

*Nunca Fiz Mais
do que Fumar a Vida*

The Poetry of Peter Sirr

Peter Sirr's quietly accumulating *œuvre* has at last been sculpted into an accomplished *Selected Poems*, and it is about time too. Never less than flavoursome and often proudly flamboyant, each of Sirr's six collections to date possesses the same sense of adventure and Continental vivacity that make for such distinctive and enticing writing. Sirr is a well-known figure in Irish poetry: Director of the Irish Writers' Centre from 1991 to 2003, he now edits *Poetry Ireland Review*, a magazine which, after a long period without stable editorship, seems a much roomier place than it was, accommodating many new and fringe voices, diverse translations, meaty reviews and assorted marginalia. If Sirr's own poetry is not as well-known as it might be, it is only because the poet has managed, admirably, to avoid the pitfalls of critical compartmentalisation. By refusing to deliver the post-colonial goods, confessional titbits or any æsthetic polemics, as well as being too fractured to be formalist, too talkative to be truly "experimental", Sirr's poetry is deliciously difficult to categorise. A poet of the city, of crowds, of wanderlust, he has an almost nostalgically Bohemian point of view. Revealingly, Sirr's personal "commodius vicus" of recirculation is only ever back to the most shadowy adjectives: "unseen", "unremembered", and (especially) "ungovernable" continually obscure his speaker's narrative certainty and, better still, his very identity.

Reading through the *Selected Poems*, and judging by its standard, one thinks of Oscar Wilde's line that only mediocrity develops; the opening poem of the book, "The King in the Forest", is one of his earliest and best. Perhaps bizarrely, the most noticeable unifying feature of the selection is its diversity; the poet's unique

adaptability is the quality that most successfully sets him apart from his contemporaries. Furthermore, Sirr's thematic variety and stylistic versatility are often so advanced that it becomes impossible to locate a familiar voice, where all too frequently his speaking subject seems as anonymous and unknowable as any member of the crowd he so colourfully describes. It is safe to say that Roy Fisher has made a notable impression on Sirr's consciousness; the visionary perambulations of his 1961 collection *City* in particular are repeatedly recalled in poems where (in Fisher's words) "the imaginary comes... with as much force as the real, the remembered with as much force as the immediate". In Sirr's case however, less conspicuous connections tend to be the more arresting. Because there has been no critical study of Sirr's poetry to date, this essay will first of all attempt to provide a backdrop to some of his more unusual influences and preoccupations, and to account for the elusiveness or diversity of his poetic voice by first suggesting some possible æsthetic attitudes developed out of those influences. Secondly, I'd like to align Sirr's many-voiced speaker with the heteroglot characteristics of Sirr's favourite source of inspiration, the city. Sirr's two most recent collections, *Bring Everything* (2000) and *Nonetheless* published late last year, will provide the main focus.

To begin, then, with the generally agreed-upon alignments that have been made (by David Wheatley and Justin Quinn, among others) with the so-called New York School: the similarity between Sirr's relaxed urbanity and that of the most prominent of that school, Frank O'Hara, speaks for itself. A poet of multifarious (and even interdisciplinary) influences himself, O'Hara represents the more readily accessible aspects of Sirr's work: the observational flâneurism, the keen eye for movement, the ostensible formlessness, the overthrown duty to be political and the preferred "duty to be attentive". But where O'Hara proclaims that he is "needed by things", Sirr's speaking subject shrinks from any such authorial arrogance with the warning, "Do not imagine the air you stand in yearns for you". This writerly humility is symptomatic of the poet's reluctance to imprint his personality onto the world, a reluctance we might come to associate with the extraordinary variety of his voice.

In a sequence entitled "Death of a Travel Writer" (included in Sirr's third collection, *Ways of Falling*, but sadly not in the *Selected Poems*), the poet writes of his ambition "to vanish/ without excuse

or apology” only to “come back once more/ but so lightly/ nothing would mark the entrance”. This fading in and out of the subject, in love with erasure and invisibility, hints at a desire to unpick conventional notions of poetic persona, and can be linked with that other great New York poet John Ashbery, whose self-devouring lines “are fundamental absences, struggling to get up and be off themselves”. While Ashbery’s absenting of poetic persona remains impossibly entangled in a notion of absence as disengaged from presence (a parallel world of absent absences), it is only one remove from the kind of non-identity Sirr puts forward as one of the more attractive of a series of “Options”, when he writes delicately of how “the night opens like a heartfelt diary” before violently urging himself to “Rip out the pages... Rip and throw/ till the night is white and even the nest has flown”. According to Beckett’s Molloy, we would do better (at least no worse) to obliterate texts than to blacken margins; this move the poet repeats with marked conviction.

