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**EXTENDING THE BOUNDARIES OF DECORUM
THE POETRY OF DENNIS O'DRISCOLL**

In the midst of life we are in death
Book of Common Prayer 1662: *The Burial of the Dead*

Dennis O'Driscoll, the Irish poet and critic, belongs to that group of writers who, as Philip Larkin defines in his *Statement*, "write poems to preserve things [they] have seen / thought / felt both for themselves and for others, though [they] feel that [their] prime responsibility is to the experience itself, which [they are] trying to keep from oblivion for its own sake" (*Required Writing* 79). This attitude towards writing is apt as well as intentional here since, in common with Larkin's morbid verse, death pervades everything Dennis O'Driscoll writes. Only in the Irish poet's case, the meaning is much more literal and the experiences he captures of a much more evocative nature.

O'Driscoll's first death-haunted volume of poetry, *Kist*, was published when he was twenty-eight, and five years later, his next collection, *Hidden Extras*, pervaded with an equally omnipresent sense of mortality, appeared. As one of the reviewers of *Kist* remarked, and this can be further extended to describe *Hidden Extras*, many of the poems "are insistently concerned with humanity medically observed, its disease and mortality."¹ The key words here are "medically observed" because regardless of whether he writes about a mortal disease or about love O'Driscoll tends to observe and analyse things with the precision of a surgeon and the patience of a scientist carrying out countless experiments on the deceased, disease and flesh.

This medical point of view, however, does not limit the poet's imagination and creativity; on the contrary, as Seamus Heaney points out in his review of *Kist*, O'Driscoll's verse is marked by "stylish imagism," and there is incredible "concentration and pleasure in the surprise and aptness of words"

¹ Bernard O'Donoghue, "O'Driscoll's Finest Poetry." *Poetry*, (the copy of the article was obtained through private communication and I was unable to identify which issue of *Poetry* it was drawn from).

("A Poet Hits His Stride" 18). O'Driscoll's analytical/anatomical collection confirms that the boundaries of decorum can be constantly extended without being actually exceeded. The poet, as another of the critics reviewing *Kist* noticed, "faces with unapologetic seriousness raw issues disallowed by the gentility principle"² such as mortal diseases ("Cancer") or medical operations ("Being"), but at the same time, his peculiar death-obsessed poetic diction does not allow us to forget that we are dealing with verse.

To give a general view on how Dennis O'Driscoll exploits the subject of death in his medically-oriented verse, let us look at a poem from his second volume, *Hidden Extras*, entitled "Reader's Digest *Family Medical Adviser*," as it is a good example of how far a poet can still go in challenging the canons of propriety:

READER'S DIGEST *FAMILY MEDICAL ADVISER*

"An A-Z Guide to Everyday Ailments"

Everyday asthma and brain tumour.
 Everyday chilblains, cancers, coronaries.
 Everyday depression and epilepsy.
 Everyday falls and gallstones.
 Everyday Hodgkin's Disease and insomnia.
 Everyday jaundice, keratosis, leukaemia.
 Everyday multiple sclerosis, nephritis, ovarian cyst.
 Everyday polio, pneumonia, quinsy, rheumatic pain.
 Everyday syphilis, threadworm, ulcer, varicose vein.

Six hundred and twenty-four pages long.

Three columns wide.

One size fits all.

Having read the poem, the reader may well feel tempted to complete this alphabetical list with their own examples. In the presence of so many of the shocking surprises that life bestows upon us, one has no alternative but to agree again with another of Larkin's statements that "life is slow dying" (*Collected Poems* 82), although the sheer number of the above body-disfiguring diseases implies a slight correction here: "Life is quick dying."

