

B R I E F L Y N O T E D

A selection of the poetry of Padraic Fallon has been published under the title *A Look in the Mirror and Other Poems* (Carcamet £8.95). It is edited by his son, Brian, and there is a brief introduction by Eavan Boland, who knew the poet in her youth. Boland's advocacy of the work is spirited, but it seems that Fallon can only be praised if Yeats is tactfully disparaged. Thus while Yeats is described twice as "great", he gave Ireland a "flawed poetic bequest"; the typical Yeats poem which he handed on to the next generation "was powerful in principle but of little use in practice" which was "stranded somewhere between British Victorianism and Irish invention". Not a particularly bad place, one would have thought, but for Boland it is a reason to sympathise with the post-Yeats generation:

I think it's important to remember even today that poets such as Padraic Fallon had to take the Irish poem—used with brilliance by a great poet but inhospitable to their dignity, their identity, their Irish past—and re-work it. They had to write a whole psychic terrain into it; an act made more difficult in that Yeats had blurred that terrain with the power and enticement of simplification. Somehow, they had to resist those simplifications and restore that complexity. It was a task fraught with problems and contradictions.

There are some powerful simplifications employed in this particular narrative; and given that Boland's simplifications have yet to create a poetry as significant as Yeats's, one is less ready to forgive them. But why are we talking so much about the introduction and not the poems? There's the rub: it's hard not to sympathise with him for writing in the shadow of Yeats—almost as hard as it is to read the poems with interest, let alone pleasure. As for the translations, what Fallon did to "Brise Marine" (which is to be found under the unbeguiling title "Two Mallarmé Things for Sue") was awful, especially when compared with translations by Derek Mahon from the same period of French poetry. For

instance, there was Mahon's translation of Valéry's "Le Cimetière Marin": the latter balances the idiom of contemporary English with a keen attention to Valéry's lithe contemplative language. Fallon is done no service by reprinting them, and more importantly neither is Mallarmé.

Harry Clifton reviews Marilyn Hacker's latest collection in this issue. Norton have also released her *First Cities: Collected Poems 1960-1979* (\$16.95). Readers who tuned in later to Hacker's ongoing poetic autobiography will not want to be without the volume (although it's sad to note that Norton used paper of such poor quality).

The Poetry Now festival in Dun Laoghaire has established a good reputation for introducing international poets to an Irish audience. The 2004 festival is will feature first Irish readings by Durs Grünbein and W.S. Merwin, alongside Derek Walcott, Ciaran Carson, Tom Paulin, Don Paterson, Máire Mhac an tSaoi, Paul Durcan, Glyn Maxwell and others. This year the festival will also launch a new award for Irish poetry: the *Irish Times* PNO5 Award will be worth €5000 and will go the best single collection published in the calendar year 2004. The festival runs from 25-28 March, and features workshops and lectures as well as readings (all enquiries to 00 353 1 2054873).

Hungarian poetry is outstanding in Central and Eastern Europe for its vigour and excellence. The language is notoriously lone and difficult—by contrast, if you know one Slavic language, you at least have a foothold on about five others—so one can only be grateful for the team of George Gömöri and Clive Wilmer who have revised their translations of Miklós Radnóti (1909-1944). The Romantic tradition seems to have persisted in full strength into the twentieth century in Hungary and perhaps as a result some of the poems topple over into bathos, as Radnóti's eye travels over a war-ravaged continent and considers the imminence of this own death (he was shot while on a forced march). But on many occasions in this volume, a perfect balance is achieved, for instance in the first of the sequence "Postcards" written about two months before he was killed:

From Bulgaria, wild and swollen, the noise of cannon rolls;
It booms against the ridge, then hesitates, and falls.
Men, animals, carts, thoughts pile up as they fly;
The road rears back and whinnies, maned is the racing sky.

But you in this shifting chaos are what in me is constant:
In my soul's depth forever, you shine—you are as silent
And motionless as an angel who marvels at destruction,
Or a beetle burrowing in a hollow tree's corruption.

Wilmer's handling of rhyme and line-break is faultless; even the inversion in the fourth line is not an awkward manoeuvre to get the rhyme, but an admirable flourish. You can get *Forced March* for the price of £8.95 from Enitharmon.

