

# AIN'T WHAT IT USED TO BE



*Andrew Zawacki*

GREG DELANTY, *The Hellbox*. Oxford University Press, £6.99  
CATHERINE PHIL MACCARTHY, *The Blue Globe*. Blackstaff, £6.99  
GEORGE SZIRTES, *Portrait of My Father in an English Landscape*.  
Oxford University Press, £7.99  
ENDA WYLEY, *Socrates in the Garden*. Dedalus, £5.95

The nostalgia gap  
is a pit into which images can fall  
and never rise. Best to suspect a trap.

—Szirtes, *Portrait of My Father in an English Landscape*

Proust made a living out of it, a posthumous living anyhow, and proved that a little nostalgia can go a long, long way. He formalized the formula in *Time Regained* by embedding it in paradox:

If, owing to the work of oblivion, the returning memory can...form no connecting link between itself and the present minute, if it remains in the context of its own place and date, if it keeps its distance, its isolation in the hollow of a valley or upon the highest peak of a mountain summit, for this very reason it causes us suddenly to breathe a new air, an air which is new precisely because we have breathed it in the past, that purer air which the poets have vainly tried to situate in paradise and which could induce so profound a sense of renewal only if it had been breathed before....

It cannot be said of Greg Delanty, George Szirtes, Catherine Phil MacCarthy or Enda Wyley that they have vainly attempted to locate a “purer air” in any religious, spiritual, philosophical or imaginative paradise. On the contrary, all four are writing in the muddied slipstream of American confessionalism and feeling the late effects of Hurricane Freud, obsessed with their very real childhoods and with the parents they worshipped, outgrew and have since outlived. Yet rather than offering a sudden, “new air”, each of these collections suffocates under its own weight of memory.

Greg Delanty recalls an Irish boyhood among the drained pints,

smothered fag-ends and discarded hot-metal type of the Eagle Printing Company, where he served as apprentice to his father. Every single poem in his fourth collection *The Hellbox* (his first published in Britain) is written from the first-person, and too often the exhaustions of this severely limited perspective invite sentimentality and cliché, as in “Passing Evergreen Bar”:

I delay heading down Summerhill to the disco’s strobes,  
scraps, shifts and refusals and stay for just one  
more, with you, forever, in the spoiled good old days.

Elsewhere (“Bad Impression”) his backward glance is banal or just awkward, such as when his anxiety “to fit / in naturally, / to be considered one amongst / metal men and composers” is

worse than approaching some  
crush on Saturday night  
to ask her for a dance  
over the disco music  
that is louder than the machine floor  
in full swing.

At best, lines like this are poor prose, and *The Hellbox* is filled with such slack language and singularly uninteresting observations about days gone by.

Delanty’s nostalgia is potentially more sophisticated than that, however. He has created a brilliant opportunity based on the enviable organizational structure of his book, only to fail to deliver. The premise is an extended conceit assuming a postlapsarian longing: The Eagle Printing Company represents a kind of universe, with the Composing Room (the title of the first section of the volume) a testing ground directed by his father, a.k.a. The Great Compositor. This panopt-iconic figure, his hands perpetually black with ink, presides as language-maker over what is in effect a forge—that is, an edenic place in which type is forged, or an iniquitous room in which words are rendered forgeries. The hellbox is the bin into which worn, old or broken bits are thrown. Lines of type are “justified” in the dual sense of aligned to a page’s margin or to a moral judgment. Delanty is the apprentice who, as an understudy to the science he tells us was originally denounced as “The Black Art”, attempts to “keep the devil from the door”. So the stage is set:

In the beginning was the Word and the Word  
was made cold type and the Word was  
coldness, darkness, shiny greyness  
and light—And the Word dwelt among us.