The New York connection is little more than groundwork. Far more intriguing is the link Sirr’s idealised vanishing act conjures with that most elusive of poets, Alvaro de Campos, to whom a moody homage is paid in Sirr’s previous title, *Bring Everything*. “You vanish from us as you vanished from yourself” he writes, shortly before re-enacting the same momentous grope towards self-affirmation that Campos himself made almost a century earlier in his great poem “The Tobacconist’s”: “I call across to you as you called// to Esteves leaving the tobacco shop/ waiting for the universe to reconstruct itself”. The important difference here is that while Esteves represented for Campos something real and concrete from which the dissolved universe could be rebuilt (“he has no metaphysics”), Campos represents just the opposite for Sirr; he is, in Sirr’s own words, “a havoc of negative capability”. That the poet would have his universe reconstructed on so unstable a foundation must call into question the trustworthiness of his viewpoint: not only is Campos’s personality cast into countless fragments in his harrowing existential verse, but it never existed—except, of course, as one of the many poetic heteronyms of the Portuguese modernist Fernando Pessoa.

Campos has been characterised as Walt Whitman having a nightmare in which he wakes up as Laforgue. The link with Whitman is a tired one, which survives only thanks to the untypical self-singing and exuberance of Campos’s “Triumphal Ode”.

The comparison with Laforgue is much more interesting. The epigram Sirr takes for his "Lines for Alvaro de Campos" reads: "nunca fiz mais do que fumar a vida" ("I have never done anything but smoke life away"). The sentiment is reminiscent of Laforgue: "pour tuer le temps, en attendant la mort,/ Je fume au nez des dieux de fine cigarettes" ("to kill time while waiting for death/I smoke luxury cigarettes in the face of the gods"). The difference rests in rhetorical attitude. In Laforgue's lines, the poet takes leave of Campos's defeatist rhetoric of negation; the speaker taunting death rather than yielding to it by an obstinate elevation of the ego. A similar rhetorical divergence exists between a famous definition of poetic personality offered by Keats (high commissioner of the very phrase "negative capability") and one from Whitman. Keats writes that "a poet is the most unpoetical of anything in existence, because he has no identity; he is continually in and for filling some other body". For Whitman, inversely, "the poet absorbs the identity of others...and they are definite in him or from him; but he perceives them all through the powerful press of himself". The difference again is not so much in the expressed as the expression, though this time the effects are more drastic: Keats has no identity; Whitman has every identity. Campos smokes away life; Laforgue smokes towards death.

All this serves to show how Sirr's alliances lie firmly with the egoless, negatively capable camp. Sirr's multitudinous selves are not, as Quinn suggests, "Whitman-like"; in one poem the poet has his "heart on a hundred sleeves", not, as Whitman would surely phrase it, a hundred hearts on his sleeve. This is what allows the speaker his ultimate movement within both the poem and the city: whether he puts himself among the "dust and bustle" of the streets or takes his familiar position at the window, his personality remains dispersed. The poet shares with his city a tentative face, a sense of continuous flux, and a blank incomprehension of beginnings (a poem often opens to the middle of a thought process, for example: "And often, when I have finished a new poem...", or "Again: this is the park..."), and of endings (so many fade to dusk with an ellipsis, or an absence of punctuation altogether). This avoidance of emplotment and completion, combined with the speaker's status as a nameless spectator of the city, has much in common with the preoccupations of a feuilletonist, whose task is simply to apprehend the life of the city as it occurs, and transcribe it, with all its hectic atmosphere of chance and

choice, onto the page. The feuilletonist must adopt the role of dummy to the city's ventriloquist, speaking with its "multi-languaged consciousness" (to borrow a phrase from Bakhtin), and mindful to leave neither a trace of himself, nor the sense of a deliberate order to the flux and spontaneity of city life. Sirr's poetic falls perfectly in line with this: "my voice is a city", he writes.

