

Forms Of Life

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Derek Mahon, *Life on Earth*, The Gallery Press, £9.95, ISBN 9781852354619;

Nina Cassian, *Continuum*, Anvil, £8.95, ISBN 9780856464089;

George Szirtes, *New and Collected Poems*, Bloodaxe,
£15.00, ISBN 9781852248130

Derek Mahon's *Life on Earth* achieves the scope its title announces through the sea imagery that pervades it. 'Homage to Goa' clearly acknowledges the sea as *fons et origo* and sustainer of life on earth:

waves smash on beaches for no obvious purpose
except to deliver the down-to-earth palingenesis
of multitudinous life particles [...]

While the book makes clear Mahon's virtuosity in complex, highly regulated stanzas, the imaginative primacy of the sea is perhaps clearest in the magisterial simplicity of 'The Clifden Road':

West of Clifden on a cliff
where sky changes into sea
and sea to memory as if
at the edge of a new world

on the long hills of Clifden
the green hills of Clifden
I will lay down my grief.

To accept death it must be
that death changes into light
that light changes into sea
and sea into memory [...]

The consonantal and alliterative threads those lines interweave run seamlessly through to the close, typifying the rich musicality of *Life on Earth*.

'Biographia Literaria', an imaginative resumé of Coleridge's life, commands attention as surely as the mariner's glittering eye with the

captivating music of its opening:

A spoilt child shivers at the river's edge –
night-hiding yes but anxious to be found,
a troubled soul torn between fear and rage.

The collection's settings range widely through Europe, Asia, and America. 'Insomnia' is among its evocations of Irish coastal localities and provides a good example of the refreshingly innovative stanza forms that recur in the book:

Scratch of a match
fierce in the dark. The alarm clock,
night-vigilant, reads twenty minutes to four;
wide-awake, as so often at this dead hour,
I gaze down at the lighted dock,
trawler and crated catch,
as if on watch.

The fourth stanza's "shrimps worship the stars" might have found a place in 'Homage to Gaia', the nine-part sequence central to *Life on Earth's* ultimately celebratory concern with the interactions of nature and humanity. Throughout it, Mahon shares Auden's skill in using light verse to bear the most serious of meanings: the possibility of humanly precipitated ecological catastrophe:

You will prevail of course
if in a different form;
we go from bad to worse
just trying to keep warm.

The poem sustains that relaxed ballad form throughout its fifteen pages, bearing the reader easily through its engagements with technologies, natural phenomena, and metaphysical speculation. Its energetic variousness extends to a section that is at once a startlingly original tribute to the Icelandic singer Bjork and an apocalyptic take on Earth's melting ice caps:

Up there where silence falls
and there is no more land
your scared, scary voice calls
to the great waste beyond.

The imaginative audacity of Mahon's early verse and the meditative gravitas of more recent collections come together in *Life on Earth*. Its far-reaching technical and thematic vitality suggest his coming work will be well worth waiting for.

The poems in Nina Cassian's *Continuum* are selected from work written between 1947 and 2007. She has translated some from her many titles in her native Romanian. Cassian was exiled from Romania in 1985 after discovery of her satires aimed at the Ceaușescu regime. 'Remember', the first of the book's six sections, draws on earlier times, reaching back to the exhilarations of childhood through to intuitions of a ruthless state closing in as an idyllic holiday is shadowed by imminent threat:

How did this day escape
the aggressor's edicts?
I'm not entitled to it,
my well being is not permitted [...]

Let's savor it as long as we can:
quickly, quickly, quickly. ('Summer X-Rays')

'Creatures from Inner Space' follows 'Remember', projecting psychologically acute states that recurrently derive their contexts and imagery from the conflict between political tyranny and the roots of personal identity:

I had a lot of good friends,
insane like myself.
We attended gatherings,
but society intrigued against us
until we became enemies.

The book's third section, 'Travelling', contains similar elements of unsettling psychological exposure, but is better typified throughout its varied locations by the precise music and imagery of 'Nature', the opening poem:

I closed another season behind me
– the river was locking itself in armor,
the woods were lacing themselves
in thin silvery spider webs;
winter was around the corner.