Delanty sets about trying to develop this newly cast relationship between words and the world, between writing and being right, and among his various roles as “son”. It’s a shame that he almost always falls down on the job, subjecting evocative and original ideas to bathetic or deflated conclusions. In “The Composing Room” he admits, “Every time I read the word *world* I wonder / is it a typo and should I delete the *l*”. and further in the same poem, he ruins an investigation into error and the slippage of meaning in language, by emphasizing “setting an *l* where there should be a *?* / or a *b* where there should be a *d*, or miss aspace....” Several poems rely on typogimmicks like, “It’s unjust to speak of anyone in terms / of *types*”. or are printed inverted or upside-down, to be read in a mirror in order “to set / the upside-down, backward world aright”. Most annoyingly, in “The Dingbat’s Song” he hopes that he will “not make myself a perpetual dingbat.”

Once or twice Delanty finds perfect pitch, as in his tribute to Whitman, in which he imagines how “all you composed in your time would be... melted down and recast in the likes of us”, as the Word becomes flesh in an altogether new, secular fashion. “We Will Not Play the Harp Backward Now, No”, after a line by Marianne Moore discouraging nostalgia, contains some of Delanty’s finer phrases, as he recalls how

many of us  
learned the trick  
of turning ourselves into ourselves,  
free in the fe fiada anonymity  
of America.

Lest America be conceived as a paradise more milk-and-honeyed than childhood, Delanty argues in his long concluding title poem that many Irish immigrants were simply “opting for the lesser ill of feeling foreign / somewhere foreign rather than at so-called home.”

George Szirtes knows something about foreignness, having been born in Hungary and raised in England from the age of eight. Perhaps it is that early, enforced cosmopolitanism that informs his sensibility, which moves fluidly beyond the straitjacket of the self to investigate history, the nature of art, and the struggle between the vanities of reminiscence and the desire to rehearse one’s past. Like the Budapest of his childhood, Szirtes is at once stately yet seedy, formal yet backstreeted, attuned to the city’s intoxicating glitz no more than to the sterile, “sealed and communal weather of its residents”, to the “nonchalance of sunlight” on daffodil buds no more than to “that unwonted clutter of names / which has done nothing to force them into flower”. *Portrait of My Father in an English Landscape*, Szirtes’ eighth individual collection, browses the urban motivations and consequences of

money and its corrupted end in power, of desire and its perversion as lust, yet Szirtes is also concerned with the slighter but no less vibrant explorations of pastoral themes. There are rabbits “waiting for an event / of greater softness to overtake them”, even as the imaginative palm at the end of the mind is depleted to a “dark / warehouse at the back of the mind”, stripped and reconstituted as a wholesale second-hand store with “sound-tracked / conversation” piped in. Szirtes is capable of embodying in one motion, without incongruity, Old World Dutch painting, the early twentieth century appeal of Shostakovich and Beria, of Hopper and Radnóti, and the “slightly shop-soiled look” of Wim Wenders’ pre-millennial angels.

What sets Szirtes’ book apart from these other three collections is its awareness of how restricted is a poetics designed to talk merely about the self. Szirtes understands that any good poem will implicitly carry the traces of its maker, so there’s little need to call attention to the self as such. In his simple but graceful sonnet “Gunsmith”, he observes of the craftsman, “He is making an object, / himself a part of the product of his skill”. In noting that the gunsmith is involved not just in the making of the gun but in the gun itself, Szirtes affirms that “plainly he loves his work, he takes so much care with it”. But in qualifying that the gunsmith is only *part* of the gun he is making, Szirtes more importantly testifies to the man’s “honest endeavour, his modest demeanour”. The gunsmith puts the gun before the smith. In implicitly privileging the poem over the poet, Szirtes is more formally interesting than the other three poets being considered. He packs his book with both orthodox and hybrid versions of various forms, especially the sonnet and the so-called corona, a sonnet-sequence or wreath of praise for one who is dead or absent. “Tinseltown” is particularly innovative, its four stanzas separating into two palindromic rhyme-schemes, more subtly evocative of a “tall mirror / hung by the magazine rack” than Delanty’s concrete poems requiring a mirror.

