

LORD OF THE FILES



Nicholas Murray

DENNIS O'DRISCOLL, *Quality Time*. Anvil, £7.95

JOHN ENNIS, *Selected Poems*. Dedalus, £7.95

If there's a correlation between the lives poets lead and the poems they write it has yet to be calibrated. One would be hard pressed to derive laws of poetic behaviour from the lives of Stevens, Williams, Eliot, Larkin who chose to work at trades rather than, as the last of these put it, "swagger the nut-strewn roads".

Dennis O'Driscoll, who has worked as an Irish civil servant since leaving school at sixteen, is now at the Dublin Customs Office, a post easily the equal of Cavafy's berth at the Board of Irrigation Works in Alexandria. Notwithstanding Frank Kermode's stern reprimand (*à propos* of Stevens) to those critics who "allowed their judgement of the poetry to be corrupted by wonder or annoyance at the poet's double life", we do wonder and not the least of the attractions of O'Driscoll's witty, humane and sentient verse is the gradual intimacy we strike up with its prevailing persona, self-dubbed in a poem from an earlier collection "Lord of the Files".

The poet's satirical view of the poetry racket, caught here in a splendid exposure of the self-regarding banalities of poetry-reading patter, "The Next Poem", could encourage a view of the poet as Larkinian curmudgeon, happy to go to the office to avoid all that aesthetic jazz. But it's a view that would be grossly unfair to O'Driscoll. For one thing he is a poet alert to wonder, a keen observer and translator of the natural world into satisfying images, and one in love with language, its pitfalls and deceits, and, most notably in the satiric *tour de force* which forms the second part of the book, "The Bottom Line", its contemporary register. He is a poet who looks and listens with scrupulous attention.

The dappled light of Martianism played over O'Driscoll's earlier poems but it was never merely tricky and in this new volume the images again strike freshly, making us see rather than murmuringly applaud the poet's cleverness. In "The Night Watch" a dawn discovery of buzzing wasps translates them into "Primed cluster bombs. / A sizzling pan. / A holiday traffic jam. / A battle dance" and links them to a range of modern threats and menaces. In "Last Flight" they appear again in a nest dying at the onset of winter, the lingering insects in the comb "old crippled nuns / in the cold cells / of a redundant convent".

Like Larkin, O'Driscoll had, as a poem in an earlier collection put it: "A childhood too boring for words" in Thurles, Tipperary. Those early poems were largely domestic in their occasions, concerned with family relationships and crises, and in this new collection O'Driscoll is still keen to represent himself as diurnal man, locked in the routines of office and home, troubled from time to

time by what he once called “G-plan angst” and conscious of his own unavoidable self: “you with the same old daily moods, debts, / intuitions, food fads, pet hates, Achilles’ heels”. But out of this material he fashions something more than tenderly nursed regret, a Larkinian acidie.

One of the sustaining pleasures of these poems is their bold and witty confrontation with the irreducible, the way in which the reality of death and ageing and disappointment is not flinched from but transformed into sharply observed images and aphorisms:

marble is not the proper way
to enshrine her memory
whose name looks cold in stone
whose flesh creased with the least pressure. (“Undying”)

Beneath the wit and the vividly realized word-painting there is a more sombre note of realization:

“That we will come,
ultimately, to nothing

—this the wind ensures,
threatening to break and enter.” (“Variations for Wind”)

O’Driscoll has clearly been influenced by the poets of Eastern Europe, their parabolic tendency, their black humour (see, for example, “The One Twenty Pub” after Wislawa Szymborska) and their wry playing off of official language and lived reality. The poet’s satirical temper, evident here in poems like “Success Story”, “December”, or “Them and You” reaches its peak in the long poem, first published in 1994 by Dedalus, “The Bottom Line”. It consists of fifty freeform but tightly written eleven-line stanzas (O’Driscoll has little use for the resource of rhyme) that crisply enact scenes from the life of a contemporary business executive, successful but troubled by the precariousness of a success that walks on very thin ice.

But the real protagonist of this poem is language, whose formulaic patterns and sterile clichés the poet has captured perfectly: “we touch base / if schedules permit” confesses a manager about lunch with his working wife. Driven by the need to be seen to be on top (but unsure what to do with the moments of leisure that are granted) the speaker lives and breathes the atmosphere of corporate blather (“However tight the shop, there will always / be some weak link in line management”). Part of the joy of this poem is O’Driscoll’s masterly ear for such locutions as “the downside / of a greenfield site”. It might be urged that the central characters are one-dimensional, a poet’s he-would-say-that-wouldn’t-he view of the senior management suits, but it sustains itself on O’Driscoll’s unflagging verve, his precision, the compression of the stanza and its high-octane charge of observation and insight into contemporary business

life. Many of his contemporaries would, one suspects, lack the specific experience to carry this off.

To move from the light, springy imagism of O'Driscoll to John Ennis' *Selected Poems* is to pass into an altogether more arduous terrain. This selection from eight volumes over a twenty year publishing career comes garlanded with a quotation from Seamus Heaney regretting Ennis' neglect and claiming that he has "worked seriously and steadily"—one of those emollient Heaneyisms that may, on closer inspection, be a little less innocent than they look. Do we want our poets to "work seriously and steadily" (a commendable approach in one digging a trench for the Gas Board) or do we want them to surprise and delight us?

The signalled influences here are Pound and Hart Crane and perhaps, too, the rugged mellifluousness of Bunting. Fleet-footed Ennis is not and, to my taste, the writing is too sombrely bardic, too ready to fall into the claggy embrace of modernist Parnassian. This sort of thing (from "Sgarúint na gCompánach", an elegy for his brother):

Henry, accept this pale proffered In Memoriam.
I heard you once cry anger at all ritual
(As we polished gold chalices of the lamb)
That gilds the speechless throat, each cleavered call.
These lines cut us somewhere in cross-section,
Engrave the blank metal plates with what was sure.

The same poem contains the line: "Constant in its garish space my mind bleeps, grieves", which seems to me discordant even in this context, however genuine the poet's grieving. And long poems, like "Orpheus" strike one as—there seems no kinder way to put it—interminable, such that the reviewer ought perhaps to declare an incapacity to respond and pass on. Except that in a poem like "Exit" which is excerpted here one sees that Ennis is capable of a more direct, felt approach to the poetry of grieving, uncluttered by wordy mannerisms, and otiose (in the sense of being decorative rather than functional in the best modernist manner) allusion to other poets.

One wants him to purge these poems, too, of their occasional banality. In "Telling the Bees", the poet confronts a swarm of bees leaving the hive with: "I look out across the circling thousands / Like Morrison did in the Doors' concert days." Or in a poem on Berryman's suicide, from the ambitious *Down in the Deeper Helicon* of 1994, we read: "Astride the viaduct of his Mississippi, / He leaped from dark to turbulent dark with little felicity." There is a cognate failure here, too, in the visible strain for rhyme in these not always happily-constructed sonnets.

This is a substantial body of work for a poet barely turned fifty, praised by the Irish American Cultural Institute which gave him its award last year for having united "the great streams of Clarke, Kavanagh and Devlin". *De gustibus non est disputandum*.