

The Changing State

Dennis O'Driscoll, *Weather Permitting*. Anvil, £7.95

Thomas McCarthy, *Mr Dineen's Careful Parade: New & Selected Poems*. Anvil, £9.95

Dennis O'Driscoll and Thomas McCarthy have much in common—they are exact contemporaries, both were born in 1954 and grew up in the neighbouring counties of Tipperary and Waterford, and they are among the few Irish poets to publish with an English publisher, Anvil in this case. Since the late 1970s, they have established distinctive poetic styles *and* also a critical presence through their involvement with various little magazines—notably, both men have edited series of *Poetry Ireland Review*. However, it would be difficult to imagine two more different poets and their new books confirm their continuing preoccupations: O'Driscoll's work consistently describes the vanity of human wishes and the inadequacy of language, while Thomas McCarthy is a lyric poet for whom art is a redemptive force.

The strengths of *Weather Permitting* are in its treatment of metaphysical themes. O'Driscoll's work is preoccupied by mortality and a *memento mori* of one kind or another is present in almost all of the new poems. Sometimes, this can be morbid and sharply witty: thinking of acquaintances with whom he has lost contact the poet muses, "They are either alive and well or decomposing/ slowly in a shroud" ("Either"). Sometimes this is morbid and eerie as in the fine villanelle "End of the Peach Season" where the repeated lines conclude icily: "The peaches are no longer in their prime/They are living now on borrowed time". Elsewhere, Death appears in mundane scenes, scythe in hand ("Deadlines", "Coming of Age", "Towards a Cesare Pavese Title (Vera la Morte e Avra I Tuoi Occhi)"). The poet himself appears as Death incarnate in "Snail's Pace", but *he* mercifully spares the humble garden mollusc. Even in "9 A.M.", a seemingly ordinary early morning street scene is shadowed by the mortality that dominates the book's other poems. By the end, the book's morbidity can appear to be programmatic and when O'Driscoll writes: "I stare at the graves/ like a sailor gazing out to sea," it seems as if the poet actually gazes at everything like a poet staring at a grave.

For the most part, O'Driscoll maintains a wry and unsentimental

distance from his material. The poems deliberately eschew any lyrical grace and determinedly realise the world as mundane, physical and untranscendent. “Only” is an unlikely cry of “Carpe Diem” with its initial refusal to indulge in any idealised gloss on human activities:

It is only lips, one on top of another.
Shedding their unsavoury scales

It is only warmth.
Everyone hovers around the 37 mark.

In another poet, these lines might seem a satirical swipe against a certain scientific reductiveness. In O’Driscoll’s case, one identifies the speaker of the poem with the poet’s anti-romantic (and anti-Romantic) worldview. However, the consciously reductive pattern of the poem is undercut by the nicely ambiguous last pair of lines: “It is only that your moment has arrived./ It is only for now.”

Besides the grim reaper, there *is* another violent creature prowling around O’Driscoll’s collection. In “The Celtic Tiger” and other poems, O’Driscoll addresses the success of the Irish economy under a succession of corrupt governments. However, these poems are unlikely to stalk the Tiger successfully: they lack the bitter power and outrageous particularity that characterises the satirical work of Austin Clarke or Michael Hartnett, Rita Ann Higgins or Paul Durcan. O’Driscoll’s poem tamely contrasts the boom-world of conspicuous consumption, of “hummus on black olive bread”, imported beer and Evian water, “sponsor’s concerts” and “Rocha tops” with the world of the poor and the old who “wait out their stay/ of execution in small granny flats”. It is an image and an idea that has lately much occupied newspaper analysts, economists, even the odd painter: here, though, the poems are too predictable to make their mark—it is an opportunity missed.

The satires also throw into sharp relief the deliberate flatness of O’Driscoll’s diction and the way that his free verse sometimes fails to challenge the mordantly clichéd language that he has chosen to deploy. I suppose that is the price you pay for taking the trouble to steer clear of, and avoid the trap of, the easy lyricism that makes some of the men in the street turn their backs on contemporary poetry. But at least one obvious plus of O’Driscoll’s technique is that it forces him to rely on unusual effects: for example, quirky visual images, usually associated with Martian poetry, enliven many poems: a letterbox is “another mouth to feed” or “a trap scattering/ bills and final reminders/ like feathers, fur” (“Buying A Letterbox”); a snail is “a container ship/ seen from a plane” (“Snail’s Pace”); burnt-out votive candles are “the shard of soap/ with which// God washes/ His spotless hands” (“Votive Candles”).

