

Time Gentlemen, Please

by Kevin Higgins, Salmon Poetry, 2008, 94 pp.

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In the annual Poetry Society UK lecture, 2008, Eavan Boland gave a riveting critique of what has happened to the political poem in recent times. One element of the discussion was whether poetry has become too polite, too refined, and too engaged with monitoring its own processes to look out into the world in order to see clearly the processes which control us. Over her career, Boland has often written about poets having to have the freedom to write the political poem, to ask where authority resides and who will contest it.

Having read Higgins' poem in *Democratiya 14*, 'Letter to a full time revolutionary,' I thought that perhaps here is a poet, not affiliated or constrained by funding or other patronage, who might be answering those questions. I opened *Time Gentlemen, Please* with a sense of anticipation.

In five sections, this is the kind of book that draws a reader in by often placing poems in loosely thematic order but also mixing it up to have pieces relate to each other in surprising ways. The atmosphere of dread tempered by wit is encountered in the first section, 'From the future, a postcard home,' and mirrored in poems of retirement and death in the final grouping, 'Last Testament.'

Despite an insouciance of tone with lines such as 'The father who took forever to die' or 'your autobiographical masterpiece: *Tribute To A Nonentity*,' there is an edge to these short lyric pieces. They have a tendency to nod towards a deeply felt emotion that is marshalled by a commitment to humour into poems which ride the cusp between a laugh-out-loud, but utterly forgettable moment, and something deeper and more lasting.

It becomes clear that this is a poetics concerned both with how the world works and with what freight words like 'arse' and 'toilet brush' can carry.

There's a charm about poems which peddle a nice line in socialist nostalgia while gently poking fun at the militancy of the previous selves of their protagonists. It brings to mind all the old jokes beginning 'Old Socialists never die, they just...'

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And there is genuine wit in pieces like ‘The World Socialist Party of Honeysuckle Heights’ where

‘that sculpture student, who last Wednesday
expressed his anti-imperialism by turning up late
and smelling of fish, is a concrete example
of what Lenin meant when he said
that the tops of the trees move first.’

In a poem like ‘The Cause,’ we might expect some reference to the particularly Irish use of that word in relation to the Troubles, but instead are treated to what begins apparently as a gently satirical look at another ‘diminished’ fighter of the good fight, ‘Each morning he decides what he’s against today.’ However, the piece progresses rather too rapidly to a bathos that seems unearned, where our anti-hero ‘nibbles the firefighters under the rusty ironing-board he now calls home.’ And perhaps that is a marker of the less successful poems here: that they wear their actual cause too lightly to be taken seriously, while they take on, almost too emphatically, a perceived need to entertain.

What is good about the book, however, is that the most memorable pieces show a capacity to do both things well: employ the tricks of the send-up while commenting on the supposed liberal tendencies of the reader at the same time. ‘My Militant Tendency’ opens beguilingly, ‘It’s nineteen eighty two and I know everything.’ It’s a poem which could do with being longer, and that’s something a reviewer can rarely say. There’s a movement here through football fandom to Liverpool as ‘the Petrograd of the British Revolution’ which will speak to almost any reader, whether a middle-aged leftie or not. The ending has that touch of personal humane observation that characterises the ‘I’ in the poems: ‘watch / my dad’s life become a play: Sit Down in Anger.’ It’s true that this ‘I,’ whom we might suppose to be the poet himself, is also addicted to self-referential warning against being taken too seriously. As he has it in ‘This Small Obituary,’ ‘He had a real knack for last lines/ but fell in love with his own invective.’ The danger here is that the poet may make it more difficult for himself when he wants to switch tonal register to encompass either contemporary politics or a meditation on death as the supreme anti-authority.

In terms of the former, the ventriloquism of ‘Firewood’ which employs quotations from eye-witness accounts of Darfur, connects intent with form in controlled eloquence. The mirroring technique employed, where the second half repeats to

both amplify and un-tether the phrasing of the first, serves to make this one of the most memorable poems in the book. Both this piece and the fine unrhymed sonnet, 'Retirement,' show a poet capable of using form to his own ends. If it is the case that a commitment to free verse is part of a political anti-authoritarian stance on the part of this writer, then it would be doubly interesting to see what might happen if he brought his clear appreciation of the possibilities of form into focus with his underlying quest for what will replace that 'militant tendency.'

The final two sections of the book do give us some sense of what might accomplish such a replacement. Sex as a kind of sacramental equivalent is celebrated in some short lyrics in section four, 'A New City.' The poem, 'She Considers His Proposal' manages to allow the power of love to be mentioned even through the obligatory bathroom humour and a line which typifies the tension of this writer, lodging somewhere between the heartfelt and a wryly laconic send-up:

'That when things go wrong he turns to her
and says: 'just because I'm kicking
imaginary people in the testicles
doesn't mean we can't hold hands.'

The notion of a poetic persona who cares deeply but laughs loudly is somewhat dented by certain poems in the final section. Pieces like 'December' and 'Hospital' begin to engage with that old and essential poetic chestnut: death. Death and personal loss become the subliminal themes which remain with a reader of this work after the jokes have faded. The moving piece, 'Ending Up' is one of the few poems allowed to carry on over a page. The increased length seems to liberate the poet. Here he can show his capacity for insight into the human condition of never being enough for oneself, rather than closing down any such exploration with a punch line.

The overall impression is created that there are two poetic personae at play here and that stronger, more sustained and more serious work might emerge if the poet took his own talents a tad more seriously. Throughout the work, the modulation of the voice is impressive and a reader feels the presence of a humane sensibility, one that is sometimes moved to outrage.

This is work which raises the issue of what the political poem can be, for us now, in our several cultures. That it begs the question is testament to pieces which

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tantalisngly suggest that this poet may yet match an originality of approach with sustained subject matter. The challenge for those who believe art should have real purchase on contemporary debate is always how to write the engaged political poem while still making it artful. Kevin Higgins is a poet who could certainly go into this poetic territory, should he wish to. I, for one, hope that he might and will look out for his next book with even more anticipation.

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