

## MIRROR-WITHIN-MIRROR

*Michael Donaghy, Collected Poems, Picador, £14.99*

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*Don Paterson, Smith: A Reader's Guide to the Poetry  
of Michael Donaghy, Picador, £9.99*

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reviewed by Jack Underwood

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*I'd like to be remembered for my poems, not my charming personality. I say this not because I'm an especially reticent or private individual – but because my work has a life of its own and, if it works, it's as much 'about' the reader's life as about mine.*  
– Michael Donaghy

It's a decade after Michael Donaghy's death and the poet's "charming personality" remains the biggest obstacle to developing a criticism of his poems. While the work still "has a life of its own", the loss of Donaghy, the man, described as one of poetry's "best-loved and most naturally gifted practitioners", still dominates discussion. "When Michael Donaghy died there was a carnival of mourning," writes Don Paterson in *Smith*, "...this made the task of discussing Michael's work difficult, because all anyone wanted to do was talk about Michael." Because of the outpouring of feeling since his death in 2004 (both in bar-room anecdote and in print) it's also been hard for readers who did not know Donaghy to approach the work outside of this context of a community still feeling 'robbed'. Donaghy's professed "ambivalence" about biographical readings of his poems should be enough to warrant a critical appraisal, led by the idea that they are "as much about the reader's life" as his own (it's probably – and ironically – what *he* would have wanted). But the best argument for revisiting Donaghy's output remains plainly that the poems, running off their own steam, are still good. Furthermore, Maddy Paxman's moving and profound memoir *The Great Below*, exploring her "journey into loss" following her husband, Donaghy's, death, should probably be viewed as an appropriately authoritative last word on the man himself. As Paterson acknowledges, "Few knew him well, and perhaps only Maddy Paxman had any

real understanding of the complexity of his personality, or the number and tireless imagination of his demons.” Meanwhile, the poems are still self-sufficiently working their “effortless gadgetry”, and, apart from the occasional mortal prophecy hitting a nerve, they remain oblivious to their author’s death.

Paterson’s *Smith* selects fifty of Donaghy’s “major poems” and follows each with a close reading. He introduces the book with “a plea” to “read each poem again following my comments”, which is an exercise designed more to give the poem the last word, than to *bring-on-home* the quality of Paterson’s insights. The self-awareness and sensitivity of Paterson’s approach are commendable, and the way in which he problematises his critical position as a friend and editor of the poet is perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of the book:

All this book will do is talk about fifty of his poems in an open-ended, unmethodical fashion... and, I hope, emphasise the various and multifaceted nature of Donaghy’s work.

Paterson, concerned with how his tour guide’s handling might draw scepticism, has clearly wrangled over what his book can actually offer:

I suspect, too, that this is the closest I’ll get to writing a ‘how to read a poem’-type book; but because I don’t think anyone really needs or wants such a thing, it’s really just a book about the way *I* read poetry, or at least read Donaghy.

Presumably, Paterson feels that people do *want* a book about the way Don Paterson reads Michael Donaghy, otherwise he wouldn’t have written one, but any vanity or presumption implied by this idea is rather trumped by Paterson’s evident conviction or frustration that critical attention to Donaghy’s poetry is thin on the ground and overdue. Despite his embedded position and the biases it might bring, he seems primarily keen to get the ball rolling:

some may find this book uncomfortably personal and too dissonant with their idea of useful criticism... Donaghy’s work will require a less improvisatory and conversational analysis than I’ve provided.

Behind these admissions is the sense that *Smith* is, in part, a labour of love, which, despite doubts about its “usefulness”, Paterson nonetheless felt compelled to write; there’s almost a nerdy glee about the close readings which carries an unexpected tenderness to the whole project. And anyway, whether a book is “needed” or “wanted” or not, is a pretty relative debate even for a poetry editor, so fair play to Paterson for instigating one within the first ten pages of

*Smith*. It's not often you see a pre-emptive strike on allied positions as a first line of defence.

Readers "obsessed with trivia", or for whom Donaghy represents something of a master craftsman, the 'smith', will love the formal and intertextual aspects that Paterson unpacks: Fibonacci sequences, movie references, Renaissance art, the occult, the various rhyme schemes, structures and mechanics:

There may be a great deal more mathematical intrigue embedded in this poem. There are various ways of arriving at the word count, but expanding  $\sqrt{-1}$  [to 'the square root of minus one'] gives another 174 or 175 depending (significantly) on how you count the word 'devil-snare'.

*Smith* makes room for anecdote in its footnotes, whether it's the showman Donaghy outwitting hecklers, or the virtuoso bluffer, styling his way through a "half-hour conversation with Hughes on his *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*... too embarrassed to admit he hadn't read a word of it". And because *Smith* is very much Paterson on Donaghy, it predictably includes some recognisably Patersonian assertions for good measure: "all a poem is is a mnemonic aid made of words, whose primary aim is to get itself memorised". Is that all a poem is? What, *all* poems, just that?

*Smith* is an expert work: well researched, unpretentious, well written, and aware of its position as a starting pistol for further critical engagement, rather than an endstop. There is a friendship, a kindness (both 'in care' and 'in kind') about the readings, that shows Paterson admires and knows these poems so well that he could be writing about his own.