When Joseph Brodsky reviewed translations of the Russian poet Osip Mandelstam in 1977 he said the "versions bear the imprint of self-assured, insufferable stylistic provincialism". The translation that was most readily available at the time was the Penguin edition by Russian scholar Clarence Brown and the American poet W.S. Merwin. The translators made no attempt to replicate Mandelstam's stanza forms or rhyming, but made it resemble, well, Merwin's own poetry. Brodsky continued: "'O.K.,' a young American poet or reader of poetry may conclude after perusing these volumes, 'the same thing goes on over there in Russia'". The story has something of a happy end, though, as Mandelstam's reputation survived Brown and Merwin, and indeed his name now resonates in the twentieth century. The highlight of Mandelstam translations is of course Robert Tracy's version of *Stone*, the poet's first collection (helpful and copious notes, original *en face*), but we should be grateful to Bloodaxe for releasing once again, now in one volume, *The Moscow and Voronezh Notebooks: Poems 1930-1937* in the translation of Elizabeth and Richard McKane. It's unlikely that anyone will claim that the McKanes have anything of Tracy's flair (their versions are unrhymed, for a start), but what reader interested in Mandelstam would want to be without this book which has so many helpful notes? More importantly, there are texts of the poems themselves that stand as an enticement and provocation to tackling the Cyrillic. *The Moscow and Voronezh Notebooks* costs £9.95.

First you have it and then you don't, first you're good and then you're shit. As fans of *Trainspotting* will remember, such is Sickboy's theory of artistic decline. The example he had in mind was Lou Reed, but another figure sorely in need of some sort of comparable failure theory is Hugh MacDiarmid. In the 1920s he published *Sangschaw*, *Penny Wheep* and *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, but not too long afterwards he was writing the poems col-

lected in *The Revolutionary Art of the Future* (eds John Manson, Dorian Grieve and Alan Riach, Carcanet £6.95). These form a selection from three hundred odd poems of MacDiarmid's exhumed from the archives of the National Library of Scotland, and while it's possible to work up a passing head of steam over his parade of indifference at the bombing of London ("Now when London is threatened/ With devastation from the air/ I realise, horror atrophying in me,/ That I hardly care"—"On the Imminent Destruction of London, June 1940"), the real scandal is how far he'd fallen and how fast. One theory we've heard is that we tumbled down the stairs of a bus and landed on his head. And pretty fast it must have been going too, to produce poems as dim-witted as "The German Bombers" and "Five Minutes' Silence".

September saw the Irish première of a new opera by Ian Wilson and Lavinia Greenlaw. *Hamelin*, a chamber opera for three voices with small ensemble, is a dark, unsettling tale concerned with the aftermath of the Pied Piper's fateful visit to Hamelin, as it focuses on the crippled child left behind when he led the rest of the children into the mountain. The grim town of Hamelin is now laid waste by war, plague and corruption with dark undercurrents of suppressed violence and murder as the authorities cover up the chilling truth of events. The boundaries between myth and reality are frighteningly indeterminate. The collaboration between composer and poet comes off excellently, Wilson's fraught, atonal score matching perfectly the sinister meaning of Greenlaw's words, creating between them a deeply unsettling mood. The libretto itself is made up almost entirely of poetry in rhymed iambic pentameter, which lends it a deceptive impression of innocent simplicity, of a nursery rhyme or fairy tale, that is of course entirely turned on its head by the meaning of the text, the action on stage and, most of all, the music. The effect is disturbing—characters singing in rhyme while committing atrocities. Motifs in the libretto are picked up and heightened by the music, its compelling, suggestive force bringing out the macabre truth that lingers barely articulated, repressed in the psyches of the characters. The child's haunting solo pieces resonate long after the opera has ended. It's rare to come across poetry and music brought together so well.

Poetry Ireland Review has a new editor: Peter Sirr is at the helm and he will not, as with editors before him, be vacating the position after four issues. This can only be welcomed. The previous

system was laudable in that it prevented the dictatorship of any one editor over a longer period, but in fact it lead to blandness at best: by the time an editor had gotten the hang of the job, it was time to leave. The design was poor, and it wasn't until a few years ago that they started sending out proofs to authors. Lest all this is dismissed as the competition jawing on, we'd like to raise a cheer for the re-launch of the magazine. The design is good, the type-face svelte and modern. In *Sirr's* first issue, the opening poem is by Paul Muldoon, and there is an essay on James Clarence Mangan by Seamus Heaney. There is a healthy attention to the likes of Richard Caddel and Roy Fisher, and a swathe of translations (from Norwegian, German, and Japanese among others). Those latter provide a good counterweight to Barra Ó Seaghdha's insightful review of *In the Chair: Interviews with Poets from Northern Ireland* (Salmon, €20), edited by John Brown. Discussing the translation activities of the generation of Heaney, Mahon, Carson & Montague, he remarks: "It is arguable that there was a greater knowledge of European culture and languages among Irish writers of the pre-cappuccino era than among today's young writers. In any case, it is worth asking just what our alleged Europeanness amounts to". Marco Sonzogni has a good account of Eugenio Montale and Giuseppe Ungaretti (it's a pity though that he manages to spell Michael Hofmann's name in two different ways in the course of the piece, both of them wrong; and Jamie McKendrick is also spruced up to "James"). David Butler files a trenchant piece on Ciaran Carson, Chris Agee and Bernard O'Donoghue. Previously, notices in *Poetry Ireland Review* often adhered to the Dodo's ethos of "*Everybody* has won, and all must have prizes"; the present issue shows that you can have sharp criticism that isn't nasty—a distinction that will be novel for some. *Poetry Ireland Review* is a steal at €7.99 (www.poetryireland.ie).