Perhaps this explains the *non sequitur* elements of Sirr's work, and in particular the misorchestration of his many sequences. Quinn has written of Sirr's difficulty with forging a successful sequence from his fragments, finding that although "there are many fine short poems" contained within any Sirr sequence, "their individual voltages do not combine in an overall effect". While this is certainly true of some (the initial momentum of the thirty-four page "A Journal" is irrecoverably lost long before the poet confesses "this is me writing in confusion and spite/ crossing out and beginning again, none of it adequate"), I would argue that an "overall effect" is not the aim. Rather, it is unholistic assimilation, a feuilletonistic collage of a world "bursting to tell itself"; Sirr would have this world presented on the page as it presents itself in life, *ad hoc* and impervious to any imposed overall meaning. Hence the exuberant "Gospels" sequence not only allows but encourages us to "read" the city like a newspaper, to "walk among stone arguments" and to "be blurted into the square" and into the chaotic, sensuous *mêlée* of cheeses to be sniffed, fabrics to be fingered, the audio-visual attractions of "the new tunes of the busker" and "the juggler adding an extra torch to his routine".

With such scope for cross-sensuous delights, the obligatory synaesthesia need only wait for its moment. This moment arrives, belated and understated, with the phrase "my eyes feed/ on the noise of trees", an anti-climax which is redeemed in the final sequence of the book, entitled "Songs in Winter and Spring", in a complex and eccentric passage:

yet even now
secured by a look, a light

something stays, spreads its quick branches
the microsecond's lore amassing, amazing

something sends down roots to the riverbed
not halfway over

and builds a house, rapidly, in this phrase slipping
through Leoš Janáček fingers

this exact spot in the hairline track
as the beam floods it, and moves on.

Reading this passage, the eye must quite literally “feed on the noise of trees”, where the tree-mimicry of a form that twines its “branches” around its rhythmic, alliterative repetitions (“a look, a light”, “amassing, amazing”), and “sends roots down” each line to hit upon unexpected resonances (both eye and ear connect “halfway” to “house” and “rapidly” to “riverbed”, discovering along the way the virtuosic aleatory music of these lines). The sheer “noise” of these arboreal architectonics is everywhere: a sensitive ear will reel at the excessive sonorities: the repetition of “something stays” and “something sends”, confused by the presence of “microsecond’s”, which itself carries a consonance from “quick” to “micro”, recalling a recognisably Gaelic, Austin Clarkean prosody, and also, with “second”, renews “secured” but revises the meaning; the alliteration that fastens “roots” to “riverbed” to “builds”, but again the disruption caused by the half-rhyme of “over” and “river”. It could all end in chaos, but for the self-mocking closing note: the rhyme laughs guiltily at itself when it becomes the shameful link between “Janáček” and “hairline track”; but again, the near miss of “exact spot” might be what finally “floods” the passage, and allows the sequence to “move on” in good humour. It is this kind of structural multi-dimensionality that throws the poem open to possibility and emphasises again the capacity for movement within it, awakening us to the sheer spaciousness of Sirr’s language. It is as if the poem, by way of this brilliantly achieved space, opens doors to various rooms, each with a different view of “the doubling, trebling city” for Sirr’s Campos-like authorial man in the window.

Sirr’s poetic allows for a reading not only of but into the city. Like Pessoa, riding on a Lisbon tram and recreating the past-lives of various articles of his fellow passengers’ clothing, or the protagonist of Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Man of the Crowd”, reading into the vacant glances of passers-by “the history of long years”, Sirr’s persona is often found uncovering portals of his own, opening a cupboard onto a market, or entering his own previous lives through a Proustian whiff of a “butchery odour”. The idea of lin-

