

# GARLIC IN THE RAGOÛT



Vona Groarke

TONY CURTIS (ed.), *How Poets Work*. Seren, £6.95

TONY CURTIS (ed.), *As the Poet Said*. Poetry Ireland, £6.99

As everyone knows there is only one Tony Curtis. He's funny, he's prolific, and he knew Marilyn Monroe. Actor, artist, poet and editor, he's undoubtedly a lesson to us all. It seems he is responsible for both these books.

*How Poets Work* is a collection of ten essays by poets describing how their poetry comes into being. For the poets involved, it must have been a dream commission, this invitation to write for once about that most fascinating of subjects, themselves. Most take the task very seriously indeed, mindless of Don Paterson's warning in the final essay that: "while it's fine for the ego to *drive* you to the gig, God help you if it's the ego that's up on stage".

Most of the essays adopt a two-pronged approach: one prong takes care of the poetic autobiography (when I first wrote, when I first wrote seriously, when I first tore up my first serious poems, what my teacher said when I did etc.), while the second addresses a single poem, fiercely reducing it to its smallest parts. We see it in all its naked innocence, hand-scrawled and copiously underlined in some cases, neatly typed and copy-edited in others. Somehow, they don't convince: one suspects the "originals" themselves may have been dickied up a little for public presentation: like reborn virgins, curiously intact. Paterson's hand-written lines are a graphologist's nightmare; Armitage comes clean and admits that his "drafts" have been "sanitized"; Longley, sensibly, includes only finished poems and offers no poetic wounds into which we might cast our hands.

Such volumes have an appeal that is largely voyeuristic: you read because you want to know how they pull it off, and if possible, to pick up a few tricks that you can try at home. You wouldn't mind finding out a few private details while you're at it, of the "of course, Paterson writes with Pilot Hi-Tecpoint V5 extra-fine rollerball these days, and he's finding it a revelation" variety; or even that Anne Stevenson lived for a year in Belfast with a husband she barely remembers. It's prurient, of course, and of dubious

scholarly value, but in the absence of biographies (no one writes biographies of poets these days until the subjects are safely dead and their reputations nicely pickled), where else can one turn for such revelation?

No fewer than three of the essayists quote Keats with a touch of horrified self-doubt: "If poetry comes not as naturally as leaves to a tree it had better not come at all". But if it truly did, there would be scant openings for volumes such as this, and many more draftless poets much poorer than they are. The truth is, where poetry is concerned, that product is everything and process a bore. It's like your host telling you where he bought his vegetables and which knife he used to chop them while you are eating the ragoût. It doesn't add to the taste, and it doesn't aid digestion. Poetry is not a scientific process: in fact, it succeeds by not being reproducible. Analysis of how a single poem developed is generally little more than an exercise in navel-gazing, all the more difficult and unpleasant to watch when the perpetrators have been sitting behind their word-processors for years, and have accumulated many volumes to tuck under their belts.

One suspects that *How Poets Work* is the kind of book that feeds into volumes like *As the Poet Said*. Indeed, Longley makes the grade and features in both with his memorable: "If many of the talentless, careless folk who call themselves poets were tightrope-walkers, they would be dead." Entertaining, quotable, even at moments illuminating, this is nevertheless not a book to be trusted. It's a mirror held up to ten sets of poems, but held at an awkward angle so that somehow, you can't avoid seeing the poets looking at themselves, and watching you looking at them. Which may be another angle on their work, but may just be too confusing to pursue.

There are two Dennis O'Driscolls. There must be. One, we know, writes poems and lives, we assume, a busy life. The other is a furtive, shad-ow-y creature with bags under his eyes, a bulging subscription list and a habit of taking notes. For nine years, this O'Driscoll sacrificed himself to the twilight world of newspapers and poetry magazines. No matter how specialist, how obscure, the intrepid O'Driscoll sought them out and gleefully pounced, unpaid, on relevant quotations. Among his sources were poets, critics, journalists, sceptics, obituary-writers and the odd anonymous soul, each united by the common thread of having pronounced, in a moment of madness or abandon, on poetry, on poets or on events poetical. Unnoticed they did not pass, as 29 consecutive issues of *Poetry Ireland Review* with O'Driscoll's *Pickings and Choosings* features proved. And digested they were not: like garlic in the ragoût, it seems, they are destined to repeat. *As the Poet Said* is a selection of his selection of quotations over that time.

The volume is divided into 42 sections, with teasing headlines like “On Sex”, “On Money”, “On Death” and, inevitably, “On Drink”. The quotations that follow may be witty, controversial, daft, wet, inflated or, occasionally, wonderful. A very few will no doubt be encountered again and again, wherever biographies are researched, theses written, quotations dropped in conversations, or epigrams sought out. The others, it’s assumed, will be allowed to retire, as exhausted as our *Doppelgänger* O’Driscoll when he hung up his spyglass in 1996.

It’s a book to dabble in, and as the presence of cartoons suggests, a book that entertains. It has a useful index which supports the idea that those most worth quoting do not always oblige with the most quotable quotations: Wendy Cope has nine inclusions to Geoffrey Hill’s none. It can be by turns beguiling and infuriating, depending on how closely any given quotation coincides with your own particular view. In the end, however, you have to be grateful to it on a number of counts: 1. it saves money (subscription fees); 2. it saves time (reading hours); and 3. it saves nuisance (having to read all those tiresome poems to find out what the poet is saying).