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## Contemporary Irish Poetry

### INTRODUCTION

I RANSACK MY bookshelves, rummage in the heap of volumes stacked on the desk or spilled over the floor. Books of recent Irish poetry, published by Salmon, Dedalus, Gallery, Blackstaff, Raven, Wake Forest, Ecco, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, Faber, Anvil, Penguin, Secker & Warburg, others. Volumes published by poets from Ireland and Northern Ireland, poets from the whole island. (How vexed the language is, our habits of naming thrown constantly into contortions of embarrassment. Speak, and someone is excluded, offended, enraged, hurt.) Volumes in the English language and volumes in the Irish language. Volumes by men and—more and more (as a recent issue of *Colby Quarterly* on *Irish Women Writers* testifies)—volumes by women. The stream that began in the late 1960's (when the beginnings of New Writers' Press and still thriving Gallery Press augmented the regular trickle of volumes from Dolmen Press) and swelled through the '70's and '80's, has by now become something of a flood, the breadth and depth of which may in part be judged by the growth of "Irish Studies" (especially in American colleges and universities), by the proliferation of cultural/literary festivals and summer schools all over Ireland itself, and by the numerous anthologies of Irish poetry that have appeared on both sides of the Irish Sea and on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. (This geographical allusion might neatly suggest the centrality of Ireland and its literary productions—as antidote, perhaps to the more usual sense, "post-colonial" and all that that implies, of its marginality. But perhaps "centrality" is not the word: it's likely we are neither central nor marginal but simply—simply!—in between.)

Picking at random among the heap that now lies higgledy-piggledy on my desk and on the floor, I open the latest volume (Salmon, 1992) by a poet from Galway, Rita Ann Higgins, whose intense, subversive, angry, laconic voice is a considerable contemporary presence. These lines are from the title poem ("Philomena's Revenge"):

'Mad at the world'  
the old women nod  
round each other's faces

But it was more  
than that  
and for less  
she was punished.

That weekend  
 she didn't leave a cup alone  
 every chair hit the wall,  
 Philomena's revenge.

Soon after  
 she was shifted  
 and given the shocks.

Abrupt and brutal, the short lines open a crack on women's experience of suppression and rage, and the ignorance that attends it. It is this world that Higgins keeps probing—fierce and humorous, a demotic *Goddess and Witch* (the title of an earlier collection) from the urban sprawl beside Galway Bay. This is not the voice of what many American readers have come to expect of "Irish Poetry" (a phrase, like the phrase "Irish Poet," which should perhaps be followed, as "Mayo" once was, by the ejaculative "God help us!"). But it is truly there, it utters something actual in the psyche of contemporary Ireland, registering (in the words of Edna Longley) "its economic and spiritual deprivation."

Dipping again among my books, I open *Fleurs-du-Lit* (Dedalus, 1990), a collection of zippy lyrics by Tom MacIntyre, their lean stanzas buzzing on some linguistic Speed of their own, their anchorage in Gaelic tradition, their sails snapping in gusts of contemporary fragmentation:

Tickle an ear  
 he hops up and down  
 like an egg in a ponger,

*I'm the Monsoon-Horse,*  
 hums the clear of his eye,  
*I'm the Martinmas Gander,*

*I sleep like a thrush,*  
*I don't look at calendars,*  
*I'm your permanent bash*  
*and The Patron of Hauliers. ("Baby in the Fire")*

While MacIntyre's landscape is dreamlike, flashy, full of playful echoes of phrases that reside just at the edge of our consciousness, something quite different is going on in *The Wrong Side of the Alps* by Anthony Glavin (Gallery, 1989), the second half of which is the stunning sequence—*Living in Hiroshima*—which manages to inhabit the bleak impossible landscape of horror in a language not inadequate to its almost unthinkable occasions. One of its minute, two-couplet sections is entitled "In Plato's Cave":

'Our present historical velocity.' Godspeed!  
 Can there be sunlight now without contamination?

My analyst sighs—no comment, he can wait. . .  
 The ceiling flickers like a video screen.

Such poetry attempts to inhabit and articulate the unspeakable, and demonstrates the refusal of contemporary Irish poets to be contained by the boundaries of the island, the confines of explicitly "Irish" subject matter. (The quicksilver post-

modern quixotica of Muldoon are probably the best known and most finished example of this.)

