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Craving the Normal

John Kenny

This is the Country

By William Wall

Sceptre, 272pp. £16.99

Though he still sometimes works in poetry, Corkman William Wall now tends to refer to himself as a “lapsed poet”. Comparatively quietly, yet speedily, his new reputation has been established by the three novels he has published in the last five years. A crucial factor in the respect Wall has incrementally won for his prose over this short time is the identifiable uniformities of his subjects. Even though they vary somewhat in style, *Alice Falling* (2000), *Minding Children* (2001) and *The Map of Tenderness* (2002) have all focused to a significant degree on the domestic social unit, something Wall once underlined in an interview with this paper: “I’m fascinated by the way families disintegrate. It can happen so easily; the bonds that hold people together are so obscure. And the idea that blood is thicker than water is rubbish.” His baneful take on the Irish family, his fundamentally anti-idyllic mood, have not entirely endeared Wall to the more misty-eyed among his readers at home or abroad.

With an echo at its very end of the rejected blood-versus-water imperative, *This is the Country* sustains both the core mood and theme that Wall has established as his metier. We are in perhaps even more comprehensively sinister country this time. After a somewhat needless eponymous introductory poem, we are told, in fairly short and titled but unnumbered chapters, the story of a well-intentioned but drug-damaged young Irishman through his own voice. He begins *in medias res*, thus establishing a pattern whereby his narrative will move, frequently at headlong speed, backwards and forwards in accounting for the events that have taken him through a vagrant youth, through victimisation and forced migration from his city to the country, through attempts at reconstruction with his own girlfriend and daughter, through resurgent violence and murder, involvement with the law, and final tragedy.

Seemingly a background conglomerate of Cork and Dublin, the home ground of the novel is really an archetypal contemporary Irish city and the narrator, whose name is closely guarded, is a representative - though far from stereotypical - marginalized figure who has been bred to petty crime and drug-abuse by the depredations of his Corporation estate and by the ruins of his family and of almost every other family around him.

Wall’s talents for linguistic compression are occasionally damaged here by vocabulary inappropriate to the narrator (“calcifying”, “wept”) and by a loosely designed ending. His cleverly devised secondary characters - especially the narrator’s zany childhood friend, Max, and the old gun-toting Protestant farmer who emerges as his benefactor - are somewhat counteracted by the cartoon cops who appear as Gardaí.

What is undiluted, however, is Wall’s insightful and robust social conscience. In his hands, the narrator becomes a kind of working-class Frankenstein, created by uncaring Irish legal and social structures and permanently consigned to looking in from the outside on success and comfort: “People sleep in the houses and dream

dreams of their own making, they have no legend forced on them by circumstances outside their control. Their houses are full of little devices that make things happen. ... Sun comes early and turns the whole place into a crystal. It warms the city to have this precious structure making and remaking in the light of each new day, throwing the way things should be onto the way things are, the fragile faces luminous and new-Windolened, the doors releasing little gusts of normal whenever someone comes or goes.”

Because the narrator is a believable personality overall, and because Ireland is therefore delineated through a convincing interiority rather than a mere journalistic recitation of public events, the sense of desolation and bleakness here is persuasive. In a corroboration of the increasingly high quality of Wall’s prose, the achieved mood of this novel is unlikely to put a spring in the blithe reader’s step in a walk around certain areas of this country’s cities.

John Kenny is an IRCHSS Government of Ireland Post-Doctoral Fellow at the Centre for the Study of Human Settlement and Historical Change, NUI Galway.