The poem works mainly through the repetition of the word "everyday", meaning "ordinary", "common", "usual", as well as "daily", "frequent" and "routine". This rhetorical device both enhances and reflects the two basic connotations of "everyday" as the incantation makes it sound additionally "common" and "routine". Furthermore, on the one hand, the monotonous use of this down-to-earth adjective makes the list of serious

² B. O'Donoghue, *op. cit.*

ailments appear more casual, less serious and thus more manageable, which may pacify the reader's prospective anxiety and discomfort caused by the mention of multiple health problems. On the other hand, however, the relentless repetition of "everyday" sharpens the reader's awareness that asthma, brain tumours, chilblains, cancers etc. constitute an integral part of our existence, something as inseparable and common as breathing or sleeping. This anaphoric structure, like a puritan minister, reminds us that our life is never safe and never free from the shadow of disease, or to use more biblical terminology: from the shadow of death, not even for one day. In its ironic, seemingly light-hearted, tone, enhanced greatly by the rehearsing of the simple adjective "everyday", "Reader's Digest *Family Medical Adviser*" declares the well known but often conveniently forgotten truth: the human body is mortal and mortality without fail keeps revealing itself in the whole range of tangible diseases.

Another aspect worth noticing here is how impersonally and indifferently mass-culture treats suffering, which, after all, is a very individual and harrowing experience. *Reader's Digest*, as the name suggests, is an easily digestible magazine which offers the reader an extremely limited and standardised view of many important or highly specialised issues. Thus, the poem's title, "Reader's Digest *Family Medical Adviser*," appears to add yet another ironic dimension since it is quite unlikely that a popular and rather trashy publication, which treats all the topics superficially and equally, could give any advice whatsoever on such grim ailments as "brain tumours" or "multiple sclerosis". And if it does, can such an opinion be truly reliable or even barely helpful?

The conclusion of the poem is even more sarcastic, pointing out the magazine's mass approach to the aforementioned diseases: "Six hundred and twenty-four pages long. / Three columns wide. / One size fits all." Although this uniformity refers first of all to the book in the poem's subtitle ("An A-Z Guide to Everyday Ailments"), which describes symptoms, suggests how to treat certain ailments and therefore may come in handy for everyone, there is no doubt that it also refers to the dull, horrifying similarity of human lives. "Three columns" may easily stand for the three basic stages in everybody's life: Birth, Life and Death, and as far as the middle stage is concerned, O'Driscoll leaves no room for illusions and bares the old but often forgotten truth that deep down our lives are identical and regardless of whether we are rich or poor, young or old we suffer all in the same way and the same diseases strike all of us. As for the other two stages of life: Birth and Death, there is not too much variety either, since as Francis Thompson aptly remarked in his poem "Daisy": "Nothing begins, and nothing ends, / That is not paid with moan / For we are born in other's pain, / And perish in our own" (374).

Thus, according to Dennis O'Driscoll, every day of our lives is filled with drab reality full of lesser or greater suffering, pain and disease, all of which prove and constantly remind us that we are all mortal, and therefore, coming back to Larkin's statement, "life is slow dying".

Looking once again at "Reader's Digest *Family Medical Adviser*" from a technical point of view, its anaphoric form gives the poem a dynamic pace as well as clarity. Piling up the ailments without using a single verb in between makes the poem clear and concise, communicating the main message that "In the midst of life we are in death" with unfailing medical precision. This way of cataloguing items is characteristic of O'Driscoll as well as is his usage of clinical and scientific terminology, which at times may sound too esoteric and detached to the reader. However, getting rid of any unnecessary phrases and aiming at surgical accuracy are among poetry's major goals, and thus, the employment of succinct medical terminology only proves how artistically versatile and disciplined O'Driscoll is and how deeply his speakers become engaged in life's multiple, oftentimes most hidden, aspects.

In one of the poems from his first volume, *Kist*, O'Driscoll writes: "Unlike atoms / man can be created / and destroyed", and this is one of the very few traditionally poetic and understated ways of picturing the human body in this collection. More roundabout images defining "what a piece of work is a man" (*Hamlet* 2.2.303) can be found in poems like "Meat," where the poet goes as far as to compare flesh to:

A hot kebab
at body heat,
rotting, going off.

Meat on the bone
No freezer deep enough
to keep it fresh.