Still rooting, I come upon the latest volume of Michael Hartnett (*The Killing of Dreams*, Gallery, 1992)—whose poems have been disturbing and delighting me since the first time I saw them thirty years ago in UCD, and whose voice, which once cast off English altogether (in *A Farewell to English*, 1975), inhabits English forms in his own mordantly ironic, idiosyncratic way:

White as squid among the roseate prawns  
his fingers placed with prim finesse  
the seaweed in a green coiffure  
about the diamond ice  
and gesticulating back he eyed his work  
and pursed, 'It's finished; very nice'. ("Mountains, Fall on Us")

Hartnett's tone, the pulse and timbre of his voice, seem peculiarly tuned to local understanding, to a sense—in spite of a sharply individual mind and sensibility—of being related to (even in isolation) a "home" community. That even "at home" can seem to our new crop of poets a foreign place, however, foreign to conventional literary expectations, is shown in some lines from the next volume I leaf through—Michael O'Loughlin's *Stalingrad: The Street Directory*:

If I lived in this place for a thousand years  
I would never construe you Cuchulainn.  
Your name is a fossil, a petrified tree  
Your name means less than nothing.  
Less than Librium or Burton's Biscuits  
Or Phoenix Audio-Visual Systems—  
I have never heard it whispered  
By the wind in the telegraph wires  
Or seen it scrawled on the wall  
At the back of the children's playground. ("Cuchulainn")

In passages such as this, O'Loughlin's grainy urban meditations have opened up (in his three collections from Raven Arts Press) a particular—astringent but compassionate—zone of consciousness as well as social geography.

Randomly stumbled on, the examples I've used above could easily be replaced with others (by poets like Sara Berkeley, John Hughes, Macdara Woods, Moya Cannon, John F. Deane, Sean Dunne, Gerald Dawe, Joan McBreen, Peter Fallon, Ciaran Carson, Pat Boran, Theo Dorgan, Paula Meehan *et al.*), all of them demonstrating a comparable liveliness of language, depth of engagement with the subject, confidence of speech. In their work, as in that of O'Loughlin and the others I've quoted, the world that contemporary Irish poets encounter and make known to us (sometimes by making strange for us) must oblige us to revise at least some of our safer, more established notions about—God help us!—Irish Poetry. It is qualities and energies such as these—revisionist, I suppose, in the best sense—that I value in the poetry being at present written all over the island, a poetry that at its most accomplished—as in the work of Kinsella, Montague, Murphy, Heaney, Ní Chuilleanáin, Mahon, Boland, Muldoon

and others among the established figures of the past twenty years (as soon as I start naming names I become, like the anthology maker, nervously conscious of those I am leaving out)—is honestly preoccupied with the world of individual consciousness and the world of external fact, honestly seeks a language that will do some sort of unsentimental justice to these two zones of being, however the weight of attention and engagement is actually distributed between them.

Whether the site of attention is the local “domestic” world—of family, lovers, the back garden, a street, a house—or the larger world of more public (“political”) confrontations, or the interior world of consciousness itself, what impresses me is the fine articulate energy of so many of these poets, an energy that is various, intense, confident of itself in the very act of utterance. And such a largesse of poetic production, poetic speech, makes me think that at last the English language itself—fully, unabashedly, unselfconsciously—has become a “native” Irish possession. (That at the same time a freshly thriving poetry in the Irish language forms one of the most prominent features of the literary landscape of the island is hardly mere coincidence, and gives proper piquancy to the cross-pollination that occurs in the current spate of translation of Irish poets from Irish into English—most notably, but not uniquely, in the case of Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill—and even, occasionally, from English into Irish.) Once upon a time, and a very good bad time it was, Stephen Dedalus listened to the speech of the English Dean of Studies at UCD and thought to himself, “My soul frets in the shadow of his language.” For better, for worse, that fretting lasted a long time. It may be argued, as Michael O’Loughlin has done, that “Kavanagh was the first fully-fledged Irish poet in the English language—that is, an Irish poet whose relationship to Irish nationality and to the English language was not problematic” (*After Kavanagh: PK and the Discourse of Contemporary Irish Poetry*, Raven Arts, 1985). That independence in Kavanagh, however, was won at a certain cost: it is what makes him the indispensable forerunner, and at the same time what limits his own discourse, his own world, the odyssey of his own questing, irritable, troubled consciousness. For the poets aside from (and after) Kavanagh, however, the fretting continued: it is in Kinsella, Montague, Murphy, in Heaney and of course in Hartnett; there are traces of it in Ní Chuilleanáin and Boland; and there is even a curious touch of it in Mahon and Longley (although it would be interesting to consider the precise nature of the felt relationship with the English language of poets from a Protestant background—North or South—and poets from a Catholic background, as this may be found registered in their poems). But the energy and sheer plenitude of Irish poetry in English at the present moment (let posterity do the work of sheep and goats criticism; for now I’m just letting myself relish the fact of the matter), its confidence of voice, its fluency of speech, seem to have taken us beyond the Joycean fret, beyond that long moment of creative/linguistic anxiety (which Joyce himself, of course, got beyond in his own scrupulously anarchic, awakened way). The language, all these poets seem collectively to be saying (whether they are writing and publishing in Ireland or England or America or anywhere else—where, for example, is Harry Clifton this minute?)—the language is ours. And not ours in a spirit of post-colonial revenge,

