

Chris McCabe

In the Catacombs: a Summer Among the Dead Poets of West Norwood Cemetery

Penned in the Margins

£12.99, 256 pages

Speculatrix

Penned in the Margins

£9.99, 74 pages

Popularity and posterity are not synonymous. A select few manage both. Most manage neither. Others manage the former, but not the latter. Pick up a poetry periodical from the early 1960s and you will find W.D. Snodgrass, often bracketed with Philip Larkin. Larkin remains on the shelves of any provincial Waterstones, but you never see someone reading *The Führer Bunker* in a doctor's waiting room. Still others manage the latter but not the former, neglected in their lifetimes because of their social position or gender, the perversity of their stars or because they were simply born before their time: Emily Dickinson, Gerald Manley Hopkins, Arthur Rimbaud. It is writers of this stripe, the neglected, underrated and overlooked, that Chris McCabe is seeking in *In the Catacombs*, the first in his projected septet of books exploring the Magnificent Seven cemeteries of London. Laid out in the nineteenth century to house the dead spilling out, sometimes literally, from traditional parish burial grounds, these landscaped Arcadias established a new aesthetic for the afterlife. McCabe begins his journey through the suburban valleys of death in West Norwood, opened in 1837, the year in which the Victorian era began, with the aim of finding 'a great lost poet...an original voice: unknown and overlooked for centuries'. His gold standard is the aforementioned Hopkins, who 'wrote before his readers were ready' and was only spared perpetual obscurity by the assiduous attentions of Robert Bridges. In theory, the ground McCabe explores should be fertile. Victorian society was nothing if not stratified and that stratification continued in death: marble mausoleums and palatial crypts for the wealthy, plain old loam and topsoil for the rest.

Poetry doesn't pay and most poets, no matter how good they are, have to do something else in order to make ends meet. In McCabe's case, this is working as the librarian of the Saison Poetry Library on London's South Bank. I mention this not to assist you in some unimaginable future pub quiz, but because *In the Catacombs* is as much the work of the librarian as the poet, underpinned by the disciplines of cataloguing, indexing and information management. On this bedrock McCabe erects a text as monumental as a mason's slab. Despite its undoubted physical presence, however, *In the Catacombs*, as

befitting a book strewn with references to spiritualism, shadows, veils and angels, is more than merely corporeal. It is a fluid, liminal and immanent work of connection and interconnection, a fusion between landscape and inscape that functions simultaneously as biography, autobiography and psychogeography. It is fitting that McCabe spends his professional life on the banks of the Thames, for this is a book intimately concerned with waterways: not just the Effra, the lost London river that weaves a dark thread beneath West Norwood, but also the mythical rivers of Styx and Lethe.

McCabe descends to the underworld, with Colin Fenn of the Friends of West Norwood playing Virgil to his Dante. Fenn, as McCabe describes him, comes across as a splendid spirit guide: knowledgeable, patient, engaged and respectful. Part of the pleasure of this book is in the details uncovered by McCabe on his meandering trip through the necropolis, the catafalque, for instance, a sort of nineteenth century stair lift for coffins, or the stacking of coffins in the catacombs themselves, neatly filed in accordance with the Victorians' administrative impulses.

