

MINDSCAPE WITH BUTTERFLIES AND WIND-MACHINE



Tim Kendall

GERARD BEIRNE, *Digging My Own Grave*. Dedalus Press, £5.95

FRED JOHNSTON, *True North*. Salmon Poetry, £5.99

THOMAS MCCARTHY, *The Lost Province*. Anvil Press, £7.95

SINEAD MORRISSEY, *There was Fire in Vancouver*.

Carcanet Press, £6.95

MARY O'MALLEY, *The Knife in the Wave*. Salmon Poetry, £5.99

MARK ROPER, *Catching the Light*. Lagan Press, £4.95

Books included in round-ups usually have one thing in common: the editor considered none of them worthy of more detailed treatment. Space being a premium after the lengthy examinations of the latest Heaneys, Hugheses and Ashberys, the leftovers get lumped together for a quick perfunctory scouring. The result can be terribly unfair to all concerned. Describing the fate of a first volume of poetry, Christopher Reid's "Go, Little Book" touches on this universal principle when it reports how a reviewer "was able to despatch it / in two brisk sentences, / one containing a joke".

Thankfully, chance sometimes throws up unexpected affinities between the most unlikely volumes. Or, as one or two of the poets listed above might argue, something more than chance. Because each of these six poets explores, with varying degrees of subtlety and success, the concept of Design. "How ordered the world is, when it tries!" proclaims a Fred Johnston poem. Chaos theory finds no converts in these collections. A butterfly in Japan might flap its wings for all its worth, but storms and hurricanes are still nothing more complex than the wrath of God: "There was too much rage in the sky for it not to be God's", reports Sinéad Morrissey's "After the Hurricane". Another of her poems, "Belfast Storm", reckons "It's as though the angels are angry", with the simile barely—and only temporarily—protecting her from acceptance of such antiquated world-views: "I can't think what they [the angels] haven't got used to by now". By the time we arrive at Gerard Beirne's "my God is wind/ I am wind" ("Where We Have Been"), we might be only too inclined to agree.

There is nothing wrong *per se* with a poetry of faith. But it hardly

takes a theologian to point out that faith and doubt complement each other. As T.S. Eliot maintained, the doubter is someone who takes the problem of his or her faith seriously. Too many of these poets refuse to take it anything like seriously enough, with the result that their work can appear laughably simple-minded. If you are looking for a post-Copernican philosophy in most of these collections, then you'll look in vain (one of Morrissey's poems is called "The World is Not Round"). Instead angels appear from every nook and cranny, blocking out the sun they're so common. The two Salmon poets—Fred Johnston and Mary O'Malley—are particularly guilty of an antediluvian fuzziness which sounds like babytalk coming from anyone but Yeats (and often like babytalk even from him): "O young love be good / be full of longing as a windy wood" croons Fred Johnston, a century too late; Mary O'Malley sends the reader to sleep with a "Lullaby" which, rather disconcertingly, offers the prospect of "Golden nets and silver fish / Floating in the sky". Fred Johnston at least breaks out of his soporific reveries now and again. In "Faith", for example, he doubts the efficacy of prayer, and suggests that our praying for so many different things means we see God as "a croupier". God may not play dice, but perhaps he plays roulette: one number just has to come up. This image represents a rare foray for Johnston, and later in the poem he's back to telling us he does not allow whitethorn in the house. He and O'Malley need to get treated for a severe dose of Yeats. Both the Salmon books are attractively—yes—designed. Shame about the contents.

Which brings me to Gerard Beirne's perceptively-titled *Digging My Own Grave*. There isn't much point bothering to criticise this collection at length: as Johnston or O'Malley might well say, it would be like breaking a butterfly upon a wheel. Admittedly, Beirne's poems about Christ are sufficient to encourage even the most militant atheist to pray for divine retribution. In "The Resurrection of Man" a Christ-figure wonders why his "tongue has abstained from licking [his nipples'] blessed buds"; clearly he's something of a gymnast, or maybe he can now reach because he has suddenly developed "two plump breasts". This is mild stuff compared with the five poems concluding the collection, all of which are titled "Variations on a ..." (Nativity, Stoning, Betrayal, Crucifixion, Resurrection). Each poem is based on some dunderheaded hypothesis: "If He who was without sin had cast the first stone"; "If the crippled had declined to walk"; "If Judas had no need for money" and so on, *ad nauseam*. "If your auntie had balls, she'd be your uncle", someone should have told Beirne long ago. Several other points especially perplexed me: do dead butterflies, taken up in the wind, really have their "tiny crisp necks" snapped when their bodies fall back to earth, as Beirne

