

The poems of Valentin Iremonger



POCKET POEMS

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Introduction

Valentin Iremonger (1918 – 1991) is the quiet man of 20th century Irish poetry in English. He is mentioned occasionally in political biographies (e.g. Conor Cruise O'Brien's *Memoir: My Life and Themes*) as a civil servant and diplomat. In literary history he is on the margins: his help with Old Irish tree lore was acknowledged by Robert Graves in the Foreword to *The White Goddess*; he had a notorious row with P J Kavanagh who accused him of being the author of an article in a newspaper against which Kavanagh took out and failed in a libel action; he made Brendan Behan famous through his recommendation of *Borstal Boy* to a London publisher; and he wrote critical essays for Seán Ó Faoláin at *The Bell*, where a verse play on Robert Emmet was published, subsequently finding its way to a BBC radio performance.

Although Iremonger wrote his name as Valentin, he had been baptised Valentine and pronounced it that way. He was known to family and friends as Val.

As a diplomat living with his family abroad (First Secretary in Britain, Ambassador in Sweden, India, and Luxembourg), Iremonger was in no position to promote his poems, but nor was it his temperament to do so. In 1979 he had a fall which caused a traumatic brain injury. This necessitated surgery to the front of his skull, and he suffered typical symptoms of 'frontal' injury, including loss of initiative and social withdrawal. These symptoms have been wrongly attributed to alcohol misuse – not uncommon in embassies with lavish drink budgets, and it was probably not wise to go drinking with Brendan Behan – but until the injury he had

sustained a busy life as diplomat, family man, and poet. In 1980 he had to retire from Foreign Affairs. His life as a writer had also stopped, although he continued to read.

I came across his work in 1962 in an Oxford bookshop. The book was *The Dolmen*, a ‘miscellany of Irish writing’, which contained three of his poems, including ‘Invocation’ with its theme of waiting for inspiration, which was the subject of Robert Graves’s lectures at the time, and translations of two poems by an unknown Breton French poet, René Guy Cadou. (Here one remarkable but not well known poet had discovered another: only recently, long after his death, has Cadou come into his own in the canon of French poetry). Iremonger, who was Irish attaché in London, attended a lecture given by Graves that year. What remains of one side of their earlier correspondence from 1943 to 1948, only a few letters from Iremonger, is now among the Graves papers at St John’s College, Oxford. Iremonger had started by sending Graves some of his poems, and then wrote: ‘You were generous, you know: I suppose I did know all about them, as you say, before I sent them – but it is very helpful to have another’s opinion.’ This opinion apparently included pointing out some ‘rhetoric’, but if Graves liked a person’s poems, he opened up on other things. Iremonger continued: ‘If, as you say, poetry is a sharing of secrets, today these secrets are proscribed and it is not by shouting and tearing one’s hair or by roaring through a microphone they will be shared.’ And ‘We have lost the capacity to “see real miracles” as Laura Riding [Graves’s former companion and Muse] says. One of war’s results seems to be that poets make a frontal assault on Truth and attempt to state, beyond yea or nay, general definitions and moral judgements. To me this doesn’t seem to be the poet’s job.’

Iremonger’s own poems show the attachment to what Blake called ‘the minute particular’ which defines poetry also for Graves. And in keeping with the urgency of Ó Faoláin and other

contributors to *The Bell* about Irish literature having to be realistic and to turn its back on the Celtic Twilight created by such as Yeats and AE, Iremonger wrote to Graves (who loathed Yeats) that ‘the huge Celtic fabric built up by Yeats and his disciples was fake. It couldn’t stand up to an economic depression, much less armour-piercing bombs.’ But later in 1944 he wrote to Graves about ‘what you indicate is our only salvation – the elements of myth: the gods and goddesses, the ghouls and ghosts, beast, bird, fish, roots.’ He also referred to the Welsh poet Alun Lewis whose poems, after his death, had been edited by Graves: ‘Lewis, honouring the sacrificial rites of his country.... Here in Ireland we cannot so readily accept the mythology... The currency of our sagas has been debased by Yeats, AE, and the remainder of that and the succeeding generations who followed their lead. For my own part I feel that I must fight it and conquer it first.’

This was a fairly subtle position: Iremonger at the age of 26 rejected the fakery of the Celtic Twilight in favour of realism, yet still looked for something in mythology. It must also be remembered that his Irish was already good from school and university in Dublin, and it would become excellent as he learned more from his wife Sheila Manning’s family in the Kerry Gaeltacht and began to write in Munster Irish. (Yeats knew very little Irish.) Iremonger and his wife also participated in modernistic theatre productions, both in Dublin and in the often experimental Lyric Theatre in Belfast. And all in all, Iremonger’s position in his essays for *The Bell*, taking off from his correspondence with Graves, was not likely to make him popular:

Mules have nothing on poets when it comes to stubbornness; and the effort of others to direct the writings of poets have always met with the equivalent of the Dubliner’s exasperated “Who d’ya think you’re shoving?” So that if my work has

tended (as a friend said) to become less concerned with general definitions and moral judgments and more concerned with the apparently trivial and insignificant (a girl on a bed noticing Spring, a childhood memory, a chance phrase thrown against my ears in the street, a walk up the garden, a girl on a mountain tying her scarf, saying, “I’m going down”) all I will say is, with Dedalus, ‘Signatures of all things I am here to read.’