McCabe's journey has something of the situationist derive about it. It's an easy matter to visit the grave of a certified luminary: just print off a map and follow the crowds. McCabe's path is made more crooked and circuitous by the obscurity of the writers he seeks, taking in false trails, weed choked plots, yellow grass and broken stones, so becoming part of the narrative, woven into the warp and weft of the text. Visiting a cemetery is an oddly contradictory experience. Death is, literally, all around us but sheer weight of numbers in a place like West Norwood makes the particular general. The dead become anonymous entries in a vast index of Borgesian complexity. McCabe charges himself with ushering a selection of unheralded shades back into the light. The poets he uncovers - William à Beckett, Samuel Laman Blanchard, Demetrious Capetanakis, Sydney Carter, Henry Dawson Lowry, Thomas Miller, Edwin James Milliken, John Overs, Sir Thomas Noon Talfourd, Menella Bute Smedley, Theodore Watts-Dunton and John Yarrow - are as heterogeneous in their provenance and circumstance as their names suggest. With their lives spanning nearly two centuries from oldest to youngest, these writers form not so much an alternative cannon as a control group, a random sample against which the writers who did make the cut can be measured. Whilst McCabe finds glimmers of beauty and glints of enlightenment, he does not find what could be termed the real deal. There is no second coming of Dickinson or Hopkins here, but this serves to remind us that eggs like that do not come in batches. As Auden argued, whilst books might be unjustly forgotten, they are never unjustly remembered. Perhaps the closest to what we might imperfectly term greatness was Talfourd and that by association rather than inspiration. Talfourd was the editor of London Magazine and had *The Pickwick Papers* dedicated to him. Dickens, however, studiously swerves any

discussion of Talfourd's literary merits, focussing instead upon his 'private friendship' and 'sincerity'. McCabe's succinct summation of Talfourd's efforts as 'an attempt to create a 'great' poem through echoing the techniques of earlier poets' could serve as a general definition of all art that falls short, re-heating and re-processing rather than making new. Elsewhere, whilst discussing Henry Dawson Lowry, McCabe aphoristically states that 'writing is about learning to perform all the techniques well and then learning to forget them a little' and it is that act of forgetting that, paradoxically, makes writing memorable.

Given this, we could see McCabe's quest as ending in frustration. This would be to miss the point. What *In the Catacombs* ends up celebrating is the act of creativity and the crazed nobility of trying to be a poet, even if that does, in the case of Capetanakis, lead you to rhyming "silly" and "Piccadilly" without irony'. The manner in which McCabe pays his own personal tribute to the twelve writers is beautifully simple and absolutely appropriate, placing small stones on their burial plots, the stones embossed with a fragment from the work of each. This is in one sense a conceptual gesture, an act of reframing and reconfiguration. When McCabe performs it, however, it becomes much more than this. Whereas conceptualism often carries with it an air of *froideur*, *In the Catacombs* is a deeply human book. When McCabe places a pebble in the long grass around a poet's final resting place it is an artistic act but also an act of connection and communion. Smedley's stone, in particular, is perfectly poised and poignant, reading 'sun unseen'.

In the Catacombs is a book about the dead but it is also a book about the living. Considering those who have gone before, who have reached for the stars but grazed their knuckles on the guttering, turns us as the reader, inevitably, inwards and causes us to focus on our own endeavours. We are compelled to make ourselves the central character in our own metanarrative. We must convince ourselves that we matter and that what we do is important, otherwise why get off the couch? Without a conviction that we will eventually emerge triumphant or at least with our dignity intact, what are we to make of ourselves? *In the Catacombs* gently guides us towards a more measured worldview where doing is more important than doing well. Despite its ostensibly maudlin subject matter, *In the Catacombs* is a book aglow with energy, its prose as crisp as frost. For a book about a graveyard, it is remarkably life affirming. As McCabe patrols those green, sepulchral acres, fingering the impromptu rosary of a bracelet of sweets belonging to his son found in his pocket, ruminating on his own father, chasing down his own ghosts, we are reminded that the meaning of the dead comes from their connection with the living and those who are remembered are never truly gone. McCabe's gift to his dozen poets is not the posthumous laurels of a Hopkins or a Dickinson that he hoped for but is nonetheless meaningful, a jolt of electricity illuminating long-dimmed bulbs, fleetingly, fitfully, but brightly.

Speculatrix, like *In the Catacombs*, is intimately acquainted with the past and on speaking terms with the dead, but here the shades McCabe consorts with are the riotous, unquiet spirits of Jacobean drama. Jonson, Middleton, Dekker and other roaring boys are out of their boxes, careering around Lambeth full of wine and white noise. McCabe is not so much archivist as ventriloquist or medium. An altogether looser limbed and more instinctive work than *In the Catacombs*, *Speculatrix* takes the argot and lexis of seventeenth and twenty-first century London and blitzes them in a blender to mix the most hallucinogenic concoction you'll experience this side of Christopher Marlowe's punchbowl.

