

Brian Coffey, *Poems and Versions 1925-1990*. Dublin: Dedalus Press, 1991. 248 pages. IR£21.00, IR£8.95 (paper).

Thomas Kinsella, *Madonna and other Poems*. Dublin: Peppercanister, 1991. 32 pages. IR£10.00, IR£5.95 (paper).

Thomas Kinsella, *Open Court*. Dublin: Peppercanister, 1991. 24 pages. IR£10.00, IR£5.95 (paper).

Brian Coffey was well served by the *Irish University Review* during the nineteen seventies, as he had been by its precursor the *University Review*; Maurice Harmon published his poems in its pages, and devoted a special issue to his work in Spring 1975. While I am not so churlish as to seize on this as a rebuff to those who find an unhealthy solace in complaining that academics neglect or misunderstand contemporary writing, I have no hesitation in citing it as evidence of Maurice Harmon's enlightened and adventurous editing of the periodical. It is therefore altogether fitting that these pages should salute the appearance of a handsome volume from Dedalus Press, offering us Coffey's *Poems and Versions 1920-1990*. At the generous centre of this copious book are the long poems "Missouri Sequence", "Advent" and "Death of Hektor". The last two in particular remind us of the ambition and attainment of the long poem as explored by Coffey.

"Missouri Sequence" is perhaps Coffey's best known major piece, because it has as its starting point a mapped and gazetteered location — so many of his poems challenge us to identify where we are, but this one seems to offer an answer. But in fact the Missouri poem, with its origins in displacement and domesticity — it arises from a meditation on the expatriate's experience in the US — do not take us into the typical Coffey country. And it ends with the most diversionary footnote in Irish poetry, solemnly telling us that "In Missouri most people pronounce Missouri to rhyme with Shenandoah". I cannot speak for most people, but that just leaves me wondering how to pronounce "Shenandoah". A much better entry point is "Advent" (wrongly "Advert" in the acknowledgements). Part 2 of the poem is a fugue and variation on the exultant opening invocation to natural richness that Lucretius prefixed to his *De Rerum Natura*; Part 3 is a movement through history, leading on to the main concern of the poem which is nothing less than a cry for the earth and our part on it. Coffey is not afraid of the great theme. "The Death of Hektor" (wrongly "Hector" in the contents) balances the destiny of human activity against the comfort of human values. In that respect at least it

is a negotiation between the concerns of "Advent" and of "Missouri Sequence". And in terms of Coffey's technique, his use of the Homeric story shows how his translations (not a term he would use) approach and depart from a textual precedent. It is in the rhythms of this movement that those readers who search for an "Irish" quality to his work will find something to dwell upon.

Coffey's acquisition of a printing press in the mid-nineteen sixties had an evident result on his poetry. The graphic and visual poems are dated now, flirtations with concrete poetry — does anyone still remember that? — but much more valuable is his use of visual quasi-prosodic effects, breaking the line by means of spaces to indicate pauses and using typography to throw phrases into relief. It should be made clear this volume does not give us the complete or collected poems and versions; even a cursory check indicates a number of published pieces that are not included here. Indeed, his work is still in progress, with versions from Mallarmé recently published.

Thomas Kinsella is another poet who has been well served by Maurice Harmon, who made his poetry the subject of an early and insightful monograph. The latest pair in Kinsella's ongoing Peppercanister series (now being distributed by Dedalus Press) are *Madonna and other Poems* and *Open Court*, numbers 16 and 17 respectively. The former continues the bleak circumspection of a distasteful world. Social occasions modulate into an awareness of night-time and nothingness. The first part of "Morning Coffee" ends:

We are all only pilgrims.
Travelling the night.

Throughout the six poems in the book there is the by now familiar Kinsella vocabulary: "sour", "order", "flesh". It takes a conscious effort to see that these poems can move in search of the salvific or compensatory moment; "hissing assemblies" are abandoned for the "fragrant slope" and "a handful of high grass/sweet and grey".

The poems in *Madonna* advance the Peppercanister series, but the title poem in "Open Court" is regressive. A satirical portrait in couplets of Dublin's nocturnal pub society, it tilts at targets which no longer exist — or, if they do, are scarcely worth the levelling of a lance. This is Kinsella returning to the manner of early poems such as "Thinking of Mr D" and "Baggot Street Deserta", but now animated only by bile and devoid of wit.

Three poets sprawl,
silent, minor, by the wall.
Locked in his private agony,

showing the yellow of his eye,
a ruined Arnold turns his face
snarling into empty space,

and so on. "Open Court", described as "a fragment", is merely unfinished.

The short poem included with it, "Dream", makes the whole booklet worthwhile. At first sight a combination of imagery taken from Yeats and Eliot, it soon forces the realisation that this is authentic Kinsella. In its predatory allegory it achieves the viciousness that the other poem aims at. A couple of vulture-like creatures have staked their territory in the desert, and wait for their human food. Groups arrive to study the animals and, not keeping their distance, become consumed with curiosity. The poem ends:

The last I remember is a ring of ghosts
surrounding the scene. One of them, seven feet tall,
prods at random with a shadowy stick.
There is some excitement at one corner,
but most of the ghosts are merely shaking their heads.

This poem is subtitled "A Puzzle"; what can it possibly mean? Excited, shaking my head, this reader thinks he can guess.

PETER DENMAN

Desmond Egan, *The Death of Metaphor*. Gerrards Cross and Newbridge: Colin Smythe/Kavanagh Press, 1990. 174 pages. No price given.

Brendan Kennelly, *A Time for Voices: Selected Poems 1960-1990*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1990. 176 pages. ST£14.95 (hardback), ST£7.95 (paper).

It is rather a pity that Desmond Egan has not received the critical attention that his dedication deserves. That he has managed over the years to work around literary groups and cliques, maintaining an almost defiant individuality, is to his credit. And in these days it is surely no crime to promote one's self as a poet. Perhaps somewhere he has been judged to have committed the mortal Irish sin of refusing to belong to an acknowledged literary order. While nursing an admirable devotion to Patrick Kavanagh, Egan has always looked to Europe and America for models for his poetic style and context. And whatever one's views on a poet publishing his own work, much worse things have been happening to poetry.