

Peter Denman

## The Long and the Short of It

Gerald Dawe, *The Morning Train*, The Gallery Press, 1999. £6.95 (pb), £12.95 (hb)

Ted McCarthy, *November Wedding and Other Poems*, The Lilliput Press, 1998, £6.99 (pb)

Tom Paulin, *The Wind Dog*, Faber and Faber, 1999. £7.99 (pb)

While these three collections could hardly be said to constitute a representative sample, they do prompt the thought that perhaps we are seeing the emergence of a new convention in the arrangement of poetry collections. Each of these books offers a gathering of short lyric length pieces, together with at least one longer poem or sequence. Paul Muldoon has repeatedly followed this practice of concluding with a long poem, and in his recent collections the long poem has become more and more predominant. None of the authors of these three books goes to that length, but each shows evidence of the need to step beyond the confines of the short lyric. Gerald Dawe begins *The Morning Train* with 'The Minos Hotel', a series of ten twelve-line observations that read at times like postcards from a glum tourist who has booked himself on the wrong holiday package. The postcard poem has a respectable lineage, but usually with the concentration on the picture side. Wallace Stevens wrote 'The Irish Cliffs of Moher' on the prompting of a card from Thomas MacGreevy; Derek Mahon's 'A Garage in Co. Cork' is similarly based on a postcard photograph. 'The Minos Hotel' reads a little like a series of texts for the obverse side of those unreal sunwashed scenes that hang in souvenir shop racks. Dawe's is the voice of the one who won't join in, the one who asks awkward questions, who gets a morose pleasure from observing others participate. His, however, is not the erotic observation of a voyeur, but the judgemental scrutiny of a sceptic.

*The Morning Train* is Dawe's fifth collection. His earlier books have already established his poetic voice as downbeat, cultivating a scrupulous detachment. Much of his poetry reads as if the poems are insisting that they mean absolutely no more than they say, because really there is not very much more to be said. 'I'm not drowning, I'm waving/ at all you folks out there in the rising tide. Confrères/ of the western world'.

This may be the poetry of reductionism, but things are not as simple as they seem. We are meant to recognise the reversal of Stevie Smith's 'not waving but drowning' – easy enough – but is that an allusion to Synge's play at the end? Elsewhere in the volume Dawe leans on Eliot, Wordsworth, Elizabeth Bishop perhaps ('Questions of Geography'). And in the poem 'Black Dog' – which does include a black dog barking to be let back into the house – are we intended to know that 'black dog' was Winston Churchill's term for the depression which afflicted him intermittently? This is the kind of thing which would, I imagine, be glossed as necessary by the poet at a poetry reading, but here the poem comes at you baldly.

There is a brief endnote referring to the "The Minos Hotel", which tells us that Minos was Lord of Crete – some but not all of the sections of the poem are set on the island – and that he was judge of the underworld. This seems to hint at a role Dawe casts himself in; a dispassionate observer of the lower world. 'A Dream of Magritte' begins 'All I could see when I looked in/ was the builder's gear'; 'Questions of Geography' ends 'Up here, next the chimney and solitary gull/ I reckon I can see you too, wherever'. This perspective is sometimes framed: 'Human Wishes' (Johnson's vanity is left unspoken) ends 'Myself and the shoemaker have the curtains pulled,/ not quite enough, so you can see what/ movement there is, both inside and out'.

Another extended work – really an assembly of short pieces – is entitled 'The Visible World'. In many respects Dawe seems to aspire to the art of painter or photographer. His poems pay homage to Magritte and Chagall, or refer to pointillism. But much of the time he is like one of those photographers specialising in *photo verité*, recording life as it is lived in a humdrum way. And he sets himself the challenge of producing memorable poems out of the ordinary. Sometimes it doesn't work:

There should always be  
THE IRISH YEAST CO.  
Shining in the twilight  
Of College St.

— 'Resolution and Independence'

And sometimes it does, as in this from "Vertigo":

I pace behind you both and feel  
the earth's steady incline  
so that when you keep walking,  
higher and higher, I want to sit  
with my back square against  
the flipped horizon; the rip-tide.

