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Traithnini (review)

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Tráithníní by John Ennis, pp 104. Dublin: The Dedalus Press, 2000. \$19.95 (cloth); \$13.95 (paper). Distributed by Dufour Editions, Chester Springs PA.

It is possible for a reader to cruise through Emily Dickinson's poems in an hour—bouncing along on her rhythms, seeing (but not seeing) the passing landscape, hearing (but barely) the poems' hum, so intent on surviving the trip that you miss most of the details. You could say, after that time, that you have "read Dickinson"; but you would surely falter in the recounting. Memory would miss the weighty substance of her work, packed into the ironies and paradoxes of her poems' existence. So it is with John Ennis' new book of poems from the Dedalus Press, *Tráithníní*. Its one hundred poems lack titles, are many are even shorter than Dickinson's briefest works. The volume takes its title from the Irish word for wisps of straw left after the harvest—an apt word that serves to knit together the entire collection. The cycle of poems recalls the biblical injunction, "Unless a grain of wheat fall into the ground and die. . . ." In Ennis's world, a field of grain is planted in order to be harvested, and all the stalks' individual strength is overridden by their conglomerate fragility.

The early poems of *Tráithníní* are suffused with a sense that "the meadower / little macho / man all machine" will come "cutting swathes / through our souls," but the farmer is a "ghoul," not a hero, and the visible deaths of other grains makes the speaking field beg: "Give us time, / time to pause / space to consider / your gullible leaves. / There will be plenty / (plenty to ponder on) / seeking shelter / in collapsing swathes. / Foragers. / Ourselves / like cringing / animals." Later, the fields rejoice in the threatening weather, because it postpones the inevitable: "Dew on us / in early dawn / late evening / those times / vulnerable / as swathes / hope we stand / here we fall / on your streets / waiting for / the rains / to show / pity / on us." But this is no escapism. Even in their

waning days, the grass-speakers have a vision of their end: “We are / the field / you saw / cut down / weeks ago / sodden, unmade.”

The middle poems of the collection acknowledge both death and its rewards. Because the “Machinery / at the gap / has not mown / yet into us,” the wind is welcomed to “move us / side by side / in a clover bed,” to create its own intimacy as “one stalk leans / against another twinned / entwined,” the whole field “never so / beautiful as in / [the] last days.” This fullness as death approaches engenders, of course, the next year’s crop: “I give and take / all life / in me / through days / that shake / the seed from me”; “My seed / spurt and sprout about me. / Winter / without me”; “The full beasts / in us move on / house us in fields / for copulation / birth, re-insemination”; “Says / the seed head / nodding to / itself— / poor eunuch / over the erection / it fought for: / ‘I want to die, / I’ve shot / my bolt. This dawn I was. / This dark I am / not’.” It also engenders the ritual of acceptance, the necessary beginning of the actual end: “Nothing so becomes us / as our leaving.”

In the closing third of the book, Ennis’s poetry proclaims moments of refusal, flashes of disillusionment: “I knew / this hour / would come / when I’d / be cut off / from myself”; “Our days come down in / the snide of wind / the belt of rain / just when we thought / these blue forenoons / shone for good”; “this is wisdom / to be / cut off / at the root. / Don’t expect to see life / in your own lifetime.” But it is here also that the poet confers the root of his vision. The lives of plants and humans, we find, are not his only subjects. Insofar as the act of writing is an attempt to outlive our mortality, the collection of poems itself becomes scriptural, a testament. When the harvest comes, it is not stalks but “our voices falling / side by side in swathes,” as if death—literal or otherwise—were to end story. The metaphor of the field gives way, dead stalks become words out of the writer’s pen. But they feed “uncertain landscapes / surnames / new vowels.” The next generation, the readers, become “our why / in word / and deed,” the reason to go on “Imagining creation.”

Though the author says of *Tráithníní* that “These poems / . . . [know] nothing / but their falling,” they also “settle / as my one / testimony,” prove that “this / shuddering / of stem” is not a final death. Or, ironically, that writing is a little death all its own, an attempt at survival, a “Maybe”. Writers and stubbled fields alike are “hosts / most days,” dependent on the hunger of others for their usefulness. And so John Ennis enters his own room where he might say, along with Dickinson, his “Message is committed / To Hands [he] cannot see.” It is a message, and a collection, worth taking the slow route through—particularly to savor its great vocabulary of the earth of which we are all tenants.

~ TRACY YOUNGBLOM