The book opens with a sequence of frantic, fractured poetic documents, framed by the texts McCabe writes through and away from: *The Duchess of Malfi*, *The Changeling*, *The Revenger's Tragedy* and others. Everything within is the blur of a shaken snow globe, a blizzard of references, accents and stresses, all time, as Eliot said, eternally present, always liable to erupt through the tarmac in a battalion of puffballs or bubble up in a storm drain, like one of *In the Catacombs'* lost rivers. This is a book of the deep surface and the extended now with all still in play and all still to play for. Each piece is anchored by the drama it refers to in a short précis. Fragments of it appear in the texts that follow, woven by McCabe into a hypnogogic tapestry of zombies, cellphones, plague, serotonin, The Globe on Google earth and hedge fund managers. Each is presented in what cursory inspection suggests are blocks of prose, but closer inspection reveals to be dense, complex slabs of poetry melted down into molten flux, rifted by lacunae that are sometimes switches of voice or register, at others a contextual gear change, at others the text becoming fissiparous from its own internal tensions, shivering into a shattered mosaic. McCabe's jump off from Jonson's *The Alchemist*, for example, which is set, so the preamble tells us, in Blackfriars, 1610, is a delirious amalgam of live skeletons, the tooth fairy, commuters "*black & melancholic worms*" and "*sodium glutamate*". This last phrase typifies *Speculatrix*: the familiar made strange by truncation, transposition and the nuanced but powerful textual retooling of that roaming diacritical mark, a Spanish incursion, perhaps, or a stray syntactical rook. The term "*speculatrix*" itself, an arcane term for a female spy, is brilliantly apt with its notes of fluid identity, moral ambiguity and simultaneous engagement and detachment. A spy, after all, is a particular type of witness, by definition a non-combatant but one with a mind in overdrive, perpetually trying to piece things together. This is true too of McCabe's wired, restless authorial voice, obsessed with minutiae but forever seeking connection and striving for panorama.

The second part of the book moves into formally calmer territory, a series of discrete pieces that look more like what we might think poetry looks like, but nonetheless equally animated by dark electricity and operating beyond the perimeter fence of easily explicable meaning and language as transparent

content. Other underworld spectres join Marlowe *et al* at the feast: Rimbaud, Bacon and Barry McSweeney. Sean O'Brien's *The Drowned Book* has McSweeney in death drifting down a subterranean waterway (rivers again) in a coffin boat stuffed with manuscripts and whisky. McCabe has him with "Bash Street Kids bouffant" in the company of Johnny Cash, Chatterton and Dylan, escorted to the afterlife down an English motorway by an undertaker "flanked in Soviet black". *My Mouth is an Elizabethan*, the penultimate piece of *Speculatrix*, is the book in microcosm, a dissolved lexicon of naughty nuncles and ninny-ninnies cheek by jowl with cans of Kronenbourg, Stella Artois and Rizlas, product placement which I'm guessing hasn't yet earned McCabe enough to buy a yacht on which to bob down the Thames to Nonsuch on a lazy Sabbath. Floating between these vocabularies are words which might belong to either, both or neither ("dawndamp"? "stoples"?), and this is one of the many pleasures of this book. We as readers are perpetually unsettled and never allowed to drift into slumber. It's not so much that we don't know what we are looking at as that we don't know when, from where or through whose eyes we are looking at it. *Speculatrix* is a book in perpetual motion, alive, dynamic, galvanised by its sources but not overwhelmed by them. As with *In the Catacombs*, this book could have simply been a project, the production of a text to order, the honouring of a brief. As with *In the Catacombs*, it is not. Rather it is a sublime work of artistry, unashamedly clever, eschewing the parameters apparently agreed by committee for poetry of directly lived experience and everyday language to produce a work of jacked up, febrile intensity. It reminds you of the magic of the whole mad business that captivated the dead poets of Norwood in the first place.

Tom Jenks