At times, this topic of the human body's ephemerality and weakness is so overstated and pushed to the fore in O'Driscoll's verse that one may start to suspect the poet of taking some vicious pleasure in exposing the reader to his numerous tactile ("hot", "body heat"), gustatory ("meat"), or kinaesthetic ("rotting, going off") images built up of fragile body parts. The way "Traces," another poem from *Kist*, magnifies the thinness of skin by pointing out how easily "elbow and back wear through its fabric" not only painfully reminds us of the fact that pretty soon the material 'fabric' will totally fade and develop holes which will "sieve us into dust," but also brings to mind the image of death frequently portrayed as a horrifyingly skinny, skeleton-like figure. Thus, this one-line tactile imagery once again confirms that "life is slow dying," making this bitter truth even more

tangible through the description of skin in terms of an inanimate (dead?) piece of cloth behind which hides a weak human frame resembling the bony picture of death.

Challenging our sensory experience and imagination so as to direct thoughts and personal reflections on the imminence and irreversibility of death is another of O'Driscoll's trademarks which reinforces his poetic vision, creating a multi-dimensional portrait of human life controlled by death.

This combination of sense-stimulating imagery can be both very poignant and very shocking, especially when the poet risks to exploit food metaphors (exemplified by "Meat" above) in his numerous, truly touching, bereavement lyrics:

Your routine of cooking, cleaning, tending, caring
ended with skin's grain invaded by malignant knots,
wheeled in an enamel dish towards the mortuary slab,
a cold meat salad smothered in a lettuce of wreaths.

This time the disease is more tangible than in "Reader's Digest *Family Medical Adviser*" as it is presented from the perspective of someone who has already seen a real person suffer enormous pains and knows the exact diagnosis as well as the final solution which the stanza emphasises with several death-denoting words: "ended," "malignant," "mortuary slab," "smothered" or "wreaths." However, the most striking of all is the final metaphor in which the poet's mother, who died of cancer, is pictured as "a cold meat salad smothered in a lettuce of wreaths". Considering that the disease, operations, pain and finally death must have changed her appearance enormously, this image seems to be not so farfetched and shocking after all. Nevertheless, it certainly differs from the usual ceremonious way of speaking about the dead, and O'Driscoll admits that this last stanza of "Disturbing my Mother" (*Hidden Extras*, 18-19) now seems too extreme even to him. He explains that the reason he introduced the comparison of the green wreaths to a salad (in the final line) was to link it with the idea (expressed earlier in the same stanza - "Your routine of cooking...") that the mother was a nurturing person, preparing meals for her family, but she is now being fed on by disease and served up like a dish.³

However, Dennis O'Driscoll is not satisfied with just stirring up painful memories and coming up with the most bitter, "unpoetic" and provoking associations which, unpleasant and straightforward as they are, undoubtedly give evidence of the speaker's/poet's inner misery. Thus, the reader has to be prepared for an even more thorough examination of "future agony,

³ Private correspondence the author of this essay received from Mr. O'Driscoll.

pain, death" (O'Driscoll, *Kist*, 13) which in its precision of both word choice and imagery shows the influence of another 'scientific' poet, Miroslav Holub, whom O'Driscoll greatly respects. In common with Holub, before he reaches a definite conclusion, O'Driscoll looks for evidence and symptoms first. To cure a disease or any other form of anxiety, it is often not enough to take pills or barely analyse the surface. Sometimes, and in the case of *Kist* and *Hidden Extras* very often indeed, the outside has to be cut open to look down into whatever is to be explored:

with a miner's lamp
the surgeon slices sediments of thought
locates tumours like rare jewels

The above stanza opens the third part of "Cancer" (*Kist*), a poem which consists of five parts in total and analyses the stages of the deadly disease in question. Here, the reader is taken to the operating theatre and forced to look at the operation on somebody with a brain tumour as well as at the man who is responsible for and carries out the operation – the surgeon. And such could be the subtitle of this three-line stanza – "The Surgeon", which, together with the poetic mood of this piece, echoes Craig Raine's opening sequence from his first collection *The Onion, Memory* where the "Martian" poet included such job centred titles as "The Butcher," "The Barber," "The Gardener" and "The Grocer." It is just enough to look at a couple of lines from two of these poems to see how striking the analogy between Raine's poetics and O'Driscoll's triplet is:

Surrounded by sausages, the butcher stands
smoking a pencil like Isambard Kingdom Brunel...