Later in the same passage, Iremonger refers, as in his letter to Graves, to poetry as an ‘encirclement movement’ and concludes that ‘It is doubtful if the classical acceptance of what we call “evil” is ever possible again, yet without this acceptance we cannot even begin to see life in the round.’ And again, ‘Poetry is the sharing of secrets, of secrets that today are proscribed. This proscription makes it more difficult now than at any previous time to write freely, and it is the sense of oppression, of impending disaster, that accounts for the rhetoric that fogs so much contemporary verse.’

This is not the tone of a future diplomat! His poems, too, although often quietly spoken, show a disturbing realism and detail – and, yes, a sense of evil, with no consoling fakery.

This introduction will not examine Iremonger’s poems or the few critical comments that exist about them. The poems, to use a phrase Iremonger applied in a review, are from ‘the only place where poetry can be found – in the everyday life of the people around [the poet]’. And they speak for themselves, in a particular voice. Ó Faoláin said of Irish poetry of his time that ‘one rarely hears a modern idiom, a modern speech. (I find it in the tense poetry of W R Rodgers and in the hesitating rhythm of Valentin Iremonger).’ For myself, I am most impressed by how long Iremonger’s sentences are: his poems are the epitome of ‘feeling thought.’

As for the critical comments, they fall short of being genuine criticism, as when Dennis O'Driscoll, who concludes that Iremonger deserves 'a modest space on the bookshelf', is bothered by 'a sombre recess of the psyche', by 'fearful rather than cheerful anticipation', and by 'youthful despondencies': in other words, by an absence of the rhetorical fog of optimism. It seems that the secrets are still proscribed if they entail facing a reality that may be gloomy. And 'the rest of his meagre output consisted mainly of wilful efforts to revive his old afflatus.' Which is precisely what Iremonger never gave into: when his inspiration stopped, he stopped. If he had only so many poems in him, well then, that was what he had. But even his manuscript poem, 'By the Waters of Yamuna', although gloomy – it's about death, after all – asserts something about life:

...their eyes filled
Not with despair – like hope here irrelevant –
But a dubious trust, each day renewed,
In simple survival....

Every age has its flash poets. And every age has its quiet poets who win through in the long run. (Think of Clare as distinct from Shelley, Hardy as distinct from Tennyson.) As the poet (in Irish) Máire Mhac an tSaoi put it after his death, 'Valentin Iremonger, both as a poet and as a human being, radiated integrity.' Iremonger, not only as an Irish poet in English but as an English poet in the older linguistic sense, and briefly as an Irish poet in Irish, takes his place in a few dozen remarkable poems. And the less remarkable poems still have something to say. Valentin Iremonger is a real poet for real times – or if the times are not real, for real readers.

Seán Haldane

GOOD-TIME GIRL

No,' she said, 'Why should I? I don't want
To settle down. I'm only twenty-three.
I've got a dream of ribbons in my hair
And dances at the cross-roads, gay and free.

Him? Oh, he understands. He knows a girl
Must stagger out a verse to make a rhyme.'
I thought of Empson and Anita Loos:
A girl can't keep on laughing all the time.

Someone should tell her how the years drip down
Like water from a leaking cistern, wearing out
The patience of the best; and how the silver
Mirror gives no occasion for regret.

THE DOG

All day the unnatural barking of dogs
Sounded in my ears. In O'Connell Street, among the crowds,
A dog barked at my heels but, when I looked, was gone.
Sitting at my window, later, at nearly three o'clock,
Glad for the quiet harmony of the afternoon,
A voice reached up like a long arm out of the street
To rap on the shutters of my ears but, when I looked,
The street's chaste line was unbroken, its perspective unstrained.

Now, lying awake in bed, smoking,
Looking out the window, I can see him,
Lean-faced and shaggy, as the moonlight falls
Sideways into my room as into a chapel,
Where he squats on the lawn and tilts his lonely snout,
Raising his lost unnatural cry.

God send his master is not dead or none he loves,
Being out of countenance, has sent him for succour
And that I don't understand his plaintiveness:
But yet, God help me, I fear this unnatural barking
Has something to do with me and not with strangers,
As quietly I lie, hearing the hours tick by,
And the unsatisfied dog, howling upon the lawn,
Breaking the night's maidenhead.

SPRING JAG

for Avril Webb, 1944.

Spring stops me suddenly like ground
Glass under a door, squeaking and gibbering.
I put my hand to my cheek and the tips
Of my fingers feel blood pulsing and quivering.

A bud on a branch brushes the back
Of my hand and I look, without moving, down.
Summer is there, screwed and fused, compressed,
Neat as a bomb, its casing a dull brown.

