

Poetry's Office

Dennis O'Driscoll, *Exemplary Damages*. Anvil, £7.95

In his essay on Seamus Heaney's poem "The Biretta," Dennis O'Driscoll calls attention to Heaney's fondness for the word "credit": "he prefers to 'credit' things rather than discredit them". This is a diplomatic way of putting what could be a harsh criticism. After all, "credit" seems closer to credulity than to belief; one only needs to extend credit to customers, or ideas, who can't pay their own way. O'Driscoll contrasts this quality with "Philip Larkinesque disillusion and scepticism", which instinctively regards tenderness for the things of this world (and the next) as pretentious or hypocritical. Interestingly, both of these Heaneyesque traits—the easy terms of credit and the hostility to Larkin, in particular—are found in still purer form in Czesław Miłosz, another poet of semi-clerical moral authority.

O'Driscoll the critic has written warmly and intelligently about both Heaney and Miłosz; but O'Driscoll the poet leaves no doubt that he is on Larkin's side of this temperamental divide. The traces of Larkin in his poetry are sometimes on the surface: for example, when a line from "Talking Shop" ("Seven days, he takes his place behind formica") draws on the memory of "Toads" ("Six days of the week it soils"). But the deeper similarity is found in the subject of those two poems, the miseries and consolations of work. For O'Driscoll is surely the poet after Larkin who has made the most of his day job, both as a subject for verse and as a part of his poetic identity.

The jacket of each of O'Driscoll's books informs us that he has worked for the Irish Civil Service since the age of sixteen. It is hard to parse the exact tone of this announcement: is it a boast, a demurral, a warning? Certainly O'Driscoll takes pride in not making a living as a poet—which is to say, as a professional self-impersonator. He has been an acute diagnostician of the poetry world's

déformations professionnelles: provincialism, careerism, dishonesty. (He is especially scathing about Irish poets who “try to export their produce to America and spend time marketing it there”.) Surely his criticism could not have been so scrupulous and non-partisan if he made his living in that world.

On a more personal level, one can sense O’Driscoll’s low opinion of those who use poetry to shirk their obligations. One of his “Obiter Poetica” goes: “If a man in Ireland tells you he is a full-time poet, you can be sure his wife is a full-time teacher”. A man who can write poetry and enforce tax laws (or deliver babies, or write insurance policies) surely has one up on the man who can only write poetry: he has refuted society’s implicit accusation of unmanliness.

But at the most fundamental level, O’Driscoll’s embrace of his office job seems connected, as with Larkin, to a tacit despair about the possibilities of human life. For a certain kind of poet, there are really only two activities, poetry and everything else. Poetry must supply the true satisfactions—the sense of worth, mastery, possibility, control. Everything else is, in Eliot’s words, “the waste sad time stretching before and after”. To spend that time in an office is no worse than any other option. In a sense, it is better precisely because the office is plainly tedious, thus drawing a clear line between life and work, or between “work” and real work (which is, of course, what the outside world sees as unreal play).

Certainly this artistic contempt for everyday life is the keynote of Dennis O’Driscoll’s best poetry. This is not to say that O’Driscoll is noisily unhappy, that he demands attention for his personal suffering. At the bottom of such confessional displays is always sentimentality, a belief that the world has let one down: by definition, complaints seek redress. In O’Driscoll’s poetry, there is no redress (and compare Heaney once again: “The Redress of Poetry”). There is only observation:

And listen to the sound
your life makes
flowing down the waste-pipe,
the stifled noises as it drains away.

Running through O’Driscoll’s poetry is this sense, not just of the nearness of death, but of the way death nullifies life. Because life

is just a brief vacation from death, it comes to seem unimportant whether one is actually alive or dead. O'Driscoll makes the point with characteristic wit in "Either":

They are either alive and well or decomposing
slowly in a shroud; I could either call them up
and chat, or confirm that they are ex-directory now.
It is a matter of life or death.