Ted McCarthy's is a new voice, and Lilliput is relatively new as a poetry publisher. However, *November Wedding and Other Poems* is not a collection that breaks new ground. McCarthy writes in a careful and unadventurously formalist style. He favours quatrains that rhyme half-heartedly and uncertainly, almost as if McCarthy cannot really be bothered to attempt a consistent full-rhyme pattern, or to seek out inventive sound links. At its weakest, it leads to the slackness of lines such as these, which do not even have the blocking support of the quatrain stanza:

Imagine an island with no  
coastline. Sail there  
under whatever wind you will: sow  
unseasonal flowers, rosemary, rue  
(too late that repentance). True  
whatever enchantment you conjecture,  
permanence from wrestling air;  
conjure water, water, bright, pure  
as that well the Gunning sisters drank from.

— 'Afterstorm'

Inept lineation, trite rhymes, at times a collapse of syntactical sense without any corresponding imaginative release – these faults bedevil the writing. Not all the poems are as bad as this, and the concluding section of ten pieces, gathered as 'Poems From the Black Book' works rather better, albeit within a limited range. By and large, these are poems carried by the strength of the emotion that prompted them. There is a sense of too much unmediated feeling behind McCarthy's writing. The poems of his that work best are those that describe occasional characters and incidents from small town life: 'Twenty Cigarettes', about a suicide in a slurry pit; 'The Chemist's Shop Assistant', in which a distasteful modernity is figured through the refurbishment of a pharmacy. The technical deficiencies of McCarthy's poetry might have been less evident

had he chosen to write in free verse, where its undoubted qualities of empathy and close description might have sufficed. As it is, his formalist aspirations remain unachieved. While I was disappointed in the book, I should in fairness mention that it was the winner of the 1999 Brendan Behan Memorial Award, and – presumably on the strength of that win – the volume achieved the rare distinction for a poetry collection of being reprinted within a year of publication.

Tom Paulin writes without punctuation (other than dashes, ellipses and question-marks), using the line endings and the rhythms to point the sense of what he says. This is part of a written attempt to mimic the characteristics of speech. As a result, his poems read as if they are texts for performance, and are inseparable from the grainy accent familiar from his BBC broadcasts. There are several longish poems in Tom Paulin's *The Wind Dog*, and the longest of them is the title poem which is a revisiting of childhood. It offers an account of the growth of the poet's mind, or at least of its first steps in language. Paulin is ever conscious of language as an identifier of place – in this he is like Tony Harrison, seeking to immerse himself in and use the particularities of dialect rather than to exhibit them as valuable curiosities, as does, say, Seamus Heaney (a dedicatee of this volume).

A 'wind dog' is an Ulster term for a partial rainbow, as we are informed midway through the poem. While Paulin resists symbols, it is possible that he intends this to stand for the glimpse of beauty, promise and achievement that was intimated to him through his growing awareness of language. However, he begins the poem with an admonition that the primary intimation for him was not the word or Logos, nor indeed sense, but sound. Building on this, he forms a poem out of the sounds of Northern Irish and Northern English speech, children's rhymes, the noise of the nursery world. Accompanying this there is a knowing clutch of references to writers and poets. The opening to Joyce's *Portrait* is acknowledged, as are Yeats and Frost, and MacNeice repeatedly; Heaney, Mahon and Longley are discernible in there, and John Clare and Wordsworth. While there is a smug satisfaction for a reader in ticking off the allusions ('Got that one!'), and it is accepted that a poem is built not just out of language but out of the precedents set by other poets, there is an uneasy oscillation here between the sense of discovery which is the subject of the poem, and the knowing retrospection which is the perspective of the

writer.

In other poems there are similar references to the painters Chagall and Magritte, continuing a feature that was evident in his previous collection, *Walking a Line*, where Paul Klee was a dominant presence. *The Wind Dog* however is a far superior book to *Walking a Line*, with a much greater sense of purpose. The sense of engagement is apparent in poems on Drumcree, and in the short poem mourning the death by fire of 'The Quinn Brothers', fusing a Chagall canvas with the horrible actuality of a shameful killing in

a council house's  
orange flames  
as they flex up and beyond  
the feathery fabulous  
powerless tree.

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"The thing that's missing from Irish poetry about beds is sex."

—Vona Groarke, quoted in *The Irish Times*, 20 January 2000

"Who wouldn't want to fall in love with a poet, with someone with all those fine phrases to use up?"

—Rachel Campbell-Johnston, *Tatler*, February 2000

"When a poet runs out of childhood, what do you do?"

—Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, *RTE Radio 1*, March 1999