but simply, naturally ours, our natural way of taking possession of the worlds we inhabit and that inform us. Without, I hope, being over-fanciful, I can hear in the collective speech of these poets, in the immediacy of their utterance as speech, a restoration of what I think I am hearing when I read, even with my inadequate Irish, a poem by Ó Rathaille or Ó Brudair or Ó Súilleabháin, by Raftery or Mac Giolla Ghunna or Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill: the sound of the language of the tribe, a sound that closes the gap between the language of the *polis* and that of the poem, a single speech spectrum that can include (without rendering into some spurious unity, into a single “countrified” or “mid-Atlantic” Irish accent) the surgical astringencies of a Kinsella, the humane boundary elisions of a Heaney, the baroque vertiginosities of a McGuckian, the heady, jocoserious play of a Muldoon, the subversive intimacies of a Durcan, or the colloquial indignation of a Rita Ann Higgins. Between all these poems and poets, the collective consciousness (in all its multiplicity, beyond what Gerald Dawe calls “the illusion . . . of being forever of the one place and of the one people” [*How’s the Poetry Going?* Lagan Press, 1991]) is finding its map in language, a language more varied, even, than the landscape of the island itself. And while this may not have an immediate and direct effect on what we call the body politic (does poetry make “nothing happen”?) something of its real achievement may at some time filter into—by opposition, if not by endorsement—what will come to be “Ireland” (quote marks, to let our virtuality be known), whenever and however and whatever that will be. There is a poem by Michael Davitt, published in a recent issue of *Poetry Ireland Review* (whose editor, Máire Mhac an tSaoi, expanded the presence of Irish language poets in the magazine, as her successor, Peter Denman, has continued to do) that touches from another angle on a thought that may not be too far from this one. For a lovely moment, during an electrical blackout, Davitt—as I understand the poem (entitled “Débheasca”/“Diglossia”)—has a glimmer of unity, of a common dual tongue, and that tongue is talk:

Ag féachaint amach an fhuinneóg dom ar ball  
Bhí Raghmallach ina Dhún Chaoín oíche Nollag.  
Coinneallphobal.

Is cuimhníós ar Corr na Móna fiche bliain ó shin . . .

Is d’ól mo dhá chluais an mhífortúilt débheasca:  
Sruthchaint thréadach na Seóigheach,  
Gaeilge.

[Outside the window later on/Ranelagh was Dún  
Chaoín on Christmas Eve./A candle community./  
/And I thought of Corr na Móna twenty years ago  
... And my two ears drank the miracle of diglossia:/  
The tribal speech—flow of the Joyces./Irish.]  
(translation, Gabriel Fitzmaurice)

Talk is “Irish” and is community, and no matter where any of us is writing we are all (whatever contemporary literary theory about the status of “writing” tells us) trying to talk—trying in our various ways, our personal dialects, to talk ourselves and our world into existence, into coexistence. The simple fact of dual