A matter of life and death is the most important of all; by changing "and" to "or," O'Driscoll implies that it is negligible, a choice between six and half-a-dozen. His poetry is drawn again and again to the levelling *memento mori*: "It is only for now," as he writes in "Only". His attitude towards death seldom rises to Larkin's pitch of ashamed terror; rather, O'Driscoll shows a cool resignation, shading into bemusement whenever he or the reader tries to forget the unforgettable: "How easily pleased we are", he laments in "Weather Permitting"; "remind me how bad/ things might—will—be", he asks in the characteristically titled "Churchyard View: The New Estate".

It is significant that, in Metaphysical poetry, mindfulness of death was the most fertile mother of wit. Not for nothing did Eliot find an archetype of such wit in the murderous Webster, who "saw the skull beneath the skin". If wit is shocking juxtaposition—the bracelet of bright hair about the bone—there is no more shocking juxtaposition than that of death and life. And it takes a witty dislocation of language to make us feel their nearness, which we spend so much time trying to forget. That is why the best and wittiest moments in O'Driscoll's poetry are the darkest. Webster would be proud to have written "Beauty and the Bag", from O'Driscoll's sequence "Back Roads":

She holds the bag
—NECTAR BEAUTY PRODUCTS—
in perfectly manicured hands.

The small print reads:
This bag is biodegradable.
It will decompose
when buried in soil.

Without saying a word, O'Driscoll has transferred the epithet

from the product to the woman, who is just a bigger decomposing bag (and the sexual implication of “bag” is surely not irrelevant). An equally swift and daring metaphor transforms “Votive Candles”:

what is left
of inflamed hopes

is a hard waxen mass,
a host;

the shard of soap
with which

God washes
His spotless hands.

By punning wax candles into waxy soap, O’Driscoll turns God into Pilate—a brilliantly economical piece of wit.

If death is the major theme of O’Driscoll’s poetry, his favourite subject is work. He makes work—the routines and impedimenta of office life—a synecdoche for the standardised, globalised, pampered and otiose life led by the middle classes in the West, Ireland as much as Britain or America. Indeed, the most startling thing about O’Driscoll, to the average American poetry-reader, would be his seeming un-Irishness: his semi-sonnet sequence “The Bottom Line” makes Dublin seem like a version of Detroit. In his essay “Foreign Relations: Irish and International Poetry”, he throws cold water on the “romantic view that Ireland is awash with inspired and instinctive poets whom even the gentlest of critical tools would wound”. Instead, he embraces what John Montague called the “global-regionalist” perspective: “This attitude is alert to the political, economic, and environmental upheavals which uproot people and force them into new imaginative relationships with their native places... The global village casts light on the deserted village”.

When applied to Ireland, in particular, such an alertness cannot avoid sounding like a debunking. It is equally distant from the *mythos* of Yeats and the *mythos* of Heaney. In his prose memoir “Circling the Square”, O’Driscoll gives his own sly version of the death of a naturalist:

In summer, those in search of casual employment could turn to the bogs a few miles from the town. "Footing" turf quickly exhausted the townies and most of us had to draw on fictional resources to conjure up the early start, the twittering lark, the blue sky, the implements, the back-breaking labour, the compensatory lunch-bag of wholesome country food, as we struggled to satisfy our teachers' perennial appetite for an essay about "A Day on the Bog."

But if O'Driscoll is alert to the hypocrisy of that compensatory lunch-bag, he is equally alert to the deracinated pretension of what has replaced it: "Time how, however, for the lunch-break/orders to be faxed. Make your hummus/ on black olive bread. An Evian". These lines from "The Celtic Tiger" suggest that O'Driscoll's careful inventory of modern urban life is another expression of that same coolness, that same slight contempt for life, that we see in poems like "Beauty and the Bag". In writing about what people like him—people like us—do with their days, O'Driscoll seems always to be asking incredulously, "You mean you *care* about that?" Do you genuinely feel proud of your "tooled-leather/ and buffed teak, hands-on management/ techniques, line logistics, voice-mail"? Can you take pleasure in your "charge-card orders/ or own-brand bargains/ in suburban shopping malls"? In "Looking Forward", O'Driscoll offers his final sardonic endorsement of such vanities:

Lose no time in enjoying earthly goods,
for tomorrow (in a manner of speaking,
at least) we die...