That’s not to say, however, that Szirtes wholly avoids nostalgic gluttony, or that he’s a master of understatement. The second segment of his book begins with a seven-part poem organized chromatically, documenting a personal history of Europe. He begins in the “Sap Green” days under “the copper dome of the old school” as a member of the class of ’65, characterized by “the charm of wasted after hours”, then journeys through the “Romanian Brown” of “political crises, shortages, rising crime”, noting that computers and the video screen mean that “nothing now can ever again grow old”. He arrives at the “Flesh Pink” of faces “moving at the speed / of light” and vanishing into images propagated by the camera. Szirtes’ prismatic scaffolding insinuates a mind about its task of aesthetically delineating one’s personal life events and situating them among the broader sweep of one’s age, or of structuring them according to impres-

sionistic spaces of dissension. Nonetheless, his conclusions too often effect a grandiose didacticism:

Time excels at the editorial cut,  
likes journeys and films or any kind of sequence,  
but loses the plot and has to improvise,  
and what it completes need not make too much sense  
as long as it provides minimal food for the eyes.

While he laments finally the “short half-life of sonnets”, he rallies to conclude his collection with three coronas, one about a life that was anything but only half-fulfilled, that of his father. Much of this poem, too, succumbs to portentousness:

The presences—not ghosts, nor photographs—  
are symbols through which we walk together.  
Our bodies are being resolved into epitaphs.

Regrettably, the poem takes it upon itself to ward off, too stringently, personal detail and narrative, since, “Anecdotes hide / the very thing they describe in their pure / linear fashion”. But while avoiding the merely anecdotal is wise—a caveat the other three collections ignore—we undoubtedly learn more about the poet’s father from the timed intrusion of intimate vignettes than we do from extra talking about how to talk about him. Seemingly chatty in itself, the one bit of personal detail that interrupts so forcefully because it occurs so late in the poem (section 11)—“One year dad fell / from the first storey of a building site”—resuscitates the image of his father far more effectively than highbrow instruction like this:

What hurts  
is the truth of every story, things being just  
as they are, true without consequence, bit parts  
in a ridiculous epic of cinematic dust.

This temptation toward pronouncement is what leads to overblown, purple descriptions such as, “We are not wolves but sheep / in the fold, gentle baas against the vast sky”, and, “His eyes / are a warm cave swimming in faint moisture”, which are as sentimental as the verses of some children, but unacceptable in a poetry that purports to look back on childhood.

Catherine Phil MacCarthy’s second collection, *The Blue Globe*, opens quite deliberately with Stephen Dedalus-like perceptions of the adult world, beginning with a precocious but confused child’s budding apprehension of the relation between the local and the universal, of the distance between human size and the infinite universe:

And the blue globe in school  
turned in my hands  
on the path from here  
to Sydney, shifting  
the axis of the known

world spinning between  
my fingers with questions  
of scale and gravity.

In contrast to Szirtes' ruminations, MacCarthy adopts a straightforward simplicity shorn of pretension or over-ambition that can be refreshing. She can re-enter the days when "a leaflet from / the government said big words / I could only spell" and, without losing a sense of mystery or imminent discovery, write from the known experience of growing up.

Yet it is this same simplicity that often diminishes into underachievement, and MacCarthy too is given to yearn for the past in ways sentimental but uneducating for the reader. "The Moment It Stopped" is about the initial strangeness of not recognizing her father's first name when she received the news that Joe had died, about the impulsive reaction of slamming the phone down when she realized who was meant, pleading, "Please, Dad, have a heart. / Don't go yet", and finally about her wish for him to speak to her "as if you could for my sake / turn back". Without wishing to deprecate the poet's genuine emotion of that shocking and tragic moment, the reader realizes firstly that it has not been explored beyond mere narrative, and secondly that the narrative itself has not been rendered past the typical responses to death, i.e. disbelief and resistance: "My fingers trace grass searching / for your wrist, your pulse, / the moment it stopped". Many of the poems in *The Blue Globe* are descriptions of loss, and not insights into or enactments of losing: in "Familiar" she misses the scent of her father's aftershave, as "My fingers long / to touch your face warm / and cool at the same time", while "Greek" laments the death of a boy named Patrick she didn't know except from his signature in several old books, one of them a grammar "describing him in symbols / that stopped at gamma". Whether she's discussing a cross-country car trip or whispering a lover's name while decapitating dandelions, nearly every poem emanates from or is directed towards the self. What MacCarthy finds enigmatic in "What On Earth?" reveals her orientation:

The books you sent back with  
a card saying barely a word  
about yourself left me puzzled...