earity is alien to Sirr's speaking subject: the diverse voices of his multiple selves contribute to the dialogic status of his words, into which many worlds are brought. Often in Sirr's poems we witness a kind of textual intersection, a Bakhtinian merging of narrative paths, many of which are heavily populated with colloquialisms and advertising slogans, not to mention the usual responses to other writers' poems, tracings taken thereof, and the regular appearances made by guest languages. There are numerous examples of this to be found in Sirr's later work. In one sequence, he hints at the uncontrollability of his dialogic language when he describes "the vocabulary of desire// coiling its trim body in the air/ just to say/ this empire is ungovernable, it is all// disarray". The cardshop cliché of "just to say", perfectly rhymed with "disarray", could not illustrate this point more clearly as it renders the "empire" of Sirr's English truly "ungovernable". A further dimension is added when this intersection of textual surfaces combines with the polyphonic voices of advertising jingles; the poem "Cabbage" provides a number of ingenious examples, one being:

night songs
Forsake me not
Abrakebabra, Pizza Hut
Who have sat at a late hour
Content, distraught
Desolate song, song of joy...

These "songs" relegate the "language of desire" to a superficial lingo, where the "whole population of want" is forever "cramming the aisles", always hungry for whatever's selling. Sirr never misses the opportunity this superficialised "Hunger!" provides for bathos, suggested above by the "desolate song, song of joy", and to a greater effect in the brilliantly imaginative poem "Habitat", in which the speaker wanders through the eponymous chainstore in a dreamlike state, watching as "couples tranced in kitchens finger shiny wood", before his thoughts turn philosophically to "the store, the stars, our lives...".

It is true to say that the notion of the carnivalesque, Bakhtin's best-known contribution to the critical vernacular, has not aged gracefully, evolving from critically usable topos to outmoded trope. All the same, it is difficult to deny its manifestations in Sirr's work. That *Bring Everything* opens sumptuously in "the havoc of

the market”, amid a reign of banquet imagery, bestial action and “the sound of laughter”, jostles the reader into the boisterous centre of carnival experience. Of course, it would be wrong to graft the historically specific, Rabelaisian aspects of Renaissance carnival onto the festive, crowded atmosphere of Sirr’s poetic just for the sake of convenience. The poet himself has his doubts, asking ironically “Isn’t this the wrong century/ for a *bain de foule*?”. The connection exists at an important remove: where the dialogism of the carnivalesque is not, as Julia Kristeva has written, “the freedom to say everything” but a kind of “dramatic banter”, Sirr’s own contemporary version is not the freedom to buy, to sell, or indeed to “bring everything” (“we did”, he writes, “and it was cumbersome”), but a kind of “dramatic barter”, where commodity has become the new carnival.

Commodity contains within it all the celebration of carnival: it unites the crowds, presents the same lavish banquets (though this time on supermarket shelves), thus exciting the senses (“the fish will smell/ the fruit...ripen or rot”), while taking the same anarchic pleasure in the discrowning of authority (“the hand stay agile/ to fool the cop”). It’s a preoccupation Sirr carries with him to his new collection, *Nonetheless*, except that now the hollowness of commerce glares from empty shelves, the revels have been suspended indefinitely, a “halal temple grocer spicery/ sells winter and nervousness to a waiting street”, though, soberingly, “no one comes”. Behind the chaos of consumerism and the feverish boom of the Celtic Tiger, there is apathy, arbitrariness (“I buy my paper/ from where the beans used to be”), and, above all, deadening stasis. In one of the many title-free poems in *Nonetheless*, the poet appropriates a radio phone-in to describe this cultural gridlock. An excitable host keeps us listening, promising the treats “still to come”:

the postman gunned down, the hurricane
gravely climbing the ratings,
the groomed voice

high above the tangled city
which tells us
repeatedly we’re stuck, we’re standing still,

the world announced all round us, the air
heavy with answers; today's
going nowhere.

Whether the air is “heavy with answers” or Larkin’s “heavier than air hypostasis”, this is the essence or reality of city living, everywhere urban polyrhythms bowing to victorious impasse.

It is no wonder then that the old urge to “vanish/ without excuse or apology” persists in this collection to evaporate the ennui. The indefinite departures of wistful narrators remain a thematic favourite of Sirr’s, notably in an exceptional translation from Giorgio Caproni, “The Leavetaking of the Ceremonious Traveller”. In this monologue, the speaker begins a fastidiously drawn-out farewell to his fellow carriage-mates on a cross-continent train, in a bid to conceal from them his anxious desire to escape their company. Perhaps he is a spy, we think, perhaps a claustrophobe. After struggling with his suitcase and addressing each stranger as his “friend”, his farewell extends to a “Farewell to knowledge/ and farewell to love”. Winding his awkward eulogy to a close, the traveller possesses all the flustered sophistication of a Hitchcockian fugitive:

Farewell. Of one thing I’m certain,
that I have reached a calm
desperation, undismayed.