It's a pleasure to note that long-standing *Metre* contributor Eamon Grennan received the 2003 Lenore Marshall Poetry Prize for *Still Life with Waterfall* (reviewed by Nils Eskestad in *Metre* 12). The prize is awarded annually for the most outstanding book of poetry published in the United States in the previous year.

Having abandoned his plans for organising a world social revolution in the 1990s, Galway-born Kevin Higgins turned instead to poetry and in April of this year his "Blackhole" was the winning poem at the Poetry Grand Slam at the Cúirt International Poetry Festival, Higgins going on to represent Ireland in the European

Slam in Paris. The chapbook, *Blackhole and Other Poems* (Poetry Monthly Press, €2.50) is written very definitely with an audience in mind. Upfront, delivered in an informal, conversational manner which delights in its own wry black humour, it is the poetry of the urban twentieth-first century, casting a sharply critical eye over the condition of contemporary society. This is poetry at its most political, the speaker despairing over the state of our times—poems on 9/11, the free market, urban decay and post-Celtic Tiger, multi-racial Ireland feature here with titles such as “The FÁS Man Cometh” and “A Real Galwegian”. It’s very much the free, rough poetry of political and social protest. Anything goes here, as in a poem titled “Foreboding” where the days are “content mostly just to be/ a small dog pissing against the same old tree”; elsewhere Hitler himself complains of “desperate weather”. Todd Swift’s description of Higgins as “Ireland’s contemporary answer to Larkin” may be stretching it a little.

Of course, there are those of us who might say that slam poetry is already yesterday’s news, and the time has now come for spam poetry. At 7.47 a.m. (what day or month we don’t know) Kristin Thomas posted the following poem constructed out of the subject-headings from spam mails. Here is “Number 3”:

You heard about it, now here it is!
Get some, now!
Are you going to read the first lady’s memoirs?
Remember her?
42 year old single woman needs sex.

Don’t tell her please.

Is that the sound of some disjunctive elliptical young blood booting up his computer to write an essay explaining how this decentres or decatenates or detonates or just describes the lyric subject? Couldn’t be. You can find more at this delightful stuff at www.sperare.com/spam_poetry.

Wallace Stevens, possibly one of the richest American poets (with the exception of James Merrill), once remarked that money is a kind of poetry. Most would disagree with that, but maybe it’s because we don’t have enough money to make the call. As was bruited widely in 2002, there’s no shortage of it in the offices of *Poetry* in Chicago after an Eli Lilly heiress left them €81.7 million. However, in December last year, the *Wall Street Journal* ran an article under the heading, “A Gift to a Tome of Verse Turns into

Something of Curse". (*Metre* demurs at the anapæst in the second foot, but luckily the rest is in prose.) For a start, the magazine has been inundated with requests for pecuniary assistance. Then it turns out that most of the money is tied up in trusts, and *Poetry* has had go to court over alleged mismanagement of some of the funds. Long-time editor Joseph Parisi quit in the summer "amid a battle with a newly assertive board". And lastly, the chairwoman, Deborah Cummins, sounding very CEO-ish, stated that "I view this more like a business start-up... Given the injection of funds, we have a fiduciary responsibility that we have to take seriously". But there is some good news. The new editor, Christian Wimian, will now pay contributors to the magazine \$6 a line, which is three times the previous fee.