Nor do a number of poems expressing an admiration for other women—real or imagined—that contributed to MacCarthy’s sense of growing into womanhood escape self-indulgent nostalgia. “Helen” is the basic tale of one girl admiring another, her “books neither / dog-eared nor / missing but open / and crisp on the desk”, and becomes an occasion for the speaker to disparage herself. Likewise, “Awakenings” revisits a sisterly paramour, “her body / my shield against the dark”, closing,

Now in that room  
where you hold me, my heart

heals. This is how I picture us  
when you’re gone,  
my head on your breast,  
your blouse undone.

The poem does not in any way problematize, even linguistically, the relationship between the girls, nor does MacCarthy put the self at risk. In other poems attending to mysterious “barefoot singers”—“Antigone”, the villanelle “Lucy’s Song”, and another evoking Duibhne, “Sand Goddess”—MacCarthy does frame a poetry of I-and-thou, but her vantage never really changes. Any exploration of the self through the medium of others who define it, if only negatively, must subject the self to risk, involving it in the very predicaments, dilemmas, paradoxes, complexes and contradictions that inevitably forge selfhood. Regardless of how the figures of Antigone, Lucy or Duibhne may have theoretically informed the speaker’s self-conception, MacCarthy’s poems rely on straightforward observations, low-rent refrains and inexpensive rhymes. She allows the kinds of clichés that Orwell portended no longer tell us anything, since a cliché is nothing more than standardized phrasing, language unable to escape its past: “When the day finally came / you never said goodbye”. Ultimately, MacCarthy’s poems further attest to the restrictive predictability of the first person, of transformative experience as viewed through only one lens or spoken in an unmodulated register. Exploring one’s youth ought to present one with the opportunity for myriad interpretations and newly discovered conclusions or inconclusiveness, but MacCarthy mostly refreshes.

Adding to this somewhat unified collection of collections concerned with recollection, *Socrates in the Garden*, Enda Wyley’s second book, opens with two poems about her mother and two about her father. While they are more compelling than MacCarthy’s exegeses, Wyley’s poems still labour under the oppression of the first person narrative. “Mother” imagines the return of a woman with a “gentle face”, its creases which the speaker now

hopes to smooth. The poem is poignant but unable to transcend its circumscribed ambition of eulogizing a deceased mother by recalling her to thank her. “Journey” puts more at stake, asking, “For must not every journey have / the pusher and the pushed”, so that an otherwise non-original elegy about an ambulance coming for a mother assumes a valence beyond the immediate story. This enables Wyley to push and pull the poem itself past anecdote into a wider, more intriguing relevance, and while the ending is teary-eyed, at least it follows through:

But you are still here,  
in this garden, under the cherry tree,  
your words its blossoms against my face:  
—*Out there, it'll all work out,*  
*don't worry child, go now.*  
You press the bag into my hand  
and your fingers, warm  
in the small of my back, push.

In “Bookmarks”, too, the speaker annotates her books with the same symbols her father used, as if to assure that “magic read and loved / can connect elsewhere”, and in order to find him again:

Is it, in the late night of my childhood,  
you, not just books, that I look for,  
sitting in the orange dim of your reading light,  
forehead cupped in your hand.\_

This poem undoubtedly fulfills its ambition to permit the daughter a moment of difficult self-realization by recollecting a late father. The trouble is the poem’s low-voltage conception: whether the poem performs its immediate function properly or not, it may not be a job worth doing, since little is risked, so little remains to be gained. Ideally, readers should believe there’s a strong reason for a poem, that we had something to lose had we not read it. Furthermore, we need to feel that at every turn, with every word and each verbal relationship, the poem itself has something to lose, that it is putting its language and the speaker’s identity on the line. Wyley’s poems have a detectable personal urgency; they do not beg to be read by others.