'Homages' is dominated by the hundred lines of 'Interpreting Bach'. This tremendous fugue of a poem conflates contemplations of the nature of music and biographical glimpses of Bach as paterfamilias, embedding the 'father' motif for its incorporation of Christian liturgy and God as 'total parent' to the heroically creative,

who restore dignity and the coincidence between truth and beauty,
the restless dialectic of the world,
to those who give palpability to numbers and organize hope,
to those who answer questions daily [...]

The collection's closing sections, 'Love's Boomerang' and 'Finale', find Cassian respectively taking stock of her long life in often astringent treatments of her loves and marriages and reflections on age underpinned by sharp intimations of mortality. The seven-part 'Letters' in the penultimate section is an enigmatic mosaic of everyday imagery and imaginings edging on the surreal. The poem drives home its repetitions of "I don't love you" as the last line of each of the parts, curtailing their imaginative flights with the emphatic bluntness of renunciation.

'Finale' maintains a counterpoint between reflections on the fragility of age and spirited celebrations of a life that triumphs in continuing:

I, who never had any chances except the chance
to live smiling, when, instead of hair or memories,
insults and spit were running down my temples,
– I, who was never in power, but had the power
to exist and to embrace you, my enemy,
and to be ready at any time to die,
– I've always had the 'Haves' – having,
had, have had, had had and Have. ('The Big Conjugation')

The range and power of *Continuum* will make clear Cassian's stature as a major contributor to modern and contemporary poetry to all who read the collection.

George Szirtes's work has always been striking for its wealth of visually realised details that function as stepping stones for the imaginative penetration of the worlds on to which his poems open. Considering the visual emphasis in his poetry in his valuable Preface to the book, he dismisses "the art poem" and finds a parallel for his work's essential qualities in the terms "punctum" and "blind field" from Roland Barthes's meditation on photography in

Camera Lucida. The former denotes the focal detail of a photograph, the latter the whole world beyond the exposure's moment.

The punctum of Szirtes's poems and their fundamental humanity are often fixed in opening glimpses of solitary figures who offer ways into the surrounding fabric of lives, locations, and history: the major sequences 'The Photographer in Winter' and 'Metro' respectively begin their sustained recoveries of family history with "You touch your skin. Still young. The wind blows down the street [...]" and "My aunt was sitting in the dark, alone [...]"

Szirtes's mother, Magdalena Szirtes, is at the heart of these sequences. Her work as a photographer furnishes images for navigating the labyrinth of 1940s Budapest, while her deportation as a Jew to Ravensbrück opens directly on the *Nacht und Nebel* at the dark heart of twentieth-century European history. 'The Photographer in Winter' is dedicated to her memory, which haunts much of the book and can fuse with the elegiac shadow that periodically falls throughout it.

Szirtes balances his profound sense of life's fragility with poems of unbridled affirmation. 'In a Strong Light' celebrates "the everyday news / of bridges trees and grass", while 'Backwaters: Norfolk Fields' reiterates the moving simplicity of "How beautiful the place is" in gratitude for the landscape in which the poet lives. The Englishness to which he can lay claim is likewise held in balance by his identity as Hungarian. Being both, he can be fully neither, allowing an estranging detachment that contributes to his characteristic sharpness of focus.

Whether in strict forms – both traditional and innovative – or free verse, Szirtes retains an accessible clarity of voice. He can rise to an unflinching directness in confronting what some prefer to ignore, as in the treatments of the Tiananmen Square Massacre in 'Chinese White', Israeli territorialism in 'Second Decade: the People of the Book', and imminent financial crisis in 'Running man blues'. A number of the finest poems are pellucid lyrics that have the simplicity and impact of folk poetry:

What arrives in frost and snow?

*The broken branch, the late white night,
a word or echo of delight.*

What word is that?

I do not know. ('Dialogue for Christmas')

"The metaphor of the journey through time forms a natural shape",

writes Szirtes in his Preface. The book's journey through thirty years of published work compellingly explores the vast and innumerable private spaces that are the blind field beyond the public foreground of history and the present. It offers many rewards.

Douglas Houston is a writer and editor. His *New and Selected Poems* is due to appear next year.

