

BOOK REVIEWS

Edna Longley, *Louis MacNeice: A Study*. London & Boston: Faber and Faber, 1988. xiv + 178 pages. £4.95 paper.

Louis MacNeice, *Selected Poems*, edited by Michael Longley. London & Boston: Faber and Faber, 1988. xxiv + 164 pages. £4.95 paper.

Hugh Maxton, *The Puzzle Tree Ascendant*. Dublin: Dedalus Press, 1988. 52 pages. IR26.00 (IR£3.60 paper).

Valentin Iremonger, *Sandymount, Dublin*, "Choice" Series, 2. Dublin: Dedalus Press, 1988. 64 pages. IR£6.00 (IR24.50 paper).

Padraig J. Daly, *Poems Selected and New*. "Choice" Series, 1. Dublin: Dedalus Press, 1988. 100 pages. IR£6.00 (IRE4.50 paper).

Six *American Poets*, "Tracks" Series. Dublin: Dedalus Press, 1988. 82 pages. IR£3.60 paper.

Francisco De Quevedo, *On The Anvil*, Versions by Michael Smith. Dublin: Dedalus Press, 1989. 106 pages. IR£7.50 (IRS4.50 paper).

Edna Longley's study of Louis MacNeice comes labelled as "A Student Guide", which might indicate a compressed glossary of allusions and proper names in the text, like other such guides published by Faber, those to Eliot and Pound for instance. And very serviceable they are too. This book is much more discursive and ambitious in its approach, although the need to provide a sort of handbook to the individual works, combined with the author's scrupulousness in sticking close to the poems, means that her discussion is studded with titles, quotations and references, and makes for a concentrated mix. MacNeice's poetic career is covered in six chapters, of which the longest, "Colour and Meaning", examines his writings about poetry.

The book begins not with the nineteen thirties but with the inevitability of "Ireland, My Ireland", which is then followed by "English Choices". Against "the English suspicion" of the stylish poetic facade which fronts MacNeice's personal reserve, Longley emphasises his Irish conditioning. Her first chapter takes its title from a line of *Autumn Journal*,

Why should I want to go back
To you, Ireland, my Ireland?,

but elides the question mark attached to the phrase. (MacNeice suggests one answer in the gnomic refrain of his poem "Autobiography": "Come back early or never come".) Longley sets out to provide her own considered response to MacNeice's rhetorical question. Her aim is to disentangle MacNeice from the 'thirties "Auden poets" with whom he has too often been bracketed, with their occasional "spray-on industrialism" and ideological posturing, and instead to insert him in a line of Irish writing which runs from Yeats to contemporary poets such as Mahon, Muldoon and, indeed, Michael Longley. For MacNeice, as for Yeats, experience of life in England

complemented, and complicated, the Irish background but never effaced it.

There is no need now to get het up over the null question as to whether or not MacNeice can or should be regarded as an "Irish" poet, and that is not Longley's concern; the critical nub lies in the relationship between his writing and his Irish origins, and in observing how subsequent Irish poetry and criticism have reacted to — or shiftily avoided — MacNeice as an example. The major works, in her eyes, are Autumn *Journal* (written during the year of the Munich bother) and the poems in the following collection, *Plant and Phantom* (1941). Central to the latter collection is the sequence "The Coming of War" (subsequently shortened and retitled "A Closing Album") which is based on MacNeice's time in various parts of Ireland during the months before and after the declaration of war. The events to which it relates are described in the final pages of *The Strings Are False*, where they give a clear sense of an ending to that "unfinished autobiography". In MacNeice's poetry, written with more finish, the "The Coming of War"/"A Closing Album" oscillates between imminence and closure; its final stanzas are a series of questions, looking before and after:

And why, now it has happened,
And doom all night is lapping at the door,
Should I remember that I ever met you —
Once in another world?

Louis MacNeice: A Study valuably draws attention to the enriching complexities that result from superimposing MacNeice's poetry on the facts of his life, and it displays the discriminating critical acuity we have come to expect from Edna Longley.

Michael Longley's selection of MacNeice's poems is published simultaneously with the above study, and replaces Faber's earlier *Selected Poems*, edited by Auden in the immediate aftermath of MacNeice's death in the mid-sixties. The present selection, while not offering many more titles than Auden's, is much more orderly and gives more in the extracts from the longer poems. There are none of the translations or passages from the plays, and, as Longley himself points out in his thoughtful introductory essay, he "favours the lyrical MacNeice"; even so, this selection offers a coherent and adequate range, providing a clear sense of MacNeice's achievement as a poet as he swings from singing despair to wry detachment. One quibble about

the selection might be that the lyrical central part of the "Trilogy for X" is given in isolation; while this is admittedly the best piece of the poem, it can only gain by being placed between the two more journalistic pieces which go to make up the trilogy.

An incidental interest comes from observing the relationships between MacNeice's work and Longley's own. MacNeice's Ireland — Ulster and the western seaboard — is the same as that which provides the landscape for Longley's verse. Both have written poems called "The Hebrides", but where MacNeice is objective Longley is more introverted. As Longley claims in his introduction, it has taken poets from Northern Ireland such as Muldoon and Mahon (and we must add Longley himself) to rehabilitate MacNeice, to pick up "frequencies in his work which were inaudible in Dublin or London". While Edna Longley sets MacNeice's work in an Irish context, her husband aligns him more specifically with recent Ulster poets.