He duels with himself and woos his women customers,
offering thin coiled coral necklaces of mince [...]

"The Butcher"

Up and down the lawn he walks with cycling hands
that tremble on the mower's stethoscope. [...]

The shears are a Y that wants to be an X -
he holds them like a water diviner,

and hangs them upside down, a wish-bone.
His hands row gently on the plunger

and detonate the earth. [...]

"The Gardener"

Placed against the background of the above examples, O'Driscoll's portrayal of a surgeon may be put in one line with Raine's pictures of a butcher and gardener since, as Jerzy Jarniewicz points out in his analysis

of the Martian Poetics, in all these poems "each metaphor presents the object as seen from a different angle" and "the disparity between the familiar nature of the object and the new, always unexpected, defamiliarizing perspectives in which it is viewed, brings about the characteristic effect of surprise and recognition" (128). In spite of the fact that the surgeon does not represent a typical artisan, though undoubtedly the operating theatre is a kind of shop where life is an article in stock, and that he is seen only from one vantage point, O'Driscoll appears to shape the physician's portrait according to the rules of Raine's poetry of perception and therefore, follows Victor Shklovsky's idea of *ostranyeniye* (defamiliarization) in terms of which "a Martian metaphor or simile can be best described" (Jarniewicz 127). Thus, O'Driscoll's surgeon is pictured as a miner who performs a strenuous task of looking for "tumours like rare jewels," and though on the surface the two jobs are at quite opposite poles, there is no doubt that the brain operation demands such an unbroken span of concentration coupled with a great amount of persistence and precision as searching for diamonds ("rare jewels"), which is an arduous activity taking up weeks, months or even years of a miner's life. Combining two seemingly different but equally expert and challenging professions strengthens the effect of the defamiliarization process as well as proves the poet's individuality. O'Driscoll may write "in the shadow of acknowledged masters" (Heaney 18) such as Raine or Holub, but he does not copy their patterns as, for instance, in contrast to Raine's rather commonplace gallery of jobs, the Irish poet chooses two highly skilled occupations dealing with problems which transcend earthly chores (a surgeon saves human life, while a miner looks for diamonds / coal risking his life).

Moreover, unlike Raine, O'Driscoll turns his medical gaze on things which sound familiar but cannot be normally seen by people and which people usually do not wish to see or talk about. O'Driscoll's defamiliarization devices prove, however, that words such as "cancer" or "brain tumour" can be easily brought up and perceived in a completely different light as in the above paradoxical simile from "Cancer" where deadly "tumours" are compared to precious "rare jewels." Putting the ironic undertone of the comparison aside, for a surgeon tumours must indeed be much more valuable than diamonds for a miner, since locating and getting rid of diseased cells usually means a successful operation, which not only bolsters the doctor's professional image, medical career and self-esteem, but first and foremost, saves priceless human life. The image of "the surgeon [who] / locates tumours like rare jewels" tackles the core of the poem's title disease, helping to establish cancer as another topic that poetry should discuss more frequently in order to help us get used to the fact that life constantly deals with but also embraces death, even on the most realistic

and down-to-earth level ("sediments of thought" / brain surround "tumours"). Ironically but truly, death is a pivotal life-force, and getting it out of one's mind, as the surgeon literally attempts to do, only restates its importance and need to be dealt with. The more we avoid topics such as cancer or tumours the more difficult and awkward they become to handle, both socially and artistically. O'Driscoll, like the surgeon figure, locates what is frequently left on the outskirts of decorum enabling his readers to come to terms with the truth that "life is slow dying."

