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Shadows and Apples

by PAT BORAN

THE ARGUMENT concerning whether poetry is alive or dead thrives in Ireland as it does elsewhere. Here, unlike the America which Joseph Epstein describes in his article “Who Killed Poetry?” (Dialogue 3, 1990), the majority of poets seem to work outside of the universities, to publish with small presses that are not university-based, and in many ways to be ignorant of the grave concerns of those who think poetry is coming to its end. Traditionally the problem here is not that poets are writing for other poets in academic confines but that, outside of the walls and halls of Academe as well as inside, as Patrick Kavanagh had it, you can’t throw a stone over your shoulder without hitting a poet.

This is not, whatever some despairing critics over here might feel, the same as saying that too much poetry is being written and published, any more than the fact that most young Irish bands produce records in runs of only about 1,000 copies means that popular music is dead or dying. On the contrary, the variety and divergence of voices, and the decentralization of publishing, indicates a healthy situation. It is rather the attitudes of reviewers, critics, and university syllabi that need revision. In the same article Epstein, referring to a response to his article by Donald Hall, sums up the real problem as being a need for reviewers “who can sift through the vast volumes of poetry now being published and call attention to worthy new work.” For, as Hall says, “most poetry of any moment is terrible. If you write an article claiming that poetry is in terrible shape, you are always right: therefore you are always fatuous.”

WHAT THEN IS THE state of contemporary Irish poetry? And what is the inheritance of younger Irish poets like myself? (By Irish here I mean Irish poetry in the English language. I must confine myself here to remarks on poetry in and translations into English, as my grasp of the Irish tongue is weak. The two most important poets writing in Irish, and whose work is available in dual-language editions, are Michael Hartnett and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill. Their poems have been my recent reintroduction to an Irish I lost immediately after school and in which I have yet to find my feet.)

In terms of coming into Irish poetry at a time when Heaney, Ní Chuilleanáin, Mabon and others are still writing, I feel a sense of excitement, of possibility. Irish poetry is in a crucial and developing state, but that is the state in which poetry thrives. Little presses, with and without state subsidy, come and go,
publishing both Irish and English language poetry as well as poetry in translation; they exist on shoestrings for small audiences, but they are many in number and their effect should not be hastily gauged. Depending on how you want to view it, the fact is that of four Irish-originated bestsellers recently, three were by poets, though one was admittedly a prose memoir. People attend the many poetry readings in impressive numbers. And in my recent appointment as Poet-in-Residence in Dublin City Libraries I have learnt never to underestimate the importance of even a single poem in a person’s life. There is an audience out there, and its diversity is reflected in the wide range of books that are bought and borrowed by a nation that is said to read more *per capita* than any other.

Nevertheless, from where we stand in time, the two great figures in Irish poetry are Yeats and Kavanagh and, without sidetracking for too long, any discussion of Irish poetry cannot be seen in perspective without them.

The influence of Yeats is easy to understand with his mastery of form and his broad, searching vision and embrace. He grappled openly with problematic identity in a changing Ireland, writing at the point where literature and politics overlapped. And if that were not enough to guarantee him a place in the hearts and concerns of Irish writers, there is also his famous exhortation: “Irish poets learn your trade, Sing whatever is well made.”

Kavanagh’s influence, on the other hand, is more difficult to grasp. The less accomplished of the two, his work at times seems facile and unadventurous in comparison to Yeats’s. He is often careless and overly sentimental. He comes to few conclusions and does not seem to believe that there is much that can be effected by his poetry. With Yeats we feel that poetry is a vibrant force.

How to explain Kavanagh’s influence then? The reasons for it are manifold: he appeals to Irish readers and writers as someone close to the earth, a natural, recognizable, flawed being. His experiences in journeying from his rural home place to the city of Dublin are recognizable at once by those of both rural and urban backgrounds. “Recognizable” is the key word here. (This, of course, prompts one to wonder how his influence will continue when and if the man has been forgotten.)