As in Dorothy Parker's bleak jingle, you "might as well live"—but don't think it's any better than the alternative. This irony about "earthly goods" is exactly parallel to the larger irony about work itself: work, too, is at best a minor distraction from the important truths, at worst a complacent substitute for them. He is always aware that "We are wasting our lives/ earning a living", and sees the grim irony of how we hand on that waste: "Ferrying the kids to school in style/ imbues them in the long term with/ some gainful aspirations of their own".

Because O'Driscoll is a member of the urban bourgeoisie, his cold eye takes in the characteristic illusions and properties of that class: no contemporary poet has written more accurately about

the life actually led by his readers than O'Driscoll in "The Bottom Line". But O'Driscoll is not simply satirising a class, which would imply that he finds true virtue located in some other class, whether higher (like Yeats) or lower. Take, for example, "Them and You":

They get drunk.
You get pleasantly inebriated.

Their wives have straw hair.
Yours is blonde...

They use loose change, welfare coupons.
You tap your credit card impatiently on the counter.

Of course, the obvious irony is directed against "You", the bourgeois reader, for thinking that you are better than "Them". But really, O'Driscoll is not a bit kinder to Them: both classes are engaged in futile pastimes, they just use different euphemisms. The office is O'Driscoll's subject only because it is the local habitation of his real theme, our wilfully ignored progress to the grave. That is why his best poem about having a job is really a poem about Job, leaving the title momentarily suspended between the two senses. In "Job" O'Driscoll rehearses Job's curse on the day he was born, using the telescoping effect of wit to link his adult, job-holding self with the spermatozoon he once was:

And why is my mother
yielding to his whim?
And why do I
(my future cursed)
rush breathlessly to win?

Could they not have turned over
or taken more care
to leave me
in my element,
part of their gulped air?

The amazing literalness of that last stanza—if his parents had turned over while making love, a different sperm would have reached the egg and the poet would not have been born—shows us O'Driscoll at his best. And at his best, he is one of the most admirable of contemporary poets—for his intelligence, wit, and

quickness of perception, for his seriousness and his serious comedy. *Long Story Short*, *Quality Time* and *Weather Permitting* are some of the most impressive and appealing books of poetry of the 1990s.

Exemplary Damages, O'Driscoll latest book, seems to me to offer fewer rewards. The themes of the collection are his usual ones, but O'Driscoll's treatment of them seems more laboured than usual. In several cases, the very structure of the poem seems to weary with repetition: each stanza of "Missing God" begins "Miss Him," then gives an occasion when you should; each stanza of "Love Life" begins with a reason why "you really have to" be impressed that people still bother to fall in love. "No, Thanks", is a list of things the poet politely declines to do; "Germ Warfare" features a list of sneezes ("The convulsion, the eruption, the paroxysm, the pile-drive,/ The dog yelp, the orgasm, the gale force, the squelch..."). The insistent repetition in these poems makes their wit seem consciously manufactured, not swift and surprising as in O'Driscoll's best work.

A related problem is that several poems cross the line separating regret and mere ruefulness, which is regret without the courage of its convictions. In "Saturday Night Fever," for instance, O'Driscoll personifies a whole list of diseases, cleverly but whimsically: "Huntington, grooving his hippy-hippy-shake routine", and so on. One does not really believe that this is how O'Driscoll thinks of these diseases; something terrible has been made ingratiating, an occasion for the poet's performance. That O'Driscoll's fourth collection in ten years should be something of a falling-off is disappointing, but perhaps not surprising. Indeed, it is worth noting only because O'Driscoll has written so many poems that meet the stringent and humane standard set forth in "The Notebook Version":

Too much of the world
eludes the grasp of art;
there are no poems
index-linked to suffering...

Hence the end-stopped cautions:
"You must write better,
Your poems have no future.
They are only as good as they are now.
This is the time they stand the test of."