Putting together a *Collected Poems*, Basil Bunting said, is like screwing together the boards of your coffin. As an adage it seems particularly cruel when applied to Adam Johnson, who didn't live to see his first collection into print, let alone a *Collected Poems* (Carcenet, £12.95) before his early death in 1993. To those familiar with the earlier collection, *The Playground Bell*, this book will serve as a reminder of how good his late poems were, and how far they'd come from the early poems that don't add very much to what we already know of their author. With their overwrought abstractions and drooping swains "in love with being in love", the juvenilia are fairly leaden affairs. Two early dedications to John Heath-Stubbs are significant: it doesn't require too great a leap of the imagination to imagine Johnson as a poetic child of the 1940s, or as an Oxford contemporary of Heath-Stubbs and Sidney Keyes. Too high a tally of dedications in a book is always a worrying sign (all dedications are dowdy, Pound said), and a third of the way into this book the reader may begin to worry that he is dealing with a talented dabbler who manages the odd moment of Cavafyesque poignancy but not much more. Then a poem as fine and unexpected as "The Spiral Staircase" comes along and Johnson takes a gratifying step towards maturity:

Halfway down the stairs that curl
Headlong towards an inconstant circle,
Midway between air and light that lied
And the dispassionate darkness, inherit
A sense. From here the way is easy—

And it does seem easy, in poems such as "The Dancing Partner",

“Monument”, “The Departure Lounge” and “The Playground Bell”, the last of these a moving account of his first gay experiences as remembered from the advanced stages of HIV infection. It’s important to remember that, in all likelihood, Johnson would not have wanted to be judged by many of the poems in the first half of this book. In the natural course of things this would not have mattered so much, as the mature poems continued to come. But as it is the core of his achievement seems all the more valuable, allowing us the brief pleasure, as he puts it in “Brumal”, of feeling “Drowned in his world,/ Oblivious.”

As a general rule *Metre* is all for orgasms, so we could hardly say no to a title like Nin Andrews’s *The Book of Orgasms* (Bloodaxe, £7.95). After a couple of dozen sections though (“How to Farm an Orgasm”, “The Ultimate Orgasm”, “Teaching the Orgasm to Speak”), a thought occurred to us. How badly would the book suffer from having the word “orgasm” replaced, passim, with “trombone”, “cauliflower” or “Dachshund”? Not all that much, if truth be told. “The Trombone in Ancient Times”, “Confessions of a Cauliflower”, “The Cosmic Dachshund”... Toned down (or do we mean up) to *The Book of Butts* it could make a great exercise video. Among the acknowledgements is a note of thanks to “Brigitte Calandra, whose belly-button appears in the photograph of the knife and fork”.

Another Northumbrian title, *Bloodaxe Poems of the Year 2003* (£3.99), features new work by some fine writers, including Peter Didsbury, Peter Reading and Gwyneth Lewis. It also features one of the most bizarre prefaces you’ll read in a long time. Pooping his press’s twenty-fifth birthday celebrations, editor Neil Astley delivers the bad news about what’s gone wrong with contemporary poetry. This warrants an indented quotation:

Any sense of personal achievement I feel in having helped open up a wider readership for poetry in Britain has been dampened by the recent emergence of poetry’s new academic spin doctors. The puritanical members of that bogus male cult of literary seriousness and poetic difficulty are now publicly trashing any writer or book perceived as threatening their critical policing of contemporary poetry, from the wonderful American poet Billy Collins (scorned as “sentimental”) to Bloodaxe’s *Staying Alive* anthology (“definitively dreadful”)... all the negative reviews—and there were many scathing ones—were by disdainful male

poets (whose own poetry would be incomprehensible to anyone not versed in late 20th century postmodernism).

The agenda behind such attacks is that these men believe poetry's prime concern is language (for its own sake) and intellectual play, not communication and human life. And because they are clever and articulate young men—adept at veiling their elitism and misogynistic attitudes behind a pretence of critical authority—they've taken over many key positions of literary influence without many people realising that their æsthetic arguments are not only spurious but dangerous.

Since Astley doesn't name names, let's do it for him. The two most outstandingly scathing reviews of *Staying Alive* were by Peter McDonald (former Bloodaxe poet, let it be noted, though expunged from their latest catalogue) in *Thumbscrew* and Mark Ford in the *Guardian*. McDonald is presumably Mr Serious, with Ashbery-groupie Ford taking care of the postmodernism. A gripe about the new *Poetry Review* accounts for another Ashbery fan, David Herd, and Robert Potts, well-known admirer of those user-unfriendly poets Peter Reading and J.H. Prynne... except, hang on, aren't both of those published by Bloodaxe? How much more postmodernist can you get than Prynne? And what about Bunting, Didsbury, Jacques Dupin, Roy Fisher, Maggie Hannan, John Kinsella, Barry MacSweeney and Douglas Oliver, also published by Bloodaxe? Anti-modernism and anti-difficulty is to contemporary poetry popularisers what Euroscepticism is to sad old Tories: a threadbare, ritual gesture, devoid of content beyond its weary self-appeasement. It also has the disadvantage, as a rallying cry for a list that includes the above-mentioned authors, of utter incoherence. All of which is as-nothing compared to that reference to the "wonderful" Billy Collins. The what? Isn't his latest book called *Nine Horses*? That'll be nine too many, then.