claims in “At Last”? For that matter, do butterflies have necks? And when a garrulous woman manages to literalise the title’s cliché in “Talking the Hindlegs off a Donkey”, the poet sees the unfortunate beast “trot across her lonesome field/ dragging its arse behind”. Trot?

The humourless angels on the cover of Sinéad Morrissey’s *There Was Fire in Vancouver* look the sort who might enjoy—insofar as they might enjoy anything—sorting out the likes of Beirne; after all, they’re quite capable, when suitably vexed, of venting their displeasure on the poet’s home city, Belfast (see “Belfast Storm”). Morrissey herself presumes she’s on the side of the angels: “My new angels are howling, hard”, with their rage “assured, ragged, unforgiving” (“My New Angels”). There’s a scary fundamentalism about Morrissey’s poetry. In the title poem the speaker and an unidentified companion stare out the window of their hotel, watching a fire no one else seems to have noticed:

There were no sirens, hoses, buckets even,
Scattering streets and “Fire!” “Fire!”
We seemed the only ones conscious of the bright crusade
And we watched with Moses standing in our heads.

Is this a real fire? Or a fire which, refuting the laws of thermodynamics, burns but does not consume, as exhibited by the burning bush in which God appears to Moses. Certainly the phrase “bright crusade” suggests a spiritual dimension: the fire is God’s will, doing God’s work, as if the city represents some latter-day Sodom or Gomorrah (both of which were destroyed by fire and brimstone). We don’t question Morrissey’s self-righteous Old Testament ethic, where God manifests Himself primarily in destruction. She has, after all, successfully appealed to authority: Moses is a companion and fellow spectator.

However distasteful the reader might find Morrissey’s theology, this should not be allowed to count against the quality of her poetry. There was *Fire in Vancouver* displays considerable talent and potential. Yet it does suffer from a bad case of first collection syndrome. The book is already too short (about 700 lines instead of the usual 1000 plus), but in fact it needs further pruning. She might certainly have omitted “Twenty-One,” a cakey four-liner:

I don’t know why God gave the world,
But I am in it. Looking up, I want to photograph
The blown blossom and the receding colours of the day—
To affirm my sky as beautifully as a blackbird.

Elsewhere it’s sometimes hard to avoid a feeling of *déjà vu*. Morrissey

should have been told that after Heaney, Muldoon and Carson we don't need "Thoughts in a Black Taxi", which is yet another poem about how, in sectarian Belfast, your name can land you in trouble if it sounds obviously Protestant or—in Morrissey's case—Catholic. Morrissey will improve, and when she does, she will regret having rushed into print with this collection.

Thomas McCarthy is a more finished poet, with four previous volumes and an already-secure reputation to bolster him. *The Lost Province* divides into four sections, which might respectively be categorised as poems about love, politics, childhood and family, and religion. McCarthy is never less than competent, but it is the final section, titled "Declan, Scientist", which shows him at his most ambitious. According to the blurb, "The final sequence wryly reimagines history in the poems of St Declan, a proselytizing Christian Scientist who arrives in Dark Age Ireland on a floating boulder, armed with a shortwave radio". This crib is handy, because the sequence itself seems rather less forthcoming. McCarthy's largest debt is to Geoffrey Hill's *Mercian Hymns*, particularly in its juxtapositions of ancient and modern:

We are flattered by Princes of the Deisi
bearing gifts; filigree gold
for melting down to micro-chips,
complicated Pictish MSS
and a white-haired Princess.
We gaze upon this beautiful daughter
of an unsaved Celtic chieftain—
gold nor God-health will move her.