"There's a skeletal quality about the poems, often as if O'Driscoll's way of working were a constant process of removal, a shedding of anything that might smack of excess or grandiosity," writes Peter Sirr reviewing O'Driscoll's third collection, *Long Story Short*. This comment is especially true in the case of O'Driscoll's first two volumes of poetry, and it would definitely be the most concise and apt blurb for any future editions of *Kist*. The image of removing and cutting through to expose darker layers underneath is this first collection's hallmark, which in a way might be compared to Seamus Heaney's poetic "digging." However, while Heaney's "true environment is the troubled earth of his roots and his people" (Kroll 51), O'Driscoll digs into a much more physical field of life – the human body – and meticulously uncovers its "hidden extras" which are subject to pain, disease and finally death. In the triplet from "Cancer" discussed above, this notion of "cutting" is represented by the verb "slice." It is masterfully used in the alliterated sequence, "the surgeon slices sediments of thought," where the repetition of the sibilant not only emphasises the sharpness of the surgeon's scalpel but also, along with the line's extensive length, which seemingly slows down the reading, creates the slightly sinister, heavy and concentrated atmosphere of an operating theatre. Finally, there is also the ingenious metaphor in which "sediments of thought" stand for grey matter. The term "sediments" may apply to both the brain's passivity during the operation as well as to the fact that, though temporarily switched off, the power of thought is likely to be stirred again from the base of the brain after the operation is over.

Many other poems both in *Kist* and in *Hidden Extras* rely on such highly crafted and decorum-defying stylistic figures full of medical terms and structured with surgical precision. O'Driscoll's idiosyncratic ways of dealing with our mortal frame seem to be a particular blend of elements taken from Holub's scientific, sober style and "the freest of free verse" (Alvarez 134), as well as from the mainstream of British poetry (Larkin) with the additional impact of the "Martian" poetics' non-poetic interests and its precision of images. Of course, there is also that original touch to O'Driscoll's verse which is his unprecedented thorough examination of well known but very rarely spoken of subjects such as cancer, thalidomide, body

organs or operations. He exposes these topics in a series of unconventional anatomical images suffused with his wry sense of humour, which endlessly surprise the reader with their sharpness and accuracy of observation. The poem which probably best sums up what has already been said here about Dennis O'Driscoll is the last full-length piece from *Kist* which, rather overcrowded with sickening visions, is by far the poet's most horrifying picture of the dead human body so far:

DEAD

dead buttocks
 wreaths of memory decay
 rotting of lips and lips of genitals
 mixing of scented juices and semen into soil
 purple thighs bait worms
 brush-like hair bristles
 rusting of bone hinge
 puncture of breast and rupture of womb
 curtains of coffin silk stirring in burst stomach's wind
 porridge of brain spilling from the head's bowl
 rainwater drained arterially through heart
 nourishing its tentacles of root

 a jelly-covered fruit cocktail of organs
 drying of pituita sliming of throat
 piston limbs polished (their frill of flesh removed) to steel
 greased with sour marrow urine oiled
 soiling the ragged funeral clothes

 in this substance fed recently on fish potato and peas
 the taste of baking dies
 the smell of chimney smoke
 the firm shaking of a hand where veins
 were scribbled like a reminder of life

 stiff as a sex organ
 carried on shoulders it once bore
 end of a body's longing for other's heat
 workshop smock of skin

 intestines splutter like underground gaspings for breath

While picturing his mother's body as "a cold meat salad smothered in a lettuce of wreaths" is unsettling but also deeply personal and poignant, "Dead" undoubtedly lets some truly disagreeable and disturbing ideas out of the deepest corners of the artist's decorum-free mind. However, what saves the poem from being a tasteless verbal exercise is its dark, slightly over the top, humour. Solemnity, respect and comfort are the things one usually looks for in the poetry of mourning or poems dealing with the deceased in general, but in this case the title word "Dead" could not be

more misleading. O'Driscoll ruins his reader's predictions in the very first line where the phrase "dead buttocks" is both comical and totally out of place as one's thoughts seldom go to those body parts of a corpse during a funeral or, especially, after it. The line strikingly entertains us with its irrational point of view, honesty and simplicity of expression, and these aspects are additionally strengthened through the contrast with a more serious and thoughtful second image, where the word "wreaths" alone creates a sufficiently mournful atmosphere. However, the poet seems to have decided not to treat the idea of describing a dead body too seriously, and therefore, in the third line, he allows himself to experiment with different meanings of "lips" ("rotting of lips and lips of genitals"), which may bring to mind the pun exercise used in the case of the collection's title word, *Kist*, though, of course, the play on this one syllable term is much more sophisticated and unobtrusive in its sexual undertones than the slightly obscene line above.

