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## *Looking for Poetry in Europe*

by PETER SIRR

RECENTLY IT befell me to chair a session entitled *New Perspectives in European Poetry* in the Irish Writers' Centre in Parnell Square. The occasion was the launch in Dublin of an Italian anthology of European poetry,<sup>1</sup> the previous night there had been a reading, and this was ten-o'clock on a Saturday morning, a certain hazy trepidation filtering with the sunlight onto the sparse attendance. Europe seemed remote. Two Italian poets were present on the panel (Fabio Doplicher, the editor of the anthology, and Valeria Rossella), the English poet Charles Tomlinson, a German poet and editor Michael Speier, and Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin. The title of our discussion was in fact the subtitle of Doplicher's anthology, which brings together the work of poets from fourteen countries in a volume of almost a thousand pages. Doplicher, in conversation and in print, has a more defined notion of Europe and European poetry than might occur to a practitioner or critic here. The word Europe is used liberally to indicate a quite specific intellectual and spiritual *Heimat*. At the end of his introduction, for instance, the editor hopes that his anthology will prove "an instrument for the rediscovery of the Europe we all love, the Europe of tolerance and freedom, of culture, the arts, of poetry."<sup>2</sup> This admirable if notional territory exists somewhere within the corporate embrace of Europe as European Community and the political and economic struggles of the post-1989 continent. Doplicher is at pains to dissociate himself from the narrowness that has equated Europe with Western Europe, which he likens to Faust: "desiring a false youth which would exorcise so many mistakes and injustices, it wanted only to make a pact with the devil, to experience a new history, without its own soul; at least without a part of this, the Slavic cultures, the cultures of the Danube etc."<sup>3</sup> His book includes substantial selections of work from pre-Faustian Europe: Poland, Yugoslavia (a word whose sell-by date has already been reached), Bulgaria, and what is still referred to on the contents page as the U.S.S.R. (Contemporary Europe is as hard on anthologists as it is on soccer team managers.)

Europe is in so many ways a chimerical concept. It is, though, in its very intangibility, its chaotic multidimensionality, that Doplicher finds sustenance.

1. *Antologia europea: Le prospettive attuali della poesia in Europa*, ed. Fabio Doplicher, Quaderni di Stilb, Rome, Italy, 1991.

2. "Un' antologia, una proposta," introduction to *Antologia europea*, p. 7.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

This is bound up with his view of language, of the word, as a kind of ethical bedrock despite, or perhaps because of, the history of language struggle, of oppressed minority tongues (the carefully named European Bureau of Lesser Used Languages lists 31), of “official” working languages and the outer reaches of the Slavic or Finno-Ungaric pluri-diversity. The prefixes “multi-” and “pluri-” along with bland hold-alls of “variety” and “diversity” are part of the essential lexicon of the new Europe. “The great richness of European poetry lies in the number and variety of languages which are spoken.”<sup>4</sup> A statement like this begs several questions. Is it interesting or useful, given precisely the variety Doplicher refers to, to think in terms of “European” poetry at all? And who, exactly, has access to the variety in which the richness lies? The nonspecialist, the nonspeaker of, say, a dozen widely spoken European languages must rely on what is made available in his or her own language; must depend, that is, on the willingness and competence of translators to transport some portion of that wealth; must depend, more crucially, on the subtle politics of translation, the decisions, in particular, as to who exactly is translated. Oddly enough, for all our alleged amnesia with respect to the “lost” Europe, it is precisely the poets and novelists of Eastern Europe who have dominated translation in recent years. It is actually more difficult to get hold of a contemporary French or Spanish poet than it is to find a representative poet of Hungary, Poland, Czechoslovakia. Holub, Herbert, Blandiana, Milosz, Rozewicz, Sorescu, not to mention the many anthologies of Polish, Czech, Hungarian, etc., poetry, are all readily available, almost to the extent that for many (and many poets especially), poetry in translation has come axiomatically to mean Eastern or Central European poetry.

Many forces have determined this, not least among which is a peculiar sentimentality that unites a loss of confidence in subject matter with what almost amounts to a longing for repression. It is symptomatic of the content-based bias of much contemporary criticism that much of it takes place in an atmosphere charged with moral imperatives. Much recent argument about poetry in these islands—and in the U.S.—has focused on what has come to seem like triviality: a triviality of content, a timidity of ambition, a lowering of poetic sights. This apparent domestication is heightened by comparison with poetic cultures where large moral imperatives are perceived to operate, where the role of poetry has been linked with the struggles of peoples, where the moral burden and thus the moral force of poetry seems to leave the English or Irish or American poet and critic floundering in his small pool of concern and casting a wistful eye eastward to the morally glamorous if dimly understood cultures of a Milosz or a Ratyushinka. Where these poets and critics are going to look now that poetry in the east looks like assuming a role equivalent to that familiar in our own cultures is anybody’s guess. A recent *TLS* carries a comic report of a debate organized by the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London, under the title Poetry for the Next Millennium/Part One, involving Margaret Atwood, Miroslav Holub, Al Alvarez, and Adam Czerniawski, with Tom Paulin as chairman:

4. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

A dispute soon developed between Atwood and Alvarez. Atwood praised the poets “in jail or on the firing line.” Alvarez, following the lines indicated in his article in the TLS last week on “Eastern European Poetry and Radical Chic,” denounced “the wishful thinking of poets in the West [who want] to be thrown in the slammer.” Atwood scornfully replied, “England is not the entire world, it may come as a shock to you.” Alvarez mused on the relatively few remaining areas of repression: China, North Vietnam, Cuba, the English departments of United States universities. . . .<sup>5</sup>

It would be easy to add to Alvarez’s list, but the notion that political repression is a necessary precondition for worthwhile poetry is as widespread as it is ludicrous. None of this is to belittle the achievement of the poets from Eastern Europe. But it is a strange provincialism of the spirit that can only greet such achievement with misplaced envy. It betrays, too, an equally strange lack of faith in poetry itself. If poetry is only a function of certain conditions, then what kind of art is it? A by-product of this is the way in which, time and again, translated texts are dealt with as if they had been written originally in English, as if the fact of their being translations were irrelevant, and the sheer moral force of their utterance had transplanted them intact into the English canon. A critic like Tom Paulin can quite blithely discuss, say, Tadeus Rozewicz’s handling of image and language in a manner which suggests that the fact that they were written in Polish was merely incidental. Rozewicz is perhaps not the best example of this. Yet if the power of Rozewicz, Herbert, or Holub comes home to us it is in good part because the poetry they write is so stripped, bare, unadorned, parabolic that it lends itself to translation. What of the others whose voices we can’t hear because it is the very intimate relationship with the resources of their own languages that makes them relatively inaccessible? We should at least acknowledge that a poetry and the language it’s written in are related to each other.

To acknowledge the Babel-like, explosive nature of what we call Europe is, maybe, to begin to understand what it might mean to us. Poetically, at least, the tired phrase “Europe of the regions” makes some sense. The editor of *Antologia europea* has been careful to represent, for example, Catalan, Basque, and Galician as well as Castilian poetry. More unusually, the section on French poetry is divided into five distinct regions: Alsace, Brittany, the North, Paris, and Provence—a corrective to centuries of firm centralism. Italy presents the opposite problem; a country already so self-divided, with regions linguistically as well as culturally distinct, much of whose poetry is written in one of the hundreds of dialects still spoken, presents insuperable demands on the conscientious, inclusive anthologist. Oddly enough, this region-minded book falters when it comes to these islands, perhaps unsurprisingly. England, English, Britain, British are used interchangeably, and the section’s title—“The Various Directions of English Poetry”—is not particularly helpful, containing as it does such un-English talents as R.S. Thomas, Sorley Maclean, Edwin Morgan, Tom Paulin, and Medbh McGuckian. What rationale can be offered for putting John Hewitt in the Irish section and Medbh McGuckian and Tom Paulin under English poetry is beyond me, though years of living in “Europe” have induced a certain

5. *TLS*, May 22, 1992, p. 20.

weariness at trying to explain what, to continental observers, seem pedantic differences.

It's about ten-thirty and our round table discussion, hampered by the fact that we haven't actually got a round table and so are ranged impressively behind an eight foot rectangle, sipping our sponsored Italian water, is chugging along. I ask Charles Tomlinson what Europe means to him as an English poet, and he proceeds to give an eloquent discourse on the fruitful cross-fertilization between England and Italy from Chaucer through Shakespeare, the Romantics, to Eliot and Pound. The Italians also mention the influence of Eliot, and it strikes me again how when we talk about the influence of one culture on another, it is always the past we end up talking about. Is this what Europe means to each of us, I wonder: the canonical past we try to catch up on? Do we have any real engagement with what is happening currently, beyond gestural Euro-nods? A project like Doplicher's might suggest just such an engagement, but it is one of the minor ironies of the morning that his project is available only to Italian speakers: it is a monolingual anthology, and not actually available in Ireland in any case. Nor will it be widely available in Italy: it is produced by one of the brave small presses that all over Europe keep translation alive. Poetry is, like everything, driven by market forces, and the market will not bear much pan-European ambition. No longer subsidized by the scam of intervention, Irish beef, we learn, may now have to struggle to find its place on the shelves of supermarkets in Nuremberg and Namur. Irish poetry is in an analogous situation, leaking slowly from the intervention lake into the little markets that can be reached by books like *Antologia europea*. We could do with more of it, just as we could do with more European poetry, both in the original and in translation, on the shelves of Hanna's and Waterstone's.