

Introduction

What is ‘Irish poetry’? Is it written in Irish or can it be written in English too? Must it be about the history, mythology and contemporary life of Ireland, or can it range wider, through Europe, the world, the cosmos? Does it include the work of poets from Northern Ireland, a territory that belongs to the British Crown, or is it restricted to poets from the Republic of Ireland? What are we to do with a poet who was born a subject of that Crown, receiving a Civil List pension from that same Crown, who could neither speak nor read Irish yet claimed he was in touch with the spirit of the nation? Does it include poets who lived and published for most of their lives in England? Does it include second-generation emigrants? What about a poet whose family lived for centuries in the country and were Protestants who believed in the Union with Britain? What if that same Protestant poet is one of the century’s best translators and interpreters of ancient Irish poetry? Is he somehow less Irish than a Catholic peasant poet who wrote in Irish? There are many more such questions, but they do not proliferate as thickly as their answers; which is to say, there is no consensus about what Irish literature is, let alone Irish poetry.

For the purposes of this brief book, I have had to answer provisionally many of these questions, and here I wish to state these answers along with the contradictions and difficulties they involve. First of all, the question of period. The overarching theme of the book is indicated by the titles of the first and last chapters. In the year 1800, the Act of Union was passed, thus joining Ireland’s political fate with Britain over the next hundred years. In the following decades, nationalism became the motive force in poetry written in Ireland, and although poets would react in different ways to this aesthetic ideology, their work was deeply marked by it. This is what I mean by ‘The appearance of Ireland’, the title of the opening chapter. The last chapter is entitled ‘The Disappearance of Ireland’ and it points to the gradual abandonment of the nation as a framework for Irish poetry – on the level of theme, technique, forebears, etc. – what one commentator has called the post-national moment.

Nationalist ideology informs much of Ireland’s finest art and literature in this period, as well as many of the most intense cultural debates. That ideology

both imagines an origin back in the vague ancient past and fantasises a glorious utopian future for the nation. It is fundamentally *unnationalist* then to say that the effects of the ideology are restricted to one particular period. While researching this book, I found myself constantly in disagreement with neo-nationalists as various as Thomas Kinsella, Eavan Boland, Seamus Deane and Declan Kiberd: these writers, with force and imagination, modernise the idea of Ireland in interesting ways, but the fundamental concept of the Irish nation itself remains unquestioned. That concept is only about 200 years old but to read these writers one would think it goes back to the Big Bang. Even a critic as sophisticated as Colin Graham in his *Deconstructing Ireland* (2001) still requires the Irish nation – in however vestigial a form – as raw material for his deconstruction, and he provides us with no glimpse of the theoretical and imaginative work to be done after the concept has been dismantled.

Why then write a book like this? Because although nationalism is on the wane, it was nevertheless the most important cultural force in much of the best literature of Europe, and perhaps the world, over the last two centuries. However much one might disagree with the tenets of nationalist literature, that the literature exists and is sometimes excellent cannot be denied, any more than the importance of *Paradise Lost* can be denied by an atheist. Furthermore, I attend to work which falls outside this debate – for instance, the poetry of James Henry in the nineteenth century, and the poets at the end of the twentieth century – and I show the way that nationalism is being overtaken by other concerns. I also examine elements of other poets' *œuvres* that are unconcerned with issues of Ireland. The approach is valedictory and as such must characterise what is being left behind and outline what is to come. It is probable that books of this kind will not be required in twenty years.