Editing *Metre*, by the way, is so safely removed from anything resembling "key positions of influence" that we know Astley couldn't possibly have meant any of the crazed postmodernist academic racketeers who write for these pages (some with Bloodaxe connections). So no offence taken.

Students of Irish censorship will know that, while Frank O'Connor's translation of *The Midnight Court* got itself banned, Brian Merriman's Irish-language original never did. Could the reason for this be that some people really believed what school-

room dictionaries have encouraged generations of students to think—that there are no rude words in Irish? Interestingly, several poems in Gearóid MacLochlainn's *Stream of Tongues/Sruth Teangacha* (Cló Iar-Chonnachta, €15, with CD) appear to confirm this stereotype, with swear words on the recto translation where there is none in the original. But on another level, MacLochlainn has made an audacious attempt to get away with all sorts of things we don't normally find in (English-language) Northern Irish poetry. Tight-lipped, oblique, studiously impartial, carving out its careful space for itself above the stereophonic nightmare of tribal violence: these are just some of the things this poetry emphatically is not. Here's the end of "Ag an Tábla":

Tá mo chéachta oscailte
 ach ní féidir dada a mhothú.
 Ní chluinim fiú na páistí ag caoineadh thuas staighre níos mó.
 Táim dall is bodhar.
 Ní mhothaím ach an scian seo teannta i mo lámh,
 ba mhian lion í a shá is a shá arís go díoltasach,
 é a stróiceadh is a ghearradh as a chéile;
 go gcruthóinn tost iomlán.
 Tost naofa fuil dorchá.

(In Ciaran Carson's translation: "The wounds are still raw,/ but I can hear fuck-all./ The kids are crying upstairs—so what?/ I've just gone deaf. Gone blind too./ All I know is the kitchen knife in my fist,/ which I'll stick and stick again into/ the throbbing heart of the squawking head/ till it's been ripped apart for good./ Then I'll have made proper peace./ Dark holy bloody peace".)

Speaking of Ciaran Carson, *Metre* lives too sheltered a life ever to have seen active service, but our description of the long poem about World War I in his *Breaking News* ("Briefly Noted", *Metre* 14) surely earns us a spell in the nearest trenches. Having won the Forward Prize with the book Carson could probably pay to have us transported there, and serve us right too. We meant the Crimean War. As the man said, "Someone had blundered" and all that.

Reginald Shepherd's latest collection is reviewed in this issue by Angela Leighton. Readers might also be interested in his essay in the Autumn 2003 issue of *Michigan Quarterly Review*, entitled "The Other's Other: Against Identity Poetry", which offers a sustained, intelligent rebuttal of the poetry of multiculturalism, espe-

cially of certain strands of African-American poetics. He nails his colours to the mast at the outset, stating that identity poetics limits "the imaginative options of the very people it seeks to liberate or speak for". Shepherd admits that the ethnic and social background of a writer is integral to his or her work, but insists that the meaning of the poetry is never reducible to that background:

Part of the expressive material given to me to work through happens to be sociopolitical (my experience as a black gay man raised in poverty in a racist, homophobic, class society), but that in no way gives my work any kind of political efficacy or allows that work to make any special claims.

He tells the story of a black lesbian performance poet at a gay writers' conference who implied "that literacy was oppressive to black people", and wryly remarks that this "certainly would have been news to the slave-owners who tried to keep their property from learning to read". But as the essay progresses, it becomes clear that a Marxist agenda replaces the ethnic agenda: "Poetry is potentially liberating because its uselessness marks out a space not colonized by or valued by capital". The implication of this is that you cannot have real poetry that imaginatively depends upon large amounts of money or power (that's Virgil out then, for starters). The truth of the matter is that you can have great poetry that celebrates ideas like imperialism and capitalism, whatever violent and rapacious forms these take. Shepherd merely replaces one constraint with another.

Bubbling under: Brian Henry, *Graft* (Arc), Sarah Day, *New & Selected Poems* (Arc), Jennifer Moxley, *The Sense Record* (Salt), Tony Lopez, *False Memory* (Salt), C.K. Williams, *The Singing* (Bloodaxe), Carolyn Forché, *The Blue Hour* (Bloodaxe), Pearce Hutchinson, *Done into English* (Gallery), Michael Coady, *One Another* (Gallery), and Don Paterson, *Landing Light* (Faber). And how about Grace Schulman's edition of *The Poems of Marianne Moore* (Faber), which came to hand just as we went to press? Now there was a wonderful American poet.