I’m getting off. Enjoy the rest of your journey.

As with *Bring Everything*, this collection is constructed upon atmospheric shifts, mild mood swings, and general restlessness. The title is vital: nonetheless, the adverbial bridge in a sentence between one given point of view and whatever remains to be said, suggests a world of indecision and in-between states. Thus *Nonetheless* accommodates a miscellany of unedited ephemera, leaving nothing unargued or unaccounted for. “Orchard Music” is typical of a diction that seems suspended in temporal and emotional limbo, the period between cause and effect, or between a concerto’s allegro and adagio. The unremembered incident always presides over historical fact, the poetry insistent on a continual letting go:

An infinity of incidents
took place, some of which
can no longer be remembered.

And the unseen lives went on
with sweet intensity: the sun rifling the empty house,
dust and spider lives, generations of furniture.

Poems full of “unseen lives” and stumbled-upon forgotten pasts are composed around a heterogeneity of historical artefacts, found objects and white elephants. There are dozens of catalogues and chronicles, whose contents all know languid freedom of being neither here nor there. In “Office Hours”, Sirr’s listing adopts an obsessively compulsive alphabetical and alliterative rigour: “addressograph, adding machine,/ adhesive tape dispenser” all give way to workers who, though “busy/ with ballpoint pens, box-files and bulldog clips”, keep their thoughts “fixed on the slow clock, the clack of coat hangers/ and consequential loss, the costs// of carbon paper and calendars”. More of this quirky itemizing appears in “James Joyce Homeloans”, a global whistle-stop tour of every business investing in the Joyce industry. “James Joyce’s Bistro” apparently offers us “the inner organs of beasts and fowl/ or something a bit more conventional”, Sydney Harbour the “*Ulysses* Challenge Yacht Race”, and Philadelphia the mysterious “Potable Joyce”. Planted amidst the usual sacrilege is a surprise sample of Bloom-esque overmuchness, typical of the poet’s love of lush description: “saddle of rabbit with black pudding/ lap of mutton/ slab of luscious goosebosome”.

Nonetheless displays more forcefully than any of Sirr’s previous collections the sheer ambitiousness of his project. The poetry is sometimes insanely Pécian: it seeks to include everything, the whole turbulent detritus of contemporary city life. But more than this, it is a poetry that pictures everything in photographic negative, struggles to conjure the unseen, remember the forgotten, sift and filter (if not govern) the ungovernable. Refusing his catalogued and cross-referenced bric-à-brac any sentimentally tacked-on significance, the poet infuses the ordinary with a far less cosmetic mystery than the formulaic strange-making of so much contemporary poetry. A nameless poem that begins “Here is everything...” makes for an accurate self-description of, as well as self-

advertisement for, not just Sirr's latest achievement (and achievement is the word), but for the poet's entire unique and fascinating *œuvre*:

Here is everything
and you can't lose it

here the early morning sunlight archive
numbered, itemized, set down

the laundry rampant in its basket
here is the museum of bending down

here the breakfast gallery
halal grocer and rained pavement annals

bus ticket trove, the chronicle of standing
of the inhalation of perfume, of headlines

The list continues, but you get the drift. "Everything// somewhere/its own monument", Sirr's poetry contains all the richness and intoxication of a Turkish bazaar to the reader's wide-eyed tourist. There are always skeptical tourists of course, who will want to ask (and quite rightly) what "the museum of bending down" actually refers to. Theodor Adorno once called the slipper a monument to our hatred of bending down; maybe Sirr's museum is a wardrobe of untied boots. Whatever the interpretation, Sirr is a poet who examines his objects from exotic angles, and expects the same of his audience. *Nonetheless* confidently builds on Sirr's achievement, and thanks to the *Selected Poems*, that achievement can finally be acknowledged, consolidated and celebrated.