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REALMS OF LIGHT

Peter Fallon, *The Georgics of Virgil*, (Gallery Press, 2004), €13.90.

Clairr O'Connor, *Breast*, (Astrolabe, 2004), €10.

Frank McGuinness, *The Stone Jug*, (Gallery Press, 2004), €11.40.

Cecil Day Lewis, publishing a translation of the *Georgics* in 1940, remarked that 'every classical poem worth translating should be translated afresh every fifty years.' On this reckoning Peter Fallon's version is only a little overdue. The *Georgics* are less imprinted on our poetic consciousness than the *Aeneid*. The latter has the thrust of narrative and the ballast of epic convention to maintain its momentum; the *Georgics*, on the other hand, are a celebration of efficient land management – a sort of poetic agricultural manual. Over nearly 2,200 lines, issues such as soil management, irrigation, crop rotation and animal husbandry are discussed against the background of a natural world caught between the ongoing human endeavour to improve the land on one side and the interventions of the gods on the other. Peter Fallon offers us a full and unabashed translation that maintains the classical apparatus of myth and the invocations to Maecenas and Caesar. It all works remarkably well; the ostensibly unlikely material furnishes the modern age with a basis for a sideways meditation on eco-systems and for a full-on celebration of plenty that is a sort of verbal harvest festival.

The rhythmic foundation that Fallon employs is an unrhymed line of six or seven beats. This is long enough to allow scope for the discursive and occasionally instructive nature of the poem, and yet can be treated with a flexibility that allows for the variations necessary to sustain the flow of an extensive text. The number of beats in his line will often be greater or less than six or seven, and the unstressed syllables are not counted, while line endings are used to punctuate the rhythm:

Those trees which of their own accord rear themselves into the realm of
light
mature unfruitful – that's a fact – through otherwise they're sound and
strong,
and that's due to the quality of soil. And even these,
grafted to another or set carefully in a well-worked bed,
will outgrow their wildwood ways and with attentive care
will toe the line of what you have laid down for them. (II, 47-52)

Among the elements contributing to the vigour of the poem are probably Fallon's own background connection with and experience of farming. This probably attracted him to the material of the poem in the first place, and helped to sustain his engagement over a prolonged attention. Nevertheless, one of the striking factors is how Fallon resists any tendency to localise the poem in an Irish context or to personalise it with biographical references. This is in itself both a vote of confidence in, and an act of due respect to, the original. Very occasionally there is an Irish word or phrase: goats are 'pucks' and have 'smigs.' A rare false note occurs when, hastening towards the end, there is the anachronistic phrase 'Full steam ahead!' More remarkable are the coinages and *recherché* words such as 'Violaceous,' 'cyanic,' 'steeping.' These are appropriate, not just for accuracy and to ensure that the reader is kept active construing the text, but also as reminder that we are dealing with an original that is exotic and requires us to reach out to another age, another code of belief, another country and climate. For, whatever about Fallon's personal connection with farming, we are a long way here from the clabber and cling of thick Irish soil. The vines and oxen, the sunny slopes crossed by bees on their errands, where water is channelled for irrigation, not drainage – all this is full of the warm south and the vaulting blue of the Mediterranean.

Day Lewis may have been Irish, but he intended his translation for an English readership in wartime Britain, clinging to the green rolling landscapes threatened by urban spread and war's alarms. Fallon's book comes at a similarly critical juncture in Irish history – if not an intervention in the economic and social transformation, then at least a soft-voiced reminder of an alternative. For Irish readers, however, it does offer some additional insights over and above the sheer pleasure of the poem itself. Its concentration on the working of the land casts a retrospective colouring over many Irish poems that have preceded it: Heaney's early work, Kavanagh's *The Great Hunger*, Yeats's peasant poems, Allingham's 'Lawrence Bloomfield in Ireland', even Samuel Ferguson's 'Inheritor and Economist' and 'Lament for Thomas Davis.' Having the *Georgics* to hand means that those Irish poems of the land can be repositioned in relation to a European classical tradition of rural poetry. The clay that worded and fleshed Irish poetry is seen differently against the friable soil that Fallon brings over from Virgil. As well as territory to be fought for and against, it is the underpinning sustenance of our material and imaginative lives.