O’Driscoll’s last book concluded with the “The Bottom Line”, a

lengthy dramatic monologue where he utilised his satiric skills, his eye for visual detail and for the absurdities and clichés of business's language. In *Weather Permitting*, he includes two very different kinds of long poem. "Family Album" is, unusually for O'Driscoll, an autobiographical, descriptive and overtly nostalgic sequence of poems. Although there are many fine touches, the sequence is in places larded with a diary-like listing of anachronistic detail which detracted from the direct forcefulness he achieves in section 7 of the sequence. "Churchyard View: The New Estate" is an altogether different prospect. Told from the perspective of a dead man, in his "pine bed", the poem collects together a series of aphorisms and pithy, affecting observations like this:

The child's coffin
like a violin case.
A pitch which parents' ears
can hear through clay.

The black wit that is present throughout O'Driscoll's work finds its ideal home in this "new estate". Reminiscent in its setting of Máirtín Ó Cadhain's novel *Cré na Cille*, "Churchyard View" showcases all that is best about O'Driscoll's poetry.

Thomas McCarthy's *Mr Dineen's Careful Parade: New & Selected Poems* is a substantial selection from five books and it shows the consistency of his interests: he was and is a lyric poet and his poems often attempt fragile ambiguous solutions as they meditate upon, say, the sadness of his father's life or the powerlessness of his community. Since his precocious debut with *The First Convention* (1978), McCarthy has been hailed as the laureate of the Irish Republic. His poem "State Funeral" marked the passing of DeValera:

It was a landscape for old men. Today
They lowered the tallest one, tidied him
Away while his people watched quietly.
In the end he had retreated to the first dream,
Caning truth. I think of his austere grandeur:
Taut sadness, like old heroes he had imagined.

There is a complex thoughtfulness about this stanza that is the hallmark of McCarthy's best work. The "first dream" and its heroes are counterpointed by the allusions to Yeats and by the quiet domestic scene of his burial, where DeValera has become something that must be "tidied away", hidden from view.

His father's involvement at the grass-roots level with the Republic's dominant political party has consistently provided McCarthy with material for poetry: it dominated *The First Convention* (1978), *The Non-*

Aligned Story-Teller (1984) and *The Lost Province* (1996), and McCarthy has consistently written fine poems about Ireland's changing state. Among those represented here are poems about emigration ("The Standing Trains"), the EU's transformation of Irish life ("The New Euro Road"), Cork's dwindling Jewish community ("The Dying Synagogue at South Terrace"), Fine Gael's constituency ("The Rich wouldn't touch us with a ten foot/ pole or even a number nine iron" ["Ellen Tobin McCarthy"]), and more recently, the short sequence that deals with many of these themes at once, "The Lost Province of Alsace".

Politics is second nature to McCarthy, but his poems have not been limited to a purely political discourse. He has not so much written about politics as interiorised the vocabulary of politics to write about love, power, memory and art, subjects (and words) that appear time and again in his poems. In a poem addressed to a cinema projector operator, "spools click in the empty auditorium./ You strap tightly the aluminium film box,/ send dreams like emigrants on the 4 o'clock train" ("Desmond Cinema, Cappoquin"); on election night, the poet imagines that his "parish sleeps on its pillow of votes" ("The Waiting Deputies") and, elsewhere, in a disturbingly intimate image, lovers wake up "numb as a young prisoner in Portlaoise/ who hears these words for the first time: *amnesty, ceasefire*" ("The Garden of Sempivirens").

Mr Dineen's *Careful Parade* also offers evidence of McCarthy's range. There are many lovely, delicate poems about his parents and grandmother and it is easy to see why McCarthy's work has sometimes been bracketed with Eavan Boland's suburban lyrics, rather than with the work of any other poetic contemporaries in the Republic. His second collection *The Sorrow Garden* (1981) explored his family's recent history and the selection here preserves poignant elegies for both his parents. The title sequence includes the sonnet, "Holes, Snow":

It is an image of irreversible loss,
This hole in my father's grave that needs
Continuous filling. Monthly now, my
Uncle comes to shovel a heap of earth
From the spare mound. Tear-filled, he
Compensates the collapse of his brother's
Frame. I arrive on my motor-bike to help
But he will not share the weight of grief.