The second important issue is that of language. It is reported that Joseph Brodsky was once asked at a reading what the poet's political responsibility was, and he answered "To the language."¹ In the Irish context, I see the following implication: Yeats, Kavanagh, Clarke, MacNeice, Heaney, Carson, to name a few, are above all poets of the English language, and that they are Irish is only of secondary importance. They have more in common with the poets of England than they do with the Gaelic bards. In the chapter on Seamus Heaney, I quote the following passage from an interview when he was asked what makes him distinctly an Irish poet and not a British poet, and he responded thus:

Well, the issue probably wouldn't arise at all were there not the political situation in the North. All of those remarks about Irish versus British are actually intended as irritants rather than definitions. The adjectives have

nothing essential to do with the noun. They have to do with the aggravation of the political and current situation. They're a form of game-playing.²

I do not wish to say that Anglophone Irish poets have not been deeply and variously influenced by Gaelic literature – most of this book traces that variety – but rather to say that the influences of, for instance, Shelley, Blake, Wordsworth and Tennyson have been more profound. While Tennyson boomed and gloomed at Ireland for all he was worth, the language he shared with Irish poets was infinitely more important than differing opinions about British imperialism. Yeats is not often thought of as a Tennysonian poet, in large part because of those differing opinions, but the *poetic* influence is there and is at least as significant as his engagement with Shelley, if not perhaps Blake.

What of poetry written in Irish? This is only mentioned insofar as it impinges on Irish Anglophone poetry – a separate book would be required to trace its development in the period. However, I have throughout tried to attend to the *border* between the two languages, especially to the occasions when writers pretend it doesn't exist. For instance, it does not seem strange to monoglot Irish audiences that J. M. Synge's *Playboy of the Western World* and Brian Friel's *Translations* are performed in English.³ The situation is similar to the film *The Piano Teacher* (2001): because it was a French-Austrian co-production it bizarrely depicted the population of Vienna talking French. This is a type of linguistic imperialism that presumes that all of the Gaelic world is accessible through English.

The book was written mainly in the Czech Republic, where I have lived for many years. In my personal life, English is a minority language, constantly eroded by Czech syntax, vocabulary and idioms. The experience has shown me how much is left outside English, how much cannot be brought over the linguistic border. It ranges from a way of breathing when one speaks to moral and philosophical concepts. I have also learned how difficult it is to explain those excluded elements, as monoglots often listen to such explanations as they would to fairy-tales. One cannot explain what is like to live in another language. At the same time, I have also learned that much can be brought over, but that conveyance is strongly conditioned by social, cultural and historical forces which often erase themselves in the end result.

I have not lived in Irish in the same way I live in Czech, as I only have reading knowledge of the language. It is still considered acceptable for a scholar of Anglophone Irish literature to have no knowledge of Irish. Some critics might defend this by saying that since the material they work with is in English, they have no need of Irish. But that very material frequently claims to express the

spirit of Gaelic literature; critics without, at the very least, reading knowledge cannot assess that claim and thus can be fairly accused of professional incompetence. Only those critics with a knowledge of both languages are in a position to assess those deceptive social, cultural and historical forces I mention above. I do not claim such a purview for this book; rather I merely bring attention to this border at key junctures.

Perhaps the most important of those junctures is the poetry of W. B. Yeats, the poet with the Civil List pension that I mentioned in the first paragraph. He established modern Irish literature and yet had no knowledge of the Irish language. Yeats scholarship is voluminous and while his ignorance of the language is noted, little more is said of the matter, few critics have addressed the matter fully. His poetry, drama, criticism and autobiography can be read for the ways he compensated for that ignorance, presenting other nationalist credentials in lieu of knowledge of Gaelic. He rather uncharitably described Keats thus:

I see a schoolboy when I think of him,
With face and nose pressed to a sweet-shop window,
For certainly he sank into his grave
His senses and his heart unsatisfied,
And made – being poor, ailing and ignorant,
Shut out from all the luxury of the world,
The coarse-bred son of a livery-stable keeper –
Luxuriant song.⁴

The description fits Yeats's relationship with Gaelic culture surprisingly well – if we substitute his Anglo-Irish Protestant details in the penultimate line.