The question of what underpins and sustains our lives is to the forefront of Clairr O'Connor's collection, *Breast*. Any poet who undertakes to write out of or about the experience of going through a life-changing event such as serious illness faces a particular challenge. There have been Ed Dorn's *Chemo Sabe*, and in Ireland Brendan Kennelly's

The Man Made of Rain and, more recently, Celia De Fréine's *Fiacha Fola*. Poems about illness do not necessarily have any shift of focus towards the outside world, and they can all too easily become simply a therapeutic instrument, or a diary of progress written over a period when the passage of time seems more intense and disrupted than in the normal pattern of a healthy life, or they never break through the barrier of introversion.

All of these factors hovered around *Breast*, the bulk of which is made up of urgent poems written during and about the diagnosis of breast cancer and the subsequent treatment. Of its nature, this is poetry written out of the immediacy of the experience. There is always the risk that such poetry will draw its effect and feeling primarily from the events being described, and so rest at the level of documentary record and transmission rather than of creativity and imagination. Happily, O'Connor's poems offer much more than this. She has a command of language and image that are marshalled to ensure that the experience – painful and harrowing though it is – becomes nonetheless poetic. At the same time she retains a sense of fidelity to the lived suffering and emotion, not just her own but of those close to her.

The collection opens strikingly with 'Agatha', one of the strongest poems in the book, which works through variations on the motif of carrying: an image of Roman soldiers with St Agatha's breasts on a platter modulates into:

The surgeon's mannered formality distances
the news somehow, as if he's
presenting a telegram on a salver
to someone else.

The poems seek the consolations of art in various forms: an El Greco painting, the Rembrandt room in the Hermitage, the intricacy of calligraphy, the blaze of colours on a coverlet. Very different but just as effective is 'What They Say', built around a catalogue of the phrases people grope for when seeking to offer sympathy and consolation; this is a wryly funny observation of the desperate helplessness of sympathy.

Because the poems in the first section of the book are all written out of the intense experience of acute illness, there are occasional instances of repetition in which an image is overworked: the scars and marks on the body after the operation are flowers, as in 'Agatha' already quoted; in a later poem there are dots and crosses for radiotherapy, and in another they figure as tattoos and calligraphy traces. Indeed, a similar image recurs in 'White Scars', a poem from the second section of the book. This second section, 'Daughterhood', gathers earlier poems. They are about the loss of parents; elegiac and reflective, the melancholy underpinning them is more easeful than the questioning in the cancer

poems. But throughout the book there is the sense that nearly all these are poems about absence and loss; whether of parents or of part of the body, the loss leads to exposure. Clairr O'Connor's achievement is to harness that vulnerability and turn it to strength.

At the centre of *The Stone Jug* by Frank McGuinness is a group of sixty sonnets tracing the course of a trans-Atlantic love affair. The distance and difficulty of the relationship ignite the poems. They are a remarkable rendering of gay love which in its passion and intensity is the equal of any other kind of love but also carries its own particular freight of difficulty. The sonnet sequence is a traditional and well-tried form for love poetry, reaching back through Berryman's sonnets and Victorians such as Meredith and Barrett Browning to Elizabethans like Spenser and Sidney. But if any sonneteer can be sensed standing alongside McGuinness's poems, it is Shakespeare – and the Shakespeare of the turbulent sonnets towards the end of the numbered sequence, not the reflective sonnets that take a carefully thought-out image or simile as their starting point: 'Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore' and 'Full many a glorious morning have I seen.' McGuinness's sonnets are written from the heat of the moment, fuelled by anguish, anger and anxiety as much as by passion.

The sonnets are only partly rhymed, and the division of the line groupings is constantly changed from poem to poem. Some have fewer and some more than fourteen lines. Les Murray approvingly identified the fourteenth to twenty-first lines of a sonnet as having 'the quality of sprawl,' but there is nothing of sprawl in these poems; they are a concentration of energy and intensity. Nor are they shy of swerving into the oblique language of symbol, and they shadow rhyme and form, but steadfastly retain the rhythms and direct address of the speaking voice. This probably carries over from McGuinness's work as a playwright.

If I believed that, I'd believe the nights
were for the birds, believe debts were paid
years before they send in the bailiffs. You
come back to me some mornings. I'm awake.
My honeyed tongue singing, singing the blues.
– 'You'

Before and after the sonnet sequence there are some other poems. There are some short epigrammatic poems, but the more successful are the longer pieces. 'Mount Fahan' is a sort of landscape and memory poem, describing part of the Buncrana setting where McGuinness grew up but infusing it with rich symbolic overtones. And at the end of the collection are two effective versions of Old English poems, 'The Wife's Lament' and 'The Husband's Message.'