Introducing the earlier selection of MacNeice's poetry twenty-five years ago, Auden shied away from offering any early assessment of the contemporary and friend whom he partially eclipsed. It was not for him, he said, "to attempt a serious critical evaluation of Louis MacNeice's poetry. That task I must leave to a younger generation, confident that a just judgment will be a favourable one, and that his reputation will steadily increase with the years". Between them, these books bear out Auden's confidence.

In the clutch of books from the admirably active Dedalus Press, Hugh Maxton's *The Puzzle Tree Ascendant* must take pride of place as being the only one made up of entirely new work. Or is it? Walter Benjamin once envisaged a book, which he would compose, entirely consisting in quotations. It would have been a literary work purged of the Self, or retaining only the formal outline of an authoring presence. By that "only" we can measure the impossibility of the task. Yet quotation has been a profitable modernist technique in this century, lending to irony all the former resonance of the posture ironised. Every bit of writing, however humble or casual, consists in quotation necessarily, and the struggle to introduce the truly original is as impossible as the other one, already assessed. Thus the pieces which make up *The Puzzle Tree Ascendant* have a certain claim to originality even if only because they are infiltrated by quotation. Nine spare poems interspersed with prose pieces — such as a description of the cicada, a post-card from the Mediterranean — suggest a writing which yearns for the condition of music or graphics. Or if not yearning, then a sense of loss predominates. A more evident claim to originality in this collection is its wilful experimentalism; this opens up new possibilities, but forgoes the

supports of a familiar idiom within which to work. Maxton's work is well ahead of his readers; we will catch up on it perhaps, some day.

Sandymount, Dublin brings back into print the work of Valentin Iremonger, one of those slightly faded voices from the nineteen forties. It is good to have poems like "Descending" and "Time, the Faithless" available, together with anthologised pieces such as "Hector", "Icarus" and "This Houre Her Vigill". Iremonger is revealed as a poet of accomplished lyricism. His few poems come closer to MacNeice than those of any other of his contemporaries. The only "new poems" in this volume are two poems in Irish, of which "Dán" is an interesting attempt to transfer some of the fluent understatement found in, say, "Hector" to the story of Cuchulainn. All the other pieces are selected (by the poet himself) from the now out-of-print *Horan's Field and Other Reservations* (1972), which gave rather more of Iremonger's work.

Sandymount, Dublin appears in the "Choice" series, the purpose of which is apparently to republish poetry which has slipped out of print. Pdraig J. Daly's *Poems Selected and New*, appears in the same series. Daly, now in his forties, is a much younger poet than Iremonger. This book includes work from his three previous collections as well as fourteen new poems, among them a short sequence set in Italy, returning to the setting of some of his early pieces. An observed landscape, Irish or Italian, provides the characteristic material for Daly's verse, even in the intimacy of "Lovesong":

I can lay the scene out perfectly:
The river just where the trees begin,
Lamplight, stars, a little cloud,
A dark glow on the water.
I could have forgiven the world anything
But your sadness.

Six American Poets appears as part of the "Tracks" series; *Tracks* used to be an occasional magazine of poetry and translation, but here the title seems to have dwindled to a handy series label. The six poets, John Engels, Charles Simic, Stanley Plumly, James Tate, Daniel Halpern, and Jorie Graham, mostly from the eastern USA, are represented by something between five (Graham) and eleven (Simic, Tate) poems apiece. Plumly is the most readily accessible, evoking a pastoral world that impinges on personal experience, achieving a relaxed syntactical spaciousness. That this is an unsatisfactory volume has little to do with the nature of the poetry, but much with the way in which it has been assembled and presented. Although this is presumably meant to be a sort of introductory sampler, we are given only minimal information about the poets' backgrounds and their careers. On the back wrapper, in the nearest we get to an editorial statement, we are told ingenuously that these six poets are not to be ignored but that it "could have been another six, or another twelve". No doubt it could, but the question remains, "Why these six?"

Michael Smith's *On the Anvil* is a model of how the poetry of another tradition might be made available to Irish readers. Francisco De Quevedo was a Spanish poet who wrote during the early decades of the seventeenth century. In sonnets of baroque Petrarchanism he offers us meditations on the bleakness of love and emotion as they succumb to time. Smith has translated sixty-five of these, preserving the sonnet shape in blank verse linear versions. The original Spanish is not given, but in those instances where it has been possible to compare texts, it looks as if Smith aims at fidelity to the original literal meaning rather than using it as the basis or starting point for an additional or new poem; either is a legitimate strategy. Smith also translates a few of the longer poems. There are some explanatory notes, and an introductory account of Quevedo in which Smith makes a passing comparison between the Spanish poet's life and that of Swift; the title of this book, however, is adapted from a line by Hopkins ("... on an age-old anvil wince and sing") and suggests more accurately the point of contact between Smith and Quevedo.

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