Seamus Heaney asked whether Yeats was an example for Irish poets or not. Modern Irish poetry would be impossible without him for many reasons, foremost of which is that he enabled it to be monoglot. He could depend on nationalist ideology to compensate for that lack, but at the end of the twentieth century, with the withdrawal of that ideology, poets have been left floundering ever so slightly. In an interview in 1997 the poet Vona Groarke was pressed on the issue of whether she saw her poetry as distinctively Irish. She responded as follows:

That's a difficult question, you know, for myself to answer. I mean, it's easy to say what *has* been an Irish poem, but now that glass has been shattered and *there* are so many different parts of it. It used to be a rural poem, but it's not anymore. Now it's equally likely to be urban as it is to be rural, it's equally likely to be about a woman as it is about a man. I find it quite difficult to define what an Irish poem is now, and I think that's a healthy thing. It's not as easy to immediately pigeonhole it as it

would have been, say, thirty years ago. I'm sure, I'm sure, I'm sure I must read like an Irish poet. I wouldn't attempt to deny or to contradict my background in the poems that I write, I mean I write out of what has been my life to date and I'm sure there are hints of that in what I do. So I think it would be fatuous for me to say that I wouldn't read as an Irish poet, but . . . That kind of elusiveness in being able to define what an Irish poem is widens the scope an awful lot . . .⁵

Clearly, 'my life to date' does not guarantee a poem's Irishness. Groarke hardly seems convinced herself, yet she has nothing better to offer. I quote the passage at length because the confusion and uncertainty that Groarke expresses are not merely her own. This brings us back to the flurry of questions at the beginning. But it is also of note that the passage follows an exchange where the interviewers ask Groarke if she would be interested in translating Gaelic poems, and she jokes in response that it's sort of ruled out as she doesn't know Irish.

The third issue which is important for my reading of Irish poetry is the British Empire. Many postcolonial critics try to align the Irish with the wretched of the earth; however, I repeatedly found poets – from Thomas Moore to Seamus Heaney – who express their indebtedness to and complicity with the Empire. My approach has been influenced by a general change in attitude towards the British Empire. Niall Ferguson remarks:

what is very striking about the history of the Empire is that whenever the British were behaving despotically, there was almost always a liberal critique of that behaviour from within British society. Indeed, so powerful and consistent was this tendency to judge Britain's imperial conduct by the yardstick of liberty that it gave the British Empire something of a self-liquidating character.⁶

Thomas Moore, as English Whig, participated in exactly such a tendency; Seamus Heaney has been lionised by a British audience eager for accounts of Irish imaginative resistance to the Empire. It is then a distortion to read Irish poetry as continually opposed to the British Empire, because the attitude of both the colonising society and the colonised is more nuanced.

Only two of the twelve chapters are devoted to the nineteenth century because of the relative weakness of the poetry of that period. There is a cluster of three chapters on the Revival, with Yeats at the centre. In chapter 6, I deal with the legacy of Modernism in Irish poetry, and how it has been adapted to Irish materials by two successive generations. Chapter 7 groups Derek Mahon, Michael Longley and Richard Murphy together and considers them in relation to the theme of Empire. The more usual grouping would substitute Heaney for Murphy in order to provide a detailed discussion of the Northern Irish Renaissance

at the end of the 1960s (Heaney is dealt with in chapter 8). It is not the point of a book like this to be original, but there are so many treatments of that phenomenon elsewhere that I considered it superfluous. Nevertheless, readers unfamiliar with the Northern Ireland Renaissance still receive an account of it, although cross-hatched by another narrative. Chapter 9 deals with poetry translation from Irish, French and Latin, and might be described as the nerve-centre of the book. Chapter 10 deals with the explosion of women's issues in Irish poetry in the 1980s and early 1990s; chapter 11 with Paul Muldoon and the theme of emigration in Irish poetry. In the last chapter – with the wave of a wand – Ireland vanishes into other concerns, such as city-writing, cosmopolitanism and the sea. I do not have a better answer than Vona Groarke to the question of what now is a distinctively Irish poem; I merely attempt to describe some of the most exciting, though disparate, elements in contemporary Irish poetry. My bet is people will soon no longer think in categories such as the interviewers' 'distinctively Irish'.