"Dead" reviews and highlights the most important elements of O'Driscoll's surgical and pathological view of life. The first stanza states in a completely unrestricted way what is constantly signalled in many other poems, such as, for example, the aforementioned "Meat," namely that the body, so much cherished, nurtured and nourished during life, becomes, in turn, food and protects other forms of life from hunger. In many of his poems, O'Driscoll's food imagery sees the human body in the light of what we eat so it should be no surprise here that after death "purple thighs bait worms" and "porridge of brain [is] spilling from the head's bowl." Moreover, in "Dead," the decaying flesh is no longer even seen as "meat" but merely as "a jelly-covered fruit cocktail of organs" or "substance fed recently on fish potato and peas," which restates the conviction about undurability of our mortal frame and depicts the body as nothing else but recyclable food.

Neither does the poet forget his inclination for clinical "cutting" images which, though less hygienic here than those in his other verse, are nevertheless displayed with equal passion in lines: "puncture of breast and rupture of womb / curtains of coffin silk stirring in burst stomach's wind," where the combination of plosives and hissing sounds only adds an extra blow of damaging air to this already destruction-ridden image.

It is worth noticing that the corpse in "Dead" is being analysed from the position of someone who actually sees what is going on underground. The body was certainly buried some time earlier as its "scented juices and semen" are mixed "into soil," "piston limbs polished (their frill of flesh removed) to steel" and "greased with sour marrow urine oiled / soiling the ragged funeral clothes." Only in the final stanza does the poet offer an earth-level flashback to the funeral scene where "stiff as a sex organ" the dead body is "carried on shoulders it once bore." Also, in the same

stanza, O'Driscoll offers a new poetic definition of death which, this time in the form of a surprisingly mild and beautiful euphemism, is delicately hinted at as the "end of a body's longing for other's heat." The poignant and gentle note, however, is not to last very long as the poet strips the reader of any allusions in the hard-hitting and revolting last line: "intestines splutter like underground gaspings for breath." Too realistic? Too non-poetic? O'Driscoll, like many poets before and after him, struggles to make one believe that the most prosaic or distasteful theme, such as, for example, an analysis of a rotting corpse, can be gripping and artistically liberating. "Dead" more than exhaustively represents O'Driscoll's own "gaspings for breath" of freedom from the underground of poetic restrictions. As Jerzy Jarniewicz remarks:

If by definition, each poetic revolution offers new understanding of what poetry is and of what it may be made, then it has to encroach upon the region which the preceding poetic constellation regards as lying outside its interest, i.e. as non-poetry. (130)

Of course, it is not to say that with "Dead" O'Driscoll made his own private poetic revolution as it is enough to recall at least two other poets, referred to earlier, whose interest in dead bodies mixed with voyeuristic inclinations preceded O'Driscoll's controversial verse, namely Craig Raine and Seamus Heaney. In Raine's 1978 poem "In the Mortuary" "death is presented in its most immediate, physical aspect" and "the reader is made to look at the dead body, to scan it almost inch by inch with a cool eye" (Jarniewicz 132):

Like soft cheeses they bulge
sideways on the marble slabs,
helpless, waiting to be washed. [...]

It is worth pointing out the use of food imagery in the above simile which brings the two poets even closer together in terms of the "anti-poetic" diction and idea of defamiliarization.

In the case of Heaney, his archaeological images may be less shocking as they mostly depict people who have been well preserved and eventually dug up from the bog, but nevertheless, some of his stanzas are equally physical and accurate in their scrutiny of corpses:

In the flat country nearby
Where they dug him out,
His last gruel of winter seeds
Caked in his stomach,

("The Tollund Man," 1972)

His hips are the ridge
and purse of a mussel,
his spine an eel arrested
under a glisten of mud.

