

Misbegotten, a farrago of nonsense when viewed in the gloom of the shabby "realism" and second-rate intellectually prized by O'Neill, is on the other hand a stunning piece of theatre. I think it ought be clear that O'Neill learned more from *The Count of Monte Cristo* than he ever did from Ibsen or Aeschylus, and more from Synge than Shaw, or Boucicault than Strindberg. If the brilliant sunshine and tender twilight of *Ah, Wilderness!* is a portrayal of O'Neill's youth as he would wish it, he says, to have been (!), the whole magnificent achievement of his body of drama is in part the old actor his father's beneficent revenge. The histrionics of James O'Neill brings us back to the subject of the Irish dimension in O'Neill. I wish this were a better book, more coherent, less scattered in its elements, more certain and consistent in its tone. It does, though, represent the first sustained essay upon its topic, an important one, and in this way provides plenty of occasion for reflection upon Eugene O'Neill.

LEO McNAMARA

Thomas McCarthy, *Seven Winters in Paris*. Dublin: Dedalus, 1989. 64 pages. IR£4.95.

Ciaran Carson, *Belfast Confetti*. Loughcrew: Gallery Books, 1989. 112 pages. IR£4.95 paperback.

Francis Harvey, *The Rainmakers*. Loughcrew: Gallery Books, 1989. 56 pages. IR£4.20 paperback, IR£7.20 clothbound.

Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, *The Magdalene Sermon*. Loughcrew: Gallery Books, 1989. 44 pages. IR£4.50 paperback.

Paddy Bushe, *Poems with Amergin*. Dublin: Beaver Row Press, 1989. 62 pages. IR£6.95 clothbound, IR£4.20 paperback.

Peter McDonald, *Biting the Wax*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1989. 64 pages. ST£4.95 paperback.

The title-piece of Thomas McCarthy's fourth collection is a collection of epigrams strung along the experiences of a stranger in Paris. Bookish, allusory, not wholly at ease with all that capitalised "Culture", he nevertheless conveys an appropriate sense of the unsettlement that comes from the playing out of personal lived events among the surroundings of a displayed but unassimilated tradition. The epigram is not much used by Irish poets; Devlin (one of the presences invoked by McCarthy) employed it in "The Passion of Christ", and Harnett in *Inchicore Haiku*, but contemporary Irish poets generally prefer the space — sometimes the sprawl — of narrative. Another of McCarthy's poems, "Helena", shows how effectively a series of unrhymed epigrammatic quatrains can meld public and private concerns.

McCarthy presents himself as a refugee from his own history as it happens insistently around him, a history from which he withdraws his assent. He comments on "the artwork of our poor Republic",

the beaten-up coaches at Mallow Station,
the rusted side-tracks at Charleville,
have taken years of independent thought.
It takes decades to destroy a system
of stations.

("The Standing Trains")

The railway station is a favoured locale, but alongside the meetings, departures, and lost connections that characterise these poems are more persistent ties of fatherhood and domesticity. The political references — sometimes, it must be said, rather forced — of McCarthy's poems have been much remarked upon; less immediately noticeable are his explorations of family life, such as "A Difficult Boy" and "A Daughter's Cry", which stake claim on areas of experience more usually associated with women poets, and so are more intrinsically political in the wider sense of the word.

Ciaran Carson's *Belfast Confetti* continues and expands the possibilities of that recovered speech found in *The Irish for No* (1987), using a similar prosody of long lines to assemble an image of Belfast. The image is made up of a collage of various materials: trade-names, street-maps, local histories, memory, anecdote and etymology. The central part of this longer than average collection is a series of nine-line poems, each divided into sections of five and four lines; this offers a containing structure with some internal patterning, not unlike the sonnet, as Carson himself has suggested. (Perhaps we have here a new form — the Carsonnet). These short pieces are interspersed with prose passages. An alliance of prose and poems in pursuit of memory has been tried before — in the first (American) edition of Lowell's *Life Studies*, in Craig Raine's *Rich*, for instance — but here the effect is to suggest a continuity between the speculative investigations of a historian and the observant imagination of the poet. The re-emergence of Carson as a major voice has prompted the republication of poems from the 1970s in *The New Estate and Other Poems*, which gathers most of the poems from his first collection, *The New Estate* (1976), and a few from the pamphlet *The Lost Explorer* (1978), together with other hitherto uncollected pieces.