language—of the island containing poets writing in two languages—becomes itself an image of possibility, the possibility of accommodation and the richness that is its consequence. The variety of personal dialects insists on this possibility as a fact, at least in that world of language that the poets must inhabit. And the variety of these personal, map-making dialects is especially vivid if one compares any representative gathering of contemporary poems (a cross section, say, of a number of anthologies) with something like the 1925 *Golden Treasury of Irish Verse* edited by Lennox Robinson. In this monument to Revivalist taste and achievement, almost all the poems speak what seems—at this distance, anyway—to be a single more or less common dialect, whether the subject is Ireland, love, religion, political passion, or a love of the land, and that dialect is not a personal one but a possession of the community, of the literary community. Maybe it's simply a question of taste of fashion and the way these tune one's ears, but the poems in Robinson's collection seem more mono-tonic, everything sounding a bit Padraic Columish ("Mavourneen, we'll go far away/From the net of the crooked town,/Where they grudge us the light of day"—"The Beggar's Child") or Nora Hopperish ("Mavrone, Mavrone! the wind among the reeds,/It calls and cries and will not let me be;/And all its cry is of forgotten deeds/When men were loved of all the Daoine-sidhe"—"The Wind Among the Reeds"). One reason this is so, I'd say, is because most of the poems look away from the consciousness of the speaker towards some external subject, which is then painted in the proper lyrical colours (usually various shades of green). It is what set the young Samuel Beckett's teeth on edge: "The device common to the poets of the Revival and after," says Beckett, "in the use of which even beyond the jewels of language they are at one, is that of flight from self-awareness" ("Recent Irish Poetry," *Disjecta*, Grove Press, 1984). It is in fact a shock in the midst of such lyrical facility to come across the tough, interrogative, unflinchingly personal tones of "Easter 1916" and "The Wild Swans at Coole," tones which accommodate the perplexed, struggling, self-questioning consciousness of the speaking poet. For the most part in Robinson's *Golden Treasury*, though, the struggle to speak is over by the time the poem is written, and so the sound of these poems is smoother than speech, a pasteurized lyrical convention that will not accommodate individual consciousness in its emblematic body, individual speech. The contemporary poets, on the other hand—whatever their final value, and however many of them would pass the rigorous exam set by Beckett—speak in many different voices, invent dialects quite distinct from one another, would be very hard to confine to a single critical description. In their variety and number, in fact, they render the category to which many of them aspire ("Irish Poet" . . .) virtually useless as an instrument of description, never mind evaluation (although it will no doubt continue to perform such functions for a good while yet). What they provide between them, however, is a many-voiced choir of often vivid, often casual, sometimes important, occasionally crucial talk about the world and the self in it.

That something of value may come from this talk is, I think, known by the poetry itself at some instinctive level, and so we keep at it, keep chipping away

at the rockface of what Pound with winning simplicity called “the art of getting meaning into words.” The *effort* at real human speech—no matter what dialect of it we speak—is a value in itself. It was Derek Mahon who once observed that a good poem is a paradigm of good politics. It is so, I suppose, because of its patience and tolerance, its interest in getting things exact, its attempt to make precise discriminations that do not amount to a scale of exclusive and excluding values. Because, that is, of the balances it holds, because it grants everything in it a right to exist, allows everything in it to make a difference. And if I extend Mahon’s point, I might add that a poetry that is multiple, plural, accommodating of variety, tolerant of difference, eager to have all the voices heard, could also be the paradigm for a more humane political possibility. As the fuss over various recent anthologies shows, however, that possibility in poetry itself has not yet necessarily affected for the good those who make the agendas, those who define the communities, those who determine who’s in, who’s out. But the possibility is there for a larger-hearted view of things. I suppose the fact is that we are still witnessing the falling into place and shape of an identity, and just as, in the political world, that struggle to define an “official” identity can foment civil war, so in the literary world it can create quarrels, claims and counterclaims, an appetite for a seat at the conference table, a hunger to be in. Internecine squabbles (hard to forget Yeats’s “great hatred, little room”) constitute the negative side of all the vitality and variety, all that productive energy.

This negative side is an inevitable if regrettable part of the picture as, on the most mundane level, poetry gets mixed up with publicity, and a thirst for recognition grows universal and unquenchable. Literary editors of the major newspapers publish reviews of only a fraction of the books of poetry published. And even with the best will in the world they can publish little more than a fraction. A result of this is that “Poetry reviews in many Irish newspapers,” according to the poet Sean Dunne, who is also a journalist, “are literature’s answer to the Big Mac” (*Poetry Ireland Review*, 32, [1991]). And of course, in this scuffle for headlines—for the good word in the most public place, for the positive opinion of the right critic—real worth and real value can easily get lost. There is inevitably a business and a hype side to it all neatly summarized in the title of Dawe’s *How’s the Poetry Going?* and in his comment that, in contemporary Ireland, “the burden of market values is being put formidably upon literature to do the work of politics.” But from the long enough perspective, I suppose (and aside from the fact that the various skirmishes and controversies do suggest that poetry matters in Ireland in a way that is probably not true in America), such competitive jostling is just so much fluff, is—to use a phrase Kinsella used in a more notorious connection—a “journalistic entity.” (See his Introduction to the *New Oxford Book of Irish Verse*.) Posterity, that unfoolable if not infallible set of taste buds, may see all this noisy jockeying for power (a vulgar symptom of the malaise being Desmond Fennell’s usually silly, occasionally—it might be thought—malicious, but widely read pamphlet on the meaning of the popularity of Seamus Heaney) as part of the history of cultural maturation. But it will make its own judgments about the poems and the poets that last.