Unfortunately, Hill's influence is rather too evident here as elsewhere. Nevertheless, this does not wholly invalidate a sequence which proves McCarthy less credulous than the likes of Morrissey. His poems take their faith seriously enough to laugh at it, find it absurd. The sequence is a powerful, if oblique, examination of the pressures the modern world has exerted on religious belief—not that you'd guess from the Salmon poets or even Morrissey that such pressures existed—and the ways in which belief has evolved in response. So when Declan boasts, at the end of the sequence, that he came over the sea on his boulder with "one father only, Christ. / The well-begot comforter", the reader is able to recognise Declan's other, unacknowledged father and comforter: technology. "Radio has such influence", he admits earlier, as it spreads Christ's word.

"Angel", the opening poem of Mark Roper's second collection

Catching the Light, performs a trick similar to McCarthy's. Worlds and world-views collide, as angels appear on TV, denying they can fly and confessing to "sexual acts". They are physical, almost bestial: when the speaker discovers an angel in a field at the back of his house, he notices that the wings are "leathery inside, vein-knotted, / welted with stitch-marks and scars" and crawling with fleas. The angel is a refugee from a modern world which denies its existence, tracks it down and destroys it. In a breathtaking final stanza the speaker remembers how the dogs were set on it,

how the angel stood there in the lights
and just before all hell broke loose
how it opened its mouth and sang,
small tongue oddly neat and clean.
And the awful beauty of that song,
how it seemed to have nothing
to do with anything, seemed even then
to have forgotten where it came from.

The extraordinary pathos this generates is comparable to that of Derek Mahon's "A Mythological Figure" which is "Condemned always to sing whenever/ She opened her mouth to speak". Roper's angels are three-dimensional, and their ultimate sanctity is heightened precisely because it springs from such a mundane nature. Unlike Morrissey's, these angels are worthy of worship.

Roper does not always write at this level. His "Safe and Satisfactory" presents Pilate after the Crucifixion thanking the sponsors, "Thorncraft, Golgotha Joinery, Vinegar Joe's", as though his poetry has developed an unfortunate attack of the Beirnes. And "The Cup of Tea", however honourable its intention, backfires as so many poems of domestic violence and sexual abuse inevitably backfire: "he took it from the child / when she was six/ held her down while / the uncle dipped his wick". Such appalling lapses are infrequent, but they do suggest that Roper is not properly aware of his poetic strengths and weaknesses: he has the talent to become an important poet, but at the moment he does not edit his own work vigorously enough.

However, Roper's successes are glorious. He seems a keen ornithologist, and writes well about the various birds which flap through his poems: herons, snipe, swans, swallows, kingfishers (which may or may not be imaginary). He loves nature, but without the unfocused sentimentality of O'Malley or Johnston; this is real, Darwinian nature, where four black beetles "padlock" themselves on to a dying goldfish

("Appetite"), and yet where there is always the possibility of visionary immanence. The title poem, for example, finds room for the unromantic "hum of a generator, / odd twang of a snipe", before it finally breaks into ecstatic meditation:

In a world of light we are creatures of distinction
lost and found
as we speak. Lost and found at this given moment
in the wonder of saying
an orange husk of moon low on the horizon
over Gortrush Wood.

There are many such revelations in *Catching the Light*. In his mystical quest Roper does not renounce the everyday world but passionately embraces it, tacitly agreeing with Virginia Woolf that "The paraphernalia of reality have at certain moments to become the veil through which we see infinity".

Nor does Roper renounce the dark, the sinister, the fiendish. What is arguably the volume's masterpiece, "Main de Gloire", offers lovingly detailed instructions for cutting a hand off "a felon's corpse", treating and desiccating it, and turning it into a candle which will allow a robber to steal with impunity. "It cannot be blown out by any ordinary person", the poem assures us, almost unnecessarily—the preparations are so persuasive that even God's wind might not do the trick. Roper concludes with the manufacturer's small print, acknowledging a small problem with the design:

Do not use where
a threshold is smeared with a black cat's gall,
a white hen's liver or a screech owl's blood. Nor
where there is a large dog, or a burglar alarm.

Now these are the kind of superstitions we can believe in.