Yeats, on the other hand, is a far more elusive figure in the Irish mind. Where Kavanagh’s journeyings are physical, Yeats’s are metaphorical. He is on a quest for meaning while Kavanagh might be said to be on his way from point A to point B, and may or may not find something meaningful along the way. In one there seems to be a plan, a vision, while the other is guided by serendipity and chance.

There is, too, the old argument put forward again only recently by an article in *The Clegg*, a new Dublin-based magazine of “writing and thought,” that Kavanagh’s attraction for younger poets can be explained by a reluctance on their part to take on Yeats’s challenge and wrestle with form and craft. This is, to my mind, a gross simplification that arises from a misunderstanding of Kavanagh’s achievement. If Kavanagh has left a legacy, it is one that encourages Irish poets to write about what comes to them “naturally” as distinct from “easily.” The question of form has more to do, I think, with a search for new forms to reflect the contemporary world, a search that is taking place in all the arts and...
one which will, gradually and selectively, assimilate much of what presently appears disregarded. I would also suggest that there is some connection here with poetry in translation, a point I will come to in a moment.

Clearly, whatever the individual merits and demerits of Kavanagh and Yeats, suffice to say that between them they command more influence on contemporary Irish poetry than any other poets, living or dead. Their concerns and subjects, though slightly altered in the intervening generation, seem largely the concerns of Irish poets writing today.

But this is not necessarily a positive attribute. Because little appears to have changed politically or socially since their time, it becomes all too easy to believe that between them they have already tapped all the richest veins and left only scattered pickings to successive generations. Indeed, it often seems that many Irish poets feel about them as Shaw did about Shakespeare when he said: “It would probably be a relief to me to dig him up and throw stones at him.” Rather than standing on the shoulders of literary giants, successive generations often find themselves obscured in shadow at their feet and, in the case of Yeats and Kavanagh, shadows that are all the larger because of the proximity of those who cast them.

It would seem that a period of doubt and experimentation must follow in the wake of greatness. Irish poetry is not unique in this respect. A rich inheritance anywhere, of anything, can easily seem as daunting as no inheritance at all. Great poets are quickly embraced by and become part of a tradition, and the difficulty for any writer lies in at once being heir to a tradition while also striving to remain sufficiently free to discover and experiment with what is outside of it. In the case of an island as small as Ireland and with a tradition as alive and visible as ours, perhaps this challenge is all the more acutely felt.

AN OBVIOUS COURSE of exploration leads to other countries and languages, their poetries and mythologies, which help to put into perspective our own super-national concerns.

In this respect The Penguin Modern Poets series published in the 1960s and 70s and edited by Al Alvarez has done much to enlarge the world of Irish poetry. It was through this series that I first read, in translation, Milosz, Amachai, Holub, et al. Now, on the subject of translation and whether poetry is or is not that which is lost thereby, I would go along with John Pilling’s assertion that “there is a substratum present in every poetic utterance which enables it to withstand and survive translation,” and that poetry in translation differs from original-language poetry “in degree rather than in kind.” This is not to say that a translation is the same as the original poem, or that all poems translate with equal facility. It is rather to agree with John Frederick Nims in his introduction to Sappho to Valéry: Poems in Translation (University of Arkansas Press, 1990) that poetry in translation is “not so lost as poetry in a language we will never understand.” To my mind, a poet like myself who did not have access to a university education must do what he can to reach out to other cultures and languages, even if he is not fluent in them. And in some ways an American-English poem is as much a
translation as say Milosz’s “A Confession,” the country of its origin being foreign and strange to me, even if its language seems familiar:

My lord, I loved strawberry jam
And the dark sweetness of a woman’s body.

Nevertheless, obviously, things are lost: resonances, puns, wordplays, sometimes rhyme and meter, alliteration, assonance, dissonance, the very sounds and music of the language. It is as if we were trying to reconstruct or reassemble Shakespeare’s sonnets without changing them.

And yet something can survive. Sometimes it’s just the “story,” the “picture,” the “event,” but we can sense a poetry in it. This is what makes Holub, for example, or my latest “discovery,” Wisława Symborska, so “translatable.” Their images seem to connect with each other in a place where things are known outside of language. We can hardly be missing out on much in Symborska’s “Letters of the Dead”:

We read the letters of the dead like helpless gods,
yet gods nevertheless knowing later dates.

Myth and fairy tale, the world of art and cinema, and the new languages of science and technology all give us a common store of images that the poem in translation may tap into. Poetry in translation may not give us the original but it gives us some indication of where that poetry has gone or can go.

A possible side-effect of this, however, is that, because it can have so little to do with form, which is a property in the main of the original language, it seems to suggest that form is no longer important, that what you say is more important than how you say it—to my mind a disastrous conclusion for a poet to reach.

And yet there is another type of form that can be found in translation as well as in original-language poetry, form that is not particular to any one language. For instance, the question and answer form in Ted Hughes’s “Examination at the Womb-door” from Crow:

Who own these scrawny little feet? Death.
Who own this bristly scorched-looking face? Death.

Surely the interrogation or the self-interrogation which, almost by definition, uses “clear, stripped, translatable” language can be seen as a new form in itself, if somewhat looser than, say, the sonnet or the haiku.

In general, however, we must stick with the idea that a poem in translation is a map, a guide to the original. Perhaps it is something that can only really be read by a poet from another language, and in this it seems that we are blessed with many fine poets who have ventured into the world of translation, possibly for the reasons already mentioned.

However, the profusion of poetry in translation must force us to consider gravely the loss of our own traditional and adopted poetics, lest we end up with a kind of world music that comes from a place none of us can recognize as home. But this is not to say that travel, however limited in itself, is a limiting thing.
ONLY WHEN I LEFT home and moved to the city did I begin to feel that I came from an uncharted place—a small town. In the Irish psyche “small town” is often still seen as being synonymous with “country,” and an upbringing in a small town is still presumed to have more in common with a rural than an urban background. In my experience this isn’t the case. My own sense of place and belonging was diminished by this misunderstanding, and it was perhaps a growing awareness of this uncharted place that prompted me to the reading and writing of poetry. Poetry was something that might seek an identity in things formerly taken for granted by ordinary language. In a poem I could hear ordinary language to the fullest extents of its meaning and resonance.

And, of course, in leaving, this perspective was changed. I gradually became aware of a place whose history could not be told in the conventional sense—at least not to my satisfaction. In the case of my home town of Portlaoise—famous for its maximum security prison, general and psychiatric hospitals, all on the one few hundred yards of road—there was much that had not been talked about and much that was an obstacle, an embarrassment to the locals, and in some ways to myself.

In a recent pamphlet I included a poem called “Untitled” in which a meeting in an orchard takes place between a native of the town and an old man who knows it only as a place to pass through.

“That’s where the prison is. Aye, the prison. That’s where it is, right enough...” He might have laughed had I remembered Stevenson’s: “A hungry man is not a free man,” as we made towards the shadow and the apples.

This sort of stilted conversation where nothing much is said but something prohibited is intimated goes some way to explaining and mimicking the reality I knew, swinging as it does between statement and evasion. In some ways my work now is an attempt to find alternative histories, pasts out of which the present might have emerged, pasts that do not deny the present but throw light on it from different perspectives.

In this connection imagination and mythology are very important. One of the first poems to make an impression on me was Miroslav Holub’s “A Boy’s Head.” Possibly more than any other, with its great endorsement of the imagination, it marked the beginning of a physical (in the sense that it came from outside my own geographical world) and a mental journey into writing. And the fact that I first came across it on a printer’s offcut from some anthology which had been used to wrap brochures for my father’s travel agency was poetic in itself.

In it there is a space-ship
and a project
for doing away with piano lessons.

And, presumably, also a project for doing away with brochure unwrapping and other chores. And could there not also be a midland town where people went
about their lives, intimate, known and loved but yet strange and somehow unexplained? A small bog-side town in the republic of the imagination?

This also reminds me that individual poems, as much as collected works, can be what influence a young poet.

Kavanagh, especially in his poem “Epic,” seemed to offer another part of the solution to my particular problem.

I have lived in important places, times
When great events were decided, who owned
That half rood of rock, a no-man’s land
Surrounded by our pitchfork-armed claims.

His placing on the world stage of personal concerns alongside “the Munich bother” of the same year is justified in the end of the poem by a visit from Homer’s ghost.

He said: I made the Iliad from such
A local row. Gods make their own importance.

This, perhaps, was Kavanagh’s bequest to Irish poets. Every successful poem challenges and encourages like this.

WHETHER OR NOT there are great poets writing in Ireland today is a moot point. It is also one that concerns literary historians of the future rather than today’s poets and readers. Great poems are what we must be interested in. And that there have been great and brave poems written in the past few decades I have no doubt: I might mention Austin Clarke’s Mnemosyne Lay in Dust, Brian Coffey’s “Advent,” Seamus Heaney’s Station Island or Glanmore Sonnets, Derek Mahon’s “A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford” or Paula Meehan’s “The Statue of the Virgin at Granard Speaks.” All of these and more are contenders for a place in our hearts and histories. I might also suggest Patrick Galvin’s poems, which seem to owe more to Neruda, for instance—with a humanity reinforced rather than reduced by adversity—than to any Irish poet I could mention.

The feature that stands out above all is the range and diversity of voices I spoke of earlier. This brings to mind Octavio Paz’s comments on Latin-American poetry which I might paraphrase as: I am certain of the existence of poems written by Irish poets in the last fifty years, but I am not certain of the existence of Irish poetry. This may be because Ireland, and the Europe it is so much becoming part of, is undergoing great change, and we are trying to link two things—identity and poetry—both of them in the process of evolution. And this of course does not help the already beleaguered reviewers whose job it is to chart one land while standing on another that is in motion.

It seems to me too that the Troubles in Northern Ireland, which may have been the genesis of so many fine poets there in the 1960s and early 70s, and which rightly attracted additional attention to their efforts, are nevertheless something that concerns the island as a whole. The difficulties in dealing with a violence that is known intimately, and those experienced in dealing with one unknown but felt through the larger community, must equally be grappled with.
Finally I could suggest that the younger generation of Irish poets is optimistic, not because it can rest on the laurels of others but because, even in the shadow of Yeats and Kavanagh, or for my generation perhaps Heaney and Mahon, there are many recent poems that do what any poem can be expected to do—enlarge the scope and embrace of poetry, enclose in form what is glimpsed in passing, stock the larder of language with new means of sustenance.

THE LEAVING

He had fallen so far down into himself
I couldn’t reach him.
Though I had arranged our escape
he wouldn’t budge. He sat
days in his room checking manuscripts
or fixing photos of his family
strictly in the order they were taken.
I begged him hurry for
the moonless nights were due;
it was two nights’ walk through the forest.

The soldiers had recently entered our quarter.
I dreaded each knock on the door,
their heavy boots on the stairs.
Our friends advised haste;
many neighbours were already in prison.

His eyes were twin suns burning.
Silence was his answer to my pleas.
I packed a change of clothes, half
the remaining rations,
my mother’s gold ring for barter.

The documents at a glance would pass.
It wasn’t for myself I went but
for the new life I carried.
At the frontier I recalled him—that last morning
by the window watching the sun
strut the length of the street, mirroring
the clouds’ parade. He wore
the black shirt I’d embroidered with stars
and said nothing. Nothing.
Then the guide pushed me forward.

Between one sweep of the searchlight
and the next, I slipped into another state
gratefully, under cover of darkness.

Paula Meehan
(from The Man Who Was Marked by Winter)