In its own collective critical way, the present gathering of essays and articles suggests some of the ramifications of Irish poetry at present, touches some of the issues I have just glanced at. What might be seen as a subtext of a number of these offerings (Antoinette Quinn's on the lesbian poet, Mary Dorcey, for example, or Dillon Johnston's on the presence of America in Muldoon and Montague, or Peggy O'Brien's on some literary precedents—significantly American—for the unsettling erotic element and linguistic adventure in McGuckian) is the way boundaries are breached—whether boundaries of gender or place or subject or sexuality or language—and the way, in breaching those boundaries, the poetry of contemporary Irish poets is insistently pushing out the defining and confining limits of its own field. (This could also be true of a particular collection like Seamus Heaney's most recent volume, *Seeing Things*, in which the porous fluency of the poet's language manages—with its tactful mix of heft and buoyancy—to navigate, to negotiate, between the realm of the *here and now* and that of the *over there*.) Such an essentially outward-looking impulse may be seen, too, in Peter Sirr's brief account of some contacts between contemporary European and Irish poetry, suggesting activity in the realm of translation that stretches poets beyond the geographical limits of Ireland and absorbs influences from the continent (influences often mediated by the volumes of translations published by Dedalus Press). Our little gathering might also be seen to contain, in the interviews with Joan Mc Breen and Paula Meehan and in the brief autobiographical piece by Pat Boran, an illustration of the way the younger, “emerging” poets have, by going beyond conventional boundaries, established a fresh set of relationships with what came before them. Listening to these voices of a fresh generation of poets, and listening to what the critics have to say about the various issues raised, one is made aware at the very least of the vitality and variety of Irish poetry (in both languages, as Peter Denman's essay on Biddy Jenkinson and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill makes clear) at the present moment, while Adrian Frazier's analysis of some prominent recent anthologies offers a glimpse of serious power struggles taking place underneath the vitality and variety of the verse itself. Of course, given the wide choice of possible subjects (whether in terms of theme, technique, author, or issue), a collection of essays like this one can offer little more than a tiny sliver or two cut at arbitrary angles off the larger body. But even in these small samples, I hope, something of the life of the whole thing may be known. And for the moment, at least, it is the life of it that matters.

In “Hopes and Fears for Irish Literature,” Yeats said, “Here in Ireland we are living in a young age, full of hope and promise—a young age which has only just begun to make its literature.” That was in 1892, exactly a hundred years ago. We can no longer talk of a “young age,” and the public “hope and promise” of the island has been blighted by social and political violence that has accounted for over 3,000 victims of murder in the North and more than 300,000 victims of unemployment in the South. Nothing in literature can at all “compensate” for such facts. It is possible, however, that in the undeniable energy and genuine talent of the new poetry—talent and energy that in my opinion give the lie to Declan Kiberd's rather grudging editorial assessment of “Contemporary Irish

Poetry” in the wonderfully abundant, if at times flawed, *Field Day Anthology of Irish Literature*—something at least of that “hope and promise” may again be found, if only the hope, and the promise, of making sense of ourselves. We’ll see.

# NAMES

Names are prophecies.  
We give them to who and what  
we don’t yet know—babies,  
new friends, bright and not-  
so-bright ideas—like maps,  
or coded messages, telling them  
how to get along in the world.

If we don’t like where they’re headed  
we issue them with new ones —  
*Corky, Spider, Dud, The Planet Acne* —  
sudden detours, new directions.  
(And we do that usually early on  
in our first meetings, if at all.)

We can rename ourselves too, use  
abbreviations, variations, nicknames.  
When we’re kids we can be  
*Superman* or *Wonderwoman* for a day.  
We are great believers in these names.

But our real selves are never far off,  
nameless beings, bemused by our efforts  
and whispering in the night alternative plans.  
And when we hear called in the street  
our most recent name, something fades  
into the marrow of our bones, returning  
flesh and blood to us, reluctantly.

And is there not a moment of emptiness  
before the world returns  
which is not easily forgotten?  
And the same moment reoccurs  
when I am asked to sign my name . . .

But I sign, and I continue travelling,  
recognising things and being recognised,  
on towards a place where names are nothing,  
where nobody listens, for a start,  
no one remembers, and people like me  
who could never get them right in life  
converse guiltlessly.

Pat Boran