There will be some readers for whom the critical unpicking of Donaghy's "machinery of grace" will be less interesting. Paterson notes in 'The avant-garde', his discussion of the poem 'Hazards', that for Donaghy and his contemporaries there was a greater sense of tribalism between experimental Modernist poets and the so-called 'mainstream', but that this has dissolved over the last decade, "mainly owing to the wiser influence of a younger generation who just can't see or care what we were all fighting about". This dissolution, which has led to a broadening sense of "form", and therefore "craft", might make the fetishism of certain technical qualities in Donaghy's work feel a bit like someone explaining the benefits of power steering in the Mondeo; the idea that a poem might rhyme so well you barely notice comes across now as much as an example of unknowing camp, as it does a demonstration of artisanal prowess. Invisible formalism, I mean, woof! Clever boys!

Luckily, with Donaghy, camp is part of the routine. At a recent Paxman/Donaghy event at Goldsmiths College in London, Donaghy's friend, the poet Eva Salzman, quoted his piece on Bishop, 'The Exile's Accent', in which he

acknowledges the influence of Auden: “that arch elegance, that courageous affectation... a somewhat campy note of displacement resolved by conspicuous technique, a mode defined by wit – in the Renaissance sense – irony, seduction, and playfulness allied with reserve”. It’s this “campy note” that sets Donaghy aside from those contemporaries whom one can still occasionally find earnestly aerobicising their iambs in macho displays of supposed subtlety and control. Donaghy’s poems show off openly – ta-dah! “My people were magicians”, says the speaker of ‘The Excuse’: the artifice, the *owning* of the stagecraft is part of the appeal.

Another of Donaghy’s strengths is that he tends to keep the immediate subject of a poem, and the logic of its enquiries, open and clear. But this courteousness towards the reader is often offset with a slightly dubious, creepy, avuncular speaker whom you suspect might really be leading you astray. “Step in and look around... We only have to make them *look* like wax,” says the weirdo, vaudeville proprietor of ‘The Chamber of Errors’. Similarly, in Donaghy’s love poems, the slick seducer is rarely charming, because his lines fall out too tidily, are too rhetorically well-oiled. But his wits are so quick and ideas so surprising, that you may end up feeling like you probably *would* anyway: “Darling, note how these two are alike / this harpsichord pavane by Purcell / and a racer’s twelve-speed bike”. Oh go on then, smart-arse. Just one drink, but I’m not promising anything.

Appropriately, *Smith* is published alongside a new Donaghy *Collected Poems*, introduced, as with the earlier 2009 edition, by Sean O’Brien. Served up on the shell, without Paterson’s walk-throughs, the poems retain their puzzling depths, and the contrast between each of them is heightened. You almost have to pity the critic F. Olsen, who mistook Donaghy’s variousness for a “fidgety affectation of style after style” (from ‘My Report Card’, *Strong Words*; originally ‘Noted in Brief’, in *Hieroplant*, 1993). While he was so often described as “Michael Donaghy: the Modern Metaphysical”, almost like a sideshow tagline, the new *Collected Poems* gives a fuller account of his range. In ‘Alas, Alice’, lead by a logic seemingly produced by rhythm, you find each new image is a turn, like someone playing a game of patience:

who dreamt blue snow and froze in dreaming and spoke by  
reading and read all evening and read by patterns blizzards  
drifting and dared by waiting and waited talking and called out  
once and called out twice and coughed grey clouds and carved  
four coffins

There’s the surprising bricolage of ‘Interviews’, where transcripts of Son House discussing fellow bluesmen are cut and pasted into a strange elegiac

narrative involving a woman called Yvette and her lover, who seems to be Marcel Duchamp: “Marcel makes a world around them, / A short, shining world.” It’s an odd and bold poem that would pique the interest of most of the experimental “ampersands” that Donaghy derided and feared would take over poetry.

There are the Marvell-esque (Marvellous?) love poems, and none is more carefully and tenderly poised than “The Present”: “Forget the here-and-now. We have no time / but this device of wantonness and wit.” But while Donaghy “The Modern Metaphysical” is impressively equal to Marvell in what Eliot described as “a tough reasonableness beneath the slight lyric grace”, the fact he could probably go ten rounds with Robert Browning as well surely means there’s more to him than that. His dramatic monologues are top notch, whether it’s the Renaissance-noir (Renoir?) thriller ‘The Commission’, the shaggy-dog pastoral-Classical ‘Remembering Steps to Dances Learned Last Night’, or his baffling masterpiece ‘Black Ice and Rain’. Eliot accused Browning of exhibiting “too little seriousness” in his monologues, and the way Donaghy’s speakers sidle up to you can feel a bit like he’s taking the piss: “Hors d’oeuvres depress you, don’t they? They do me.” But by the end, again, he has you:

Since then, each night contains all others,  
nested mirror-within-mirror, stretching back from then  
to here and now, this party, this room, this bed,  
where, in another life, we might have kissed.

It’s a bit of a shame to see further poems presumably published from the “safe” and “safer” computer folders in which Donaghy saved his work in progress. The posthumous collection *Safest* seemed like a reasonable gathering of the work prepared, if not intended, for public viewing, and given Donaghy’s famed fastidiousness and conviction when it came to editing, it’s hard not to feel that, with some of these later drafts, you’re rummaging through his sock drawer. None of the previously uncollected work really stops the show, so it’s not a risk that really pays off, either. Finding *new things with each reading* is a cliché, and one that often mistakes the changeable nature of individual readers for fathomless depth in text (or perhaps those are the same thing?) but looking through *Shibboleth*, *Errata*, *Conjure* and *Safest* you’re never short of discoveries. Finding new favourite lines or ideas is easy. O look, I just found another:

‘Driving and writing have a lot in common,’  
he parleys, and we sit there, the two of us  
blinking into the average braking distance  
for 30mph, wondering what he means.

Jack Underwood’s *Happiness* will be published by Faber in July.