("The Grauballe Man," 1975)

I am the artful voyeur
of your brain's exposed
and darkened combs,
your muscles' webbing
and all your numbered bones:

("Punishment," 1975)⁴

In fact, each of the three poets may be called "the artful voyeur" as they all look at the most intimate corners of human existence and, with meticulous care, venture to expose those regions to the reader in the most demanding form of writing – verse. The above parallels prove how skilfully O'Driscoll exploits different sources to create his own poetic world, and it only makes his poetry the more gripping. As Heaney himself remarked:

Some poets are most themselves when they write as if they were first to discover verse and rhythm as means of expression, apparently writing in disdain of or ignorance of literary tradition. But another, no less potent kind of imagination only operates fully when it keeps itself more or less artfully conscious of poetry already in existence. In this first collection [*Kist*] Dennis O'Driscoll reveals himself a poet of the latter kind, at work in the shadow of acknowledged masters. ("A Poet Hits His Stride" 18)

It is true that Dennis O'Driscoll happens to write "in the shadow of acknowledged masters" and that Raine's and Heaney's images are in a way more compact and stylish than his uneven stanzas and long lines but then O'Driscoll seems to go one step further in everything he does. And thus, for instance, the author of "Dead" does not picture the body in the mortuary or after exhumation, but he virtually examines the corpse in the very process of decaying, coming to pieces, changing into ashes, and he does this without considering any aesthetic boundaries, scruples or style limitations.

However, this lack of respect for what is commonly considered good taste is not aimed at shocking or disturbing the reader but appears to be driven by the need of expressing and displaying all the fears which bother the poet himself. Without falling into the easy trap of confessionalism or didactics, O'Driscoll treats poetry as if he was a psychologist who is there to listen to the patient's most hidden worries and as a result presents the audience with vivid, detailed session reports, often verbalized in medical diction. As the core of any effective therapy is to get problems off one's chest, examine and, if possible, resolve them, O'Driscoll relentlessly uses his

⁴ All quotes from Seamus Heaney's poems come from his *New Selected Poems 1966–1987*.

poetic analyses to confront the reader with nightmares and challenges of life. By tackling the frequently unspoken concerns all human beings share deep in their minds, the poet, as a good psychologist would, often goes to extremes to extract the truth, and since "Beauty is truth, truth beauty" (Keats 76), even in poems such as "Dead" or "Disturbing my Mother" the boundaries of decorum are never violated for a shocking effect but only naturally extended to examine existential issues in depth. O'Driscoll once said that death is one of the things people keep looking to poetry for,⁵ and his artistic output does not fail short of such expectations, though some readers may certainly need time to adjust their gaze to the poet's dissecting point of view, they may also be sure that the final effect will be rewarding. O'Driscoll's poems are haunted by death, disease and destruction, but in their pathological analyses they are more like a purification act, some kind of remedy, enabling the artist to create and regularly release his mind of troubling thoughts while also helping the reader face the unspeakable in a poetic and thus maybe more bearable way. When asked if he is a morbid person O'Driscoll replied:

No, I think if you're morbid, you're kind of obsessed with death. I am doing almost the opposite. I am trying to purge thoughts of it, I'm trying to rid myself of it. It's kind of always like a shamanistic experience of evoking it in order to rid yourself of it. Whatever it is about poetry one of the themes that it's responsive to is death.⁶

And so it is. One may try to argue this statement by saying that there are other topics poetry is even more responsive to, for example, love, but bearing in mind that "in the midst of life [or love] we are in death," morbid verse, more than any other kind of poetry, reminds us of how short our earthly existence is and urges us to live and love more intensely.

Dennis O'Driscoll, born in Thurles, County Tipperary, in 1954, is well known as one of Ireland's most widely published critics of poetry. He is a former editor of *Poetry Ireland Review* and his criticism has appeared in major journals in Ireland, the USA and Australia. His poetry collections include *Kist* (1982), *Hidden Extras* (1987), *Long Story Short* (1993), *Quality Time* (1997), *Weather Permitting* (1999), *Exemplary Damages* (2002), and *New And Selected Poems* (2004). As *The Poet Said*, a selection of poetry quotes from O'Driscoll's "Pickings and Choosings" column in *Poetry Ireland Review*, was published in 1997. He lives in County Kildare.

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⁵ Unpublished Irish Radio Interview by Andy O'Mahony, private correspondence the author received from Mr. O'Driscoll.

⁶ *Ibidem*.

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