The Rainmakers by Francis Harvey is supplemented by eight poems reprinted from his late first collection, *In the Light on the*

Stones, published twelve years ago. The thirty-one new poems wander through the contemplative solitude of a country life in Donegal; anonymous figures are thrown into relief against the bleak satisfactions of snow, rock, and sea. Lack of hearing, inarticulacy, a lost language, are all threaded along the poetic lines of communication. John Clare is invoked as a patron presence, but Harvey's voice is more comprehending and assured in its observations than Clare's. There is an elegy for the writer Patrick Boyle which, while invested with feeling, shows that the public ceremony of the elegiac form does not sit easily with Harvey's skills. Much more successful, and more representative of the collection's worth, is "A Snowy Good Friday"; its long loping sentences encompass a countryside which has already been tracked by other solitary walkers:

everywhere
the snow reveals the secret lives of men
and beasts.

The easy meandering of the poem is given sudden point by a final and gently surprising reference to the liturgical significance of Good Friday. This is a religious poetry that is in no way mythopoeic and does not have palpable designs on readers; Harvey's subdued voice is a welcome and unusual quality in Irish writing today.

Another quiet voice is that of Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, whose sixth book, *The Magdalene Sermon*. Her poems are momentary, frequently offering a glimpse of another life rather than a rounded insight. Temporal qualifications underpin her work, as in these opening lines:

'I thought of you then,' she says (*Snow*)
Let the child sleep now (*Balloon*)
At fifty she misses the breast (*London*)
Time goes by the book laid open (*The Italian Kitchen*)
A month since the hospital sleep (*Recovery*)

A world of difficulty is opened up, with *disjecta membra* gathered in isolation. One of the most effective of her poems is "A Whole Life", conjuring up an undated painterly landscape complete with a temple, arches, and a pair of monks, into which is parachuted a sudden presence of the actual. A similar process works in reverse in "Crossing", where a particularised visit to the specified location of Currah Chase, former County Limerick estate of the De Vere family, pens movingly into an airier, more widely imagined world. This collection, her first for eight years, is a salutary reminder of the

known qualities of Ní Chuilleanáin's writing.

In *Poems With Amergin* Paddy Bushe lays particular claim to the territory of south-west Kerry, around Ballinskelligs Bay where the legendary Amergin landed with the first Celts. Bushe balances the vatic qualities of Amergin with an adept handling of form and a wry awareness of the limitation inherent in any formal discipline. This is seen most clearly in the sequence "Poets at Smerwick"; the poets in question are Raleigh and Spenser, who participated in the massacre of six hundred Italians and Spaniards there in 1590, and Bushe himself who attempts to resolve the apparent contradictions between "butterfly and butcher". He comes to terms with his own fascination as he watches the gannets dive:

I saw
necessary angels. I admired
the ordained patterns, their grace.

This is an apology for poetry.

Violence also informs the two longest pieces in Peter MacDonald's well-crafted first collection, *Biting the Wax*. "Silent Night" and "Sunday in Great Tew" circumscribe atrocities but keep a proper distance: the former has the manner of a short story, recounting the prison-camp horrors experienced by a deported Channel Islander during the last war, while the latter explores the geographical and cultural divide between the "six counties" and the English shires at the moment of the Remembrance Day bombing in Enniskillen. Both poems are ambitious, in that they face resolutely into major subjects, but cannot quite escape the nagging doubt that the power of the poem derives from the moral horror of what it describes. These doubts are dealt with in a related poem, "Fire", which ends magnificently:

Tell me instead
how this silence can be spoken; help me understand
the intricate geography of all islands,
the tricks of distance; stand close, help me find
out once and for all the lie of the land.

If McDonald can only persist in this search, his is going to be a significant voice.

PETER DENMAN