The apathy felt on this reader’s part is almost wholly a result of finding, again and again, a slew of wistful phrases that neither reinvent language nor the experiences informing it: “I cannot look / at oranges / without thinking / of you—”, and, “I raise my head to find / your face in cathedrals— / my joy, my sorrow / in you”, and,



Now we are grown, what can come  
but memories like women with gentle hands—  
soothing, beautiful, helping us  
these long, long days to endure...

and,

And then what could I do  
but push out the window of this country home  
built west on a fairy path  
and let your hair free with my love.

What's lacking not only in Wyley's work, but also in Delanty's, Szirtes' and MacCarthy's collections, is any sense that the language itself, and not some experience or emotion that preceded it, is guiding the poem. There is no assurance that the words or the rhythm have had any say in the poem's inception, behaviour, demeanour, direction or indirection, no confidence in allowing writing to find its own way. All four poets, with the exception of a sporadic Szirtes, seem unable to inhabit a universe or a language other than their own. They all tell stories but do not work to tell them slant; or they cannot stop telling stories in order to start inventing them. Wyley's "Five Definitions of a Butterfly", for instance, is one of her few poems inviting a more oblique poetics, as she dares herself tentatively to dislocate the object from the language that might frame or resist it productively:

I know long ago it was thought, that witches  
became you—stealing away on your wings,  
eggs and cheese, milk or cream,  
the farmer's eyes buttered with sleep.

Even so the elision is not taken very far, coming back to how the butterfly went "free... out into the night air". But this may be the vector that Wyley, given that she finds the long-lost lore of ghosts and Celtic twilight so alluring, may wish to pursue, especially if she can incorporate something of the strange incompleteness of myth into her work. Myths give poets a chance to tell stories about people other than themselves and about predicaments other than their own, or to reconfigure their lives through the transmuting kaleidoscope of earlier narratives. A myth, which is a kind of sophisticated nostalgia, offers poets an opportunity to observe the past through another narrative about the past, and to reinvent them both.

# A GLIMPSED VALLEY, A CROWDED STREET



*Peter Sirr*

CHARLES TOMLINSON, *Selected Poems 1955–1997*.  
Oxford University Press, £11.99

Variety can be a hard master. The fertile poet, giving scrupulous attention to the whole range of his experience, runs the risk of never acquiring the trademark style a more closely husbanded attention might produce. I had been finding it hard to write about this substantial selection of Charles Tomlinson's poems when a comment by Michael Schmidt in a brief tribute to Tomlinson's poems made me see why. Schmidt ascribed the relative neglect of Charles Tomlinson to "the particularity of his images", his avoidance of any kind of generalized rhetoric. More than with most poets, you are impelled to respond to specific poems, and this is bad news for the brief review. And yet this particularity is the chief pleasure Tomlinson's poetry affords. He has the kind of imagination whose governing principle is a kind of civilized hospitality, in which the world of perceived objects and responsive sensation is accommodated within a seamless discourse of attention and attentiveness. Reading him, you have the feeling that anything could prompt a poem, could draw forth the habitual painterly exactitude and the temperate tone quietly alert to surprise that are his most characteristic reflexes. The ocean, a Tuscan landscape, a glimpsed valley, a crowded street are fed to an intensely seeing eye and a constantly reflective habit of mind.

The result is a poetry that is easily missed because its quietness doesn't make large claims on us. If "the time is in love with endings", Tomlinson declines extremity for "Such treaties as only time itself / Can ratify, a bond and a test / Of sequential days..." The quietness has to do with tone, and, often the chosen subjects; the poetry isn't necessarily linguistically quiet. It's more likely to be noisily active, rhetorically adept, inventive, but if the discourse were more fractured we'd notice this more, as we might be surprised by his formal experiments. If the civilized rational discourse, the underlying structures of argument, all contribute to a sense of control, Tomlinson's poetry is still open to a range of influences and experiences in a way more sharply defined poets often aren't: