

O Seasons, O Cities

Peter Sirr, *Bring Everything*. Gallery, £7.95

For many years Peter Sirr has seemed a poet without a defining context. Unlike contemporaries in England such as Glyn Maxwell and Simon Armitage, Sirr, easily equal in his talents, has not appeared to be part of a larger change in Irish poetry. The English poets had the New Gen promotion, which for all its shortcomings did serve to define a generation and alert readers to the fact that a new dispensation had well and truly arrived. It was not that Sirr's gifts have gone unrecognised: Eavan Boland and Thomas McCarthy generously praised his first collection, *Marginal Zones* (1984); and Tom Clyde compared later work to the poetry of Paul Muldoon. The comparison to Muldoon is of interest only because it doesn't really stick. First, because Muldoon, unlike Sirr, has written at a consistently high standard and has been more formally inventive; and second, because it is clear that the two poets share little in terms of theme or preoccupation. Muldoon is better viewed in the context of Northern Irish poetry of the last few decades, and that leaves Sirr alone again. But with the publication of *Bring Everything* in 2000, it's clear that Sirr has created a context all by himself.

The critics were accurate in their praise of *Marginal Zones*. The book is stylistically accomplished, acute in its observations, and yet informed by a delicate pathos. It refuses the usual autobiographical dramatisations of the time, plunking instead for something more oblique and mannered in its expression. In its accuracy of vision, it seems aware of what the Martians were up to, but its ends are very different. There is wit, humour, and several love poems, a vein that will become more important for Sirr in the years ahead. Its first poem, "The King in the Forest", while conventional in its handling of the volta and somewhat indebted to Derek Mahon in terms of tone, is deft and assured:

Habitat of the hesitant, where shy
 Motions proliferate! Flowers proffer
 Nothing comprehensible, fungi observe
 Not the least heraldic rule, and the slender
 Deer elude me. I am a connoisseur

Of ash-*lied* and oak-elegy, and when
 The limbed light comes through the trees
 I am the startled interloper set down
 In a corner of the canvas, an afterthought
 Or a study in perspective, who sees

The leaves transfigured, the thin hands raised.

Here the speaker is sidelined, relegated from agency to observation, and this foreshadows much of the poetry of subsequent collections. Often when writing autobiographical anecdote, he is looking from a window at the city, the cloudscape or just the goings-on across the street. He absorbs, collates, arranges, but does not step forward to change the panorama that he sees. What is admirable here also is the vagueness of the epiphany: only the slightest indications of its nature are provided in the final line. It but hints at transcendence and transformation, as though the usurped king has no words to describe further what he sees. Similarly, in "Translations" the world stretches ineffably beyond the language of the speaker, and Sirr intimates how such linguistic limitations (and by implication such failure of imagination) can have dire consequences for others:

On the plains, and nearby, in cartoon
 Houses, thickets aflame with claws,
 The little family groups sit down
 To half the words for food.

This alertness to the constructed nature of reality is alien to much Irish poetry with its incessant rummaging through the myth kitty and obsession with origins. However a poem like this, although it settles for a somewhat standard dying fall, is evidence that Sirr is learning at this early stage how to situate his voice in the contemporary world, and avoiding some jerry-built conception of primordial connection with the land or nation.

"Alternative Sites", with its relish of the intricate panorama of the city, its judicious use of idiom and a looser mode of address, most clearly augurs Sirr's later achievements. Looking at cranes operating over a city, he sees

The fitful drills go berserk on cue.
 Office cleaners get to work, floor by floor,
 Hoovers probing identical stars.
 This could be a breakthrough

Brought in countless dimensions
 To the spellbound millions,

Their antennae amazed into stiffness
By these fantastic labours,

The supervisory Cyclops
Whose beam jerks in all directions.
Or else this is a speculative backdrop
The mogul moon has financed,

The extras lumbering from the pubs,
The tacky prehistoric modules
Wheezing towards Rathmines
Somebody's affordable myth.

The puns, the rich sound effects, the careful detailing—these are the bright local felicities. Sirr, looking out through his panopticon is somewhat drawn to condemnation, or perhaps condescension (“Somebody’s affordable myth”), but this is resisted. After all, the final line, read in a different register, might be compassionate. But outweighing this ambiguity is the surprising predilection for the idea that this is a constructed scene, although the questions of by whom and for whom are not directly touched upon.

Some of the poems of Sirr’s second collection, *Talk, Talk* (1987) are set in Holland, where he moved to in 1986, and in general the book marks his engagement in earnest with European poetry, particularly with its more relaxed delivery and surrealist edge (as for instance in the poem “A Painful Case”). He is less likely to arrange his lines into regular stanzaic shapes, opting instead for an amorphous free verse. He also moves in for a close-up on the “affordable myth” of “Alternative Sites”, bringing the reader into the bedsit to sing the “Ode of the/ steadfast gas heater, the seedy couch” (and we are brought there not only to look at the furniture but also to witness the eros of the poem’s conclusion). The middle section of the book is concerned with a love-affair and the final section is about the death of the poet’s father. While these poems contain many fine moments, one cannot but be a little disappointed at Sirr’s conventional handling of these subjects. With the archness and poised delivery of *Marginal Zones* gone, what we are left with is a flat treatment of these stock themes. It is as though the emotional heft of the subject matter restricted the movement of his imagination.

The first fifteen or so pages of Sirr’s third collection, *Ways of Falling* (1991), indicate that he has not moved on from *Talk, Talk*. He has settled in comfortably to his chosen forms and modes of address but there is little happening in them. Perhaps the lowest point is “Les Beaux Jours” which is about going for Sunday walks up the mountains with his family as a child. Anyone who has endured similar afternoons will sympathise, but it’s hard to cut him much slack as he concludes the

poem with mandatory anti-epiphany: "raindrop after bloated raindrop slump onto the windscreen". The poem is so tonally weary, the turns of thought so hackneyed, that one wonders if Sirr is deliberately parodying a common type of poem of the time. It's with some relief then that one turns the page to find "Escape Manual", self-aware and almost acknowledging dissatisfaction with what has come before: "There is always a way, surprisingly./There is always some way to surprise/ even this beady eye/ open all decade". While not a distinguished poem, it is a kind of vector, an instruction to the poet from himself. However, the next poem, dutifully entitled "Destinations", is distinguished and immediately directs the reader's gaze outwards and upwards: "Something outside is ablaze with surprise". The speaker stands on a threshold between worlds in the poem, and indeed between the first phase of his career and the second, as Sirr glimpses fecund imaginative possibilities:

A landscape intent or convalescent:
everything there
is foretaste, echo, a tremor of entrance,
a still warm absence. It is the childhood of gods
or their ancient boredom. Here I come
in the small hours to explore, my hands empty,
my mind sucked dry: there is not only
nothing to say, there is nowhere to send it.
Yet here also I stay, invented by the air
and growing into it, each day
a little more securely: the first of my kind
amazed by my life, that lingers, and is spacious.

The last line is self-regarding in the best of ways; it is almost Whitmanian in its scope and lack of petty egotism. The fourth line sends childhood experience off into stellar, mythological reaches, and implies a boredom with the subject. But for all of the promise of "Destinations" there is no immediate flourishing and the book contains many weak poems, not to mention some poor editorial choices. For example, the poem "Swing", a conventional piece of childhood nostalgia, comes immediately after "Destinations", as though we had never been told about the amazement and spaciousness of his life a page before. The book ends with a long sequence, "Death of a Travel Writer", which is ambitious in its range and methods, but displays Sirr's difficulty with orchestrating single poems into sequences. There are many fine short poems contained within it but their individual voltages do not combine in an overall effect.

The same problem is to be found in "A Journal", a thirty-four page sequence which concludes his next collection, *The Ledger of Fruitful Exchange* (1995), and which is about the break-up of a relationship.

Much more compelling are the poems of the first section, especially "Cures", "Body and Soul", "Options", "Listening to Bulgarian Music" and the marvellous "Pages Ripped from July". This last is perhaps the best poem about tourism and its implications since the poems that open Elizabeth Bishop's *Questions of Travel*. In the first part, entitled "Rough Guide to July 18", the gaze of the speaker ranges over the town, much as the speaker of Marianne Moore's "The Steeplejack", but Sirr is more alert to the details of the demotic than Moore, thus:

a boy walks out of the house of his parents
towards the field where his girl waits;
the mini-market is closing on Via Roma
(Hier spricht man Deutsch); fish

relax on platters, Vespas swarm in the piazza
and down on the beach
Antonio furls his blue umbrellas,
congratulates his deckchairs, slapping them on the back

till the sand flies; from lidos, from belvederes
Freddie Mercury John Lennon Lucio Battisti...
.....
someone has left *Bild* on a table, scandalizing
the breeze; Bepi takes his postcards in

(tan breasts the waves caress, the sun going down
on the tiniest of G-strings) and surprising mullets
swim head to tail towards death
out by the eastern promontory...

The delight of this gaze as it moves through the scene, its good humour and speed, its profound relish for the diversity of *things* in the world,—these are bracketed by the historical scope of the first verse:

At this moment in the town's history
(long, bloody
in 1554 seven thousand slaughtered
heads down on the Bitter Stone)

a boy walks out...

There is a kind of guide-book complacency to the remark, but the catalogue that follows is not your normal *Rough Guide* to one Italian day. In the later section, "Umbra", the travelling couple are drawn further into the scene, but in the last, "Worlds" an altogether more complex relationship is established. The tourist gaze, looking condescendingly at the town, sees it in the distance:

Once this too
was the world. Now it lies
too far down, now it is sunlight
and finished history,
its deaths and blood
optional information.

The speaker shrugs and turns to leave, but as he does a deeper realisation flashes upon him:

If you stayed long enough here
a door would open
you would not want to enter:
bearing your ordinary life

you would walk out into the heat of the square,
the screams of the dying, the spectacle
of the already dead.
Carelessly you would be taken,
without any particular excitement,
and bundled onto the stone,
your blood, wholly unremarkable,
pouring into the sun
its brief stain.

The qualifying phrases here mitigate what would otherwise be a melodramatic conclusion. Sirr has carefully prepared us for this, so that we are confused and utterly engaged by the complexity of the scene he has sketched. The bloody stain fails to erase Bepi and his postcards—the good humour of that is strangely instinct with horror of the massacre, though one is at a loss to say exactly how.

It's hard to imagine there being any doubt that *Bring Everything* is Sirr's best book to date. There are none of the longueurs of previous collections; it is carefully crafted and edited; in thematic terms, it is impressively cohesive, and yet still manages to surprise in its transitions and about-faces. There are elegies for his father that, in pathos and tonal flare, far surpass the long sequence in *Talk, Talk*. It represents the perfection of a mode that Sirr has been working in previous books, encompassing a rich imaginative profusion and amazing sensual force. Though it includes love poems of the highest order, its central character is the city of Dublin itself as it has never been seen before in our poetry. It relishes the huge variety of *commodity* that is now available, it goes into Habitat shops, its looks at the headlines, listens to its noises, it relishes the odours and perfumes of the city breathing, leans closer to consider them: "admiring the stalls, running our fingers along bright

fabrics, sniffing cheeses, wandering wherever the crowd took us". Put simply, it takes pleasure in every aspect of the place, without turning away from the greed and deception which help compose the whole scene. The title itself indicates the expansive generosity of this contemplation. It is like the poetry of Frank O'Hara as he wandered around New York on his lunch breaks. With the important exceptions of Thomas Kinsella and Michael Hartnett, Irish poetry has overlooked the city as subject, preferring landscape. Sirr then is like one of the first pioneers discovering a new continent and conveying it to our imaginative ownership.

For Sirr the city, by gathering commodities from far-flung countries, corrals the hinterlands of those things as well, and so the self has access to the various geographies of the world: "There's a moment the air will thicken and the light shift, as if/ another country has poured itself in" and you might find yourself in China or Turkestan. While in Santa Fe, he tells us

I sat like a native, drinking *mate*, inhabiting hugeness,
exchanging countries with Paula Shanahan,
part German, part Irish, part Italian...

.....

Her ancestors burst from the
frame,
they have exchanged their immigrant gravity for a spacious
laughter
and run towards the horizon...

("Turkestan")

This is marvellously exuberant and capacious, truly suggesting a space into which everything can be brought. The usual jeremiads about globalism dwell on the debilitating effects of the free flow of capital; the wide-ranging locales of Sirr's poems catch something of that movement as well as the refreshing sense that Ireland in the last ten years has been invaded by so many foreign things, foodstuffs and people. But rather than wringing his hands about this, he delights in the freedoms such change brings: the freedom to inhabit other selves temporarily, to taste other countries, to buy their furniture in the Habitat store. Those same Jeremiahs also believe that one of the first casualties of this loosening up is an older idea of place. Certainly, in Sirr's book Dublin occasionally lifts off and floats through the stratosphere, but the consequence of this is that the city is rediscovered, seen anew:

At night I open the cupboard:
voices and stones arrive
fruit and fish from the market
a hand whisking tobacco

Q U I N N

from an inside pocket
the floating
greened copper of a dome
ingredients for the City
which is not the city
but the grocery of an eye.

("The Domes of the City")

The history of Dublin comes to the fore in later poems such as "After a Day in the History of the City", "Cathedral", "Essex Street". What is evident here is that his global gaze is rooted in place in a different way from, say, Kinsella's in Thomas Street and its environs. For the older poet the imperatives of nationalism inform his reconstructions of urban history, whereas Sirr lacks such a framework. For the latter, the bloodshed of the past becomes dreamily commutative with that which happened in other cities of the world. So in sense, yes, the nationalist idea of place is erased, but a different idea replaces it and who is to say that one has more purchase than the other?

There are many selves and sensuous worlds released in this vision, and another important theme of the book is the joy of becoming other people. There is a new kind of commerce between the city and its open-eyed citizen:

Ever since I was banished from the mountains
I have lived here in the roar of the streets.
Each year more of it enters me, I am grown
populous and tangled. The thousand ties of life
I thought I had escaped have multiplied.

("Madly Singing in the City")

There seems to be little regret about this development. The self is endowed with the suppleness and elasticity of an MGM cat—at one moment it is obliterated and becomes someone else, at the next it is reconfigured and back again in place looking out the window. "Desire" begins with the following instruction: "Reconstruct me from a closing bookshop,/ from the panic of shelves/ where old cars trick the spirit, manuals/ of self-repair; gods, geography, money..."; and ends with this statement:

Elsewhere, in the desert, in the hilltop village,
on an endless, meandering train
the soul puts down its books, is fluent again.

"Cathedral" also ends with such an image, as the speaker tells his lover that "the whole place seemed to fall/ and my spirit, that had been light, was air". When he says at the end of "China" that "we can no more live singly than light can fall on one place only", he traditionally re-

states the need for love, but on another level marks the desire for the self, Whitman-like, to contain multitudes. It's no wonder then that a long poem is devoted to one of Pessoa's personae, Álvaro de Campos.

To revise the comment about the comparison between Sirr and Muldoon, perhaps it is more accurate to remark that in their most recent books they are closer in theme. The channel-surfing disjunctions of *Hay* are similar in some respects to Sirr's global mobility. But where Muldoon's range, for all its wildness of reference, is finally bounded by autobiography, Sirr's is by Dublin's city limits. Muldoon remains more formally inventive, but in *Bring Everything* Sirr has a capaciousness that makes Muldoon's work seem somewhat claustrophobic. He has no trademark tone, as the Northern Irish poet does, but is able to borrow and orchestrate a greater assortment of voices and thread them seamlessly together, which makes it all the more sweetly difficult to work out "whose head is starting to spin,/ whose voice is telling the story,/ whose life it happens in."