It is six months since my father's death
And he has had to endure a deep snow;
All night it came down, silently like time,
Smoothing everything into sameness. I
Visited the winter-cold grave, expecting
A set of his footprints, a snow-miracle.

In *The Sorrow Garden* McCarthy also began to write poems about writers and artists, many of which are re-printed in this selection: first AE and Daniel Corkery, and in later collections, Nabokov, Vuillard, Pissarro, Hugh MacDiarmid, Picasso, Robert Duncan, Louis MacNeice and André Gide, are the subjects of poetic tributes that define them in terms of their different visions of art and the good life. In these poems, McCarthy's own vision of art as the redeemer of life is at its clearest: "Truth is/ we are all born to an artless, provincial stench./ If we are lucky, Picasso, we die French" ("Picasso's 'Composition au Papillon'"). For McCarthy, his own father's life hovers at the back of these portraits as a reminder of life failing to realise its full potential, trapped in hopeless, pointless political struggles: in poem after poem, he addresses his father, and always sterile politics is opposed to an art whose virtues are purely aesthetic:

But look at Picasso
 he was a bullish, besieged Stalinist,
 yet he worked and worked and worked.
 Every butterfly of an idea he embraced became art;
 and every false move he made used material
 more permanent and beautiful than the Dáil
 ("Thinking of My Father in the Musée Picasso")

Elsewhere, AE's admirable (political) "life was full of things fresh or unmade// like the new country or a spring homestead". AE's failure to be caught up entirely by the stultifying, male-dominated world of politics is McCarthy's subject, and the poem approvingly concludes, "He was the first to live by the Eternal Feminine" ("The Wisdom of AE"). His fine sequence "Cataloguing Twelve Fenian Novels" also meditates upon the intersection between art and politics as McCarthy, in his day-job as a librarian, records the damp and vandalism that literally rot the books he is archiving.

In the selections from his third and fourth collections, *The Non-Aligned Story-Teller* and *Seven Winters in Paris* (a reference to Elizabeth Bowen's memoir and not to any extended Parisian residence), McCarthy's wife and children are the subjects of poems that attempt to generate a picture of the same kind of fiercely domestic idyll that is the scene of Máire Mhac an tSaoi's "Codladh na Gascaigh," a poem for which McCarthy has professed great admiration in one of his essays. Sometimes, though, these poems of contentment and marital bliss seem slack (as if it is the sentiment alone that matters), although they can reach the celebratory heights of a poem like "Toast" whose opening stanzas are a hymn to his life in Cork:

No lovelier city than all of this,
 Cork city, your early morning kiss,

M C A U L I F F E

peeled oranges and white porcelain
midsummer Sunday mists
that scatter before breakfast.

Mass bells are pealing in every district
in the Latin quarter of St. Luke's,
the butter *quartier* of Blackrock.
Each brass appeal calls to prayer
our scattered books and utensils,

the newly-blessed who've put on clothes
Why have I been as lucky as this?

After this vision of the good life, the poem happily continues with a litany of domestic chores, avoiding any reference to the god for whom the church bells toll.

Although this is a generously-sized *Selected Poems*, there are a couple of poems I miss, "Persephone, 1978" and "The Childhood of Light" in particular, which still require readers seek out the original collections in second-hand bookshops. There are also minor changes to some poems, most significantly in the stanza omitted from "The Wisdom of AE". Anvil's design makes this an attractive-looking book but there is an amount of worrying typos: on the book's back cover, McCarthy is described as having won the Patrick Kavanagh Award in 1997 (rather than 1977); there are also occasional misspellings, inconsistent capitalisations of nouns and initial letters, and some stanza breaks seem to be omitted so as to fit poems on a single page. That aside, this is a richly enjoyable book, and given that almost all of McCarthy's work has been out of print for some years, it valuably allows his work to re-enter the mainstream of contemporary poetry. Over the course of the book, readers can see McCarthy extending his range and returning to familiar themes with increasing power and resourcefulness. The book's new poems move "beyond the politics of anxious youth" ("Some Hidden Trees"), but the lyrical tone and the poet's focus on the prismatic effects of memory remain the same. And in the opening sequence, a poem like "Grand Parade" takes Ireland's current prosperity with a grain of salt:

Lights change in the street of the yellow horse.
Green turns
to red and keeps us waiting. We must
wait in line
as centuries waited in line to be tossed
into a river.
Orange and green. Lovers lean against a light.