From the window of a farther tree I hear
A chirp and a twitter: I blink.
A tow-headed vamp of a finch on a branch
Cocks a roving eye, tips me the wink

And, instantly, the whole great hot-lipped ensemble
Of buds and birds, of clay and glass doors,
Reels in with its ragtime chorus, staggering
The theme of the time, a jam-session's rattle and roar,

With drums of summer jittering in the background
Dully and, deeper down and more human, the sobbing
Oboes of autumn falling across the track of the tune,
Winter's furtive bassoon like a sea-lion snorting and bobbing.

There is something here I do not get,
Some menace that I do not comprehend
Yet so intoxicating is the song
I cannot follow its thought right to the end.

So up the garden path I go with spring
Promising sacks and robes to rig my years
And a young girl to gladden my heart in a tartan
Scarf and freedom from my facile fears.

SPRING STOMP

Now while the early sun
Smears the fields with morning,
I will ask my love to come
Trucking down the dawn,
As spring's advance live agents
Of buds and migrant birds
Herald a summer coming
Like thunder from the south.

O love, when we suffer under
Our autumn's cruel regime,
What laws can quell the rebel
Armies of memory,
Or stop the broken lines
Of poems streeling through
The wasted fields of our
Imagination's farms?

So, love, let you come dancing
Down the jazzy lanes of spring,
Through the ragtime green of meadows
By the high cliff's muted brink.
Let's swing it by the river
To the torch-song of the water
While yet our sinews answer
The off-beat's hot-licked pause.

RESERVATIONS

Twenty crocuses in my garden to-day, she said,
I know spring is here.' She lay on the bed,
Happily, while I stood at the window, sideways,
Thinking, 'This is how it has been always.

Somebody else has been happy because spring was here,
Lazily turning on a bed, smiling. The mere
Veneer of acquiescence was all I ever possessed.
I know there is a lot that I have missed

Yet, afraid of March gales, there was nothing I could do
But agree, with reservations — remembering, too,
How winter struck us dumb, not so long ago,
And how it would pay us back for spring, blow for blow.

DESCENDING

I'm going down,' she said, tying her yellow scarf,
While I still watched the dull grey mountain road
Mooch down into the glen and disappear
Round a curve of trees and cottages. Some sudden fear
Made me not reply or make any attempt to start
Yet awhile; I sat on the old sacrificial stone

To which we had climbed all the hot morning together,
Choosing the difficult way, along the dried-up river bed
Choked with dead boulders covered with a fur of spruce leaves.
Not even the sacrifice of our youth — made at noon — redeems
The swinging boughs of our minds, gay with feathers,
Lopped from us now. I'm going down,' she said.

Her teeth were hedges of dense, white sloe-blossom,
Her hair a development of black. Down the afternoon
From the rare peak of youth, too, we are going, to the valley
Of age, lurching and stumbling down its gothic alleys
And grotesque approaches. 'I'm going down.' The gossip
Of the wind in her hair will be stopped much too soon.

A MARRIAGE HAS BEEN ARRANGED

Yes,' she said, 'I am happy,' turning the ring
On her finger three times for luck. Spring
Outside the window, ticked off winter who was beyond retorting.
The curtains blew inwards and upwards softly
As she stood, gazing at something I could not see
Far beyond the small pond and the crooked walnut tree.

I was glad for her but could not restrain
A thread of sorrow being pulled through my brain.
How she would marry and decay into contentment
Occasioned in me some amount of resentment
Against the ways and means of our emotional lives,
Their sharp and cunningly concealed knives.

The problem, of course, is to hold this minute Now
In perpetuo while growing ourselves to ripeness; how
To have Time held up by some blunt traffic cop
So letting us, the unfortunate pedestrians, across.
It can't be done, I suppose; so I wish her, my dear,
As much happiness as she can conveniently bear.

THE GULL

Some bitch of a bird yelled dog's abuse
At me this morning when I woke up.
Flat on my back I listened, stunned
By the bad-tempered tirade that never stopped

Once even for breath or to choose a word.
From her tongue's tip a sailor's range
Of invective, blue as the sky, spearing towards me
Slewed and ricocheted against the window pane,

As she made her own of the five-tone scale
With a design of grace-notes no coal-quay shawlie
Could shuffle together on a sunny morning
Or drunk in a pub in an evening's brawling.

This was what I had feared all along;
Trick-o-the-loop Nature, street-angel, house-devil.
Well I guessed the sheen on the far green hills
To be the smooth evil of satin, its moral level.

So, while at the window, a wicked bird frantically
Crumpled the morning tissue of silence, I resolved
To put as much distance between Nature's red claws
And myself as the years could make possible.

For me the Queensberry game, the built-up manner, the artificial,
Will be some vantage-point from which to view the wild,
Afford delaying actions while I make some judgements
Uninfluenced by the terror of a child,

And, in due course, questioned, I'll reply
That the great white bird with the cruel beak was to blame
Who, one sunny quiet morning in May, suddenly frightened me,
Roaring, cursing and spitting against the window-pane.