twenty-first century Belfast’s “Holy Land” as a victim of sexual violence. “Killynether” is an updated take on C.S. Lewis’ Narnia story while the poet’s notes at the back point to Valéry, Rilke and Arno. Yeats’s “Lake Isle of Innisfree” is set alongside Star Wars’s “Forest Moon of Endor” (both sanctuaries) in “Casualty”. Joyce is also alluded to, Gillis employing Muldoon-like allusive effects with the word “hierarchitectitiptoptical” from *Finnegans Wake*.

It is the poet’s exuberant use of figurative language through-

out that is most striking. The cinematic, surreal quality of the poems can at times seem overdone, particularly in the mawkish “Street Scene in Blue” with its jejune attempt at emotional resonance:

And then my head becomes a DVD
replaying things that were mixed with things
that might have been, intercutting close-ups
with tracking-shots of you next to me...

The crazed use of metaphor and simile for all its use as poetic resource almost bursts to excess with enthusiasm in its own making, even at times coming across as showy and far-fetched, as here in “Monday Morning”:

Suddenly I was in the middle of a sex scene
As the green hills huddled like a squad of marines
Around the fried-egg sun, in a ketchup-red sky...

The repeated end-words in the ode “To Belfast” call Muldoon and his formal adventures with the sestina to mind but the use of this device here is unsuccessful, the words failing to develop towards other possibilities. Forms falter under the heft of descriptive extravagance. The linguistic effects can be excessive, making a poetry far too conscious of its own efforts and straining to keep up with itself and with the achievements of poets such as Muldoon and Carson who are such obvious influences throughout, though lacking the former’s formal mastery and allusive cleverness and the latter’s musically sensitive ear. Gillis is one of the staff at the Seamus Heaney Centre for Poetry and this collection is certainly a product of that place, the notes acknowledging the help and encouragement of Carson and McGuckian. It is a smart, glitzy performance but I wondered at times whether there is enough substance beneath.

Matthew Welton’s first collection on the other hand is dedicated to “the rhythm of the song-line”, to the musical possibilities of words in and for themselves. This is a more formally assured work, a body of poems that needs no pyrotechnics to achieve delight. As Wallace Stevens put it: “above everything else, poetry is words” and though Stevens and R.F. Langley are obvious influences, Welton has developed his own style out of theirs. These are

poems that don't have to mean but be. Welton's poetry readings are uncommon in the way that he performs his poems from memory, as a musician would, slowly, deliberately; his words as mouthfuls of sound, attentive to details of alliteration, assonance, rhyme. These poems are indeed "delicious to say".

Welton's poetry is not concerned with matters of history, politics or ideologies but creates a world all its own. "London sundays" notes "the clock that never works" and it is precisely the passing of time from one moment to the next, the movement and colour of the seasons, of the world that is important to this most sensually engaged of poets. Colours, smells, sounds "matter", brought out with acute tenderness for "the way" they happen. This preoccupation with words manifests itself in the title poem, which is structured on the sections of *Roget's Thesaurus*. Interesting here is the pattern that becomes apparent as the sections unfold; the adverb in each of the final lines of the section's final stanzas carried over into the final lines of the second last stanza. Thus, "The sound of insects/ carries hesitantly into the air" becomes in the next section, "Hesitantly the light passes. Hesitantly// the wind loosens off into the day". Words are as notes of music, forming one chord, modulating into another, the sections as chords, the repeated pattern creating the equivalent of a ground bass, anchoring the whole. Slight changes of a single adjective, noun or punctuation mark affect the tone, mood, image of each poem as in the pairs "Van der Kerkhoff" and "De Boer". These subtle uses of variation and repetition, of descriptive possibilities illuminate what it is that makes a poem, that is, the over-riding importance of verbal and musical exactitude.

Iambic lines predominate and the rhythmic and formal design is masterful, the poet's own sense of timing impeccable. Both of the poems titled "Van der Kerkhoff" are composed of one sentence that moves over fifteen lines, the enjambment creating a sense of the same "unendingness" of natural life as it draws on and out. Welton's use of simile renders the world anew: "The evenings drop like plums" or "the wind wears off like drunkenness or lust". The poems are expertly crafted and punctuated, as here in "The wonderment of fundament", the full-stop arrests the action, clamped by alliteration:

She makes her music, loosening her hands.
The moment holds.

“Another explanation” has a river “lemon-coloured” after dawn, that “seems to have about it something almost like/ a kind of illogic-the denial perhaps, of/ any sense of order, any order of sense”; the chiasmus thoughtfully reflecting the river’s pull and flow, as it “seems almost to be holding something back”. The same effect is perfectly employed in “Hubba” where “The sea reflects the sky, the sky the sea”, the chiasmus mimetic of this mirror image. Nothing is overstated or imposed, but all evolves gradually, carefully. After experiencing this poetry, we too must “find it easier to see how one thing slips/ into another, simpler to believe in change”.