

THE "IRISHNESS" OF CONTEMPORARY IRISH POETRY. PLACE, HISTORY AND CULTURAL CONTINUITY IN CONTEMPORARY IRISH POETRY WRITTEN IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

THESES

Contemporary Irish poetry written in the English language is distinguished from other English poetries on the thematic level by a preoccupation with the categories of place, history and cultural continuity.

The spatial category associated with the notion of 'Irishness' is the island of Ireland, both South and North. The political division of the island to the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland is only one of the many though it is the first among them – ethnic, religious and linguistic features mark a multifariously divided world in which the focus of such a term as 'Irishness' can only be accessed and assessed by a pluralist approach.

The categories of place, history and cultural continuity provide a framework which allows the examination of the body of contemporary Irish poetry according to spatial as well as temporal dimensions; the temporary separation of space and time provide the categories of place and history respectively, and their synthesis offers the view on cultural continuity which covers basic elements of the notion of tradition.

PLACE

The category of place itself indicates a plural universe as it incorporates both the natural and the human world. The natural world, existing prior to and next to human habitation, is evoked in the form of landscapes whose choice of location reflects a preoccupation with frontier-like experiences: coastal locations are frontiers due to the meeting of water and land, and lakes embody a curious quality as they tend to induce visions akin to Romantic precedents, thus they also emanate the spirit of in-between-ness. The western coast of the Republic is the favoured choice: Derek Mahon, Seamus Heaney, Matthew Sweeney and Thomas Kinsella all address it in their turns, and all find the wild and harsh beauty of the place a potent source which induces visions and revelations, though what comes to be revealed in Sweeney and Kinsella embodies a rather tragic dimension. Northern landscapes are also principally represented by coastal locations, and they likewise possess revelatory powers.

The world populated by human civilisation is further divided as urban areas contrast with country locations which often, though not always, possess the designation 'rural.' As the earlier ideological conditioning of the Republic tilted heavily towards the rural world as its ideal, the urban world bears the general heritage of suspicions – however, it is rather the dubious consequences of recent economic resurgence and subsequent modernisation which drive poets to focus on less enchanting aspects of cities such as poverty, material and spiritual deprivation and consequent dehumanisation. The two principal cities, Dublin and Belfast, draw a remarkably consistent response from poets – though change is characteristic of both, it is rather Dublin which reflects alterations yet with a pervasive sense of the constancy of old miseries, whereas Belfast appears unable to shed its old image of a hostile industrial city despite fundamental changes to its economic life. Thomas Kinsella, Brendan Kennelly and Paul Durcan present Dublin as a city which is becoming increasingly alien even for its own inhabitants in the wake of modernisation, and this picture is complemented by Eavan Boland's perspective on the rather prosaic yet still potently regenerative suburban world of the capital. The chroniclers of Belfast are similarly the natives of the city: Derek Mahon's disillusioned accounts bear the mark of the poet's rather loose relationship with the place, Tom Paulin's upbringing in the city enables him to trace the faultlines marring the life of Belfast, and the most complete treatment of the city is provided by Ciaran Carson whose short poems make up a film-like sequence of the life of the city, arresting minute-by-minute change as much as it is possible in literature.

The assessment of the country is not coloured by ideological constructs – rather, the poetry seeks to dispel those. The country is a nearly constant world where change is slow and not spectacular; the life of country places is dominated by inherited hostilities, suspicions and prejudices which are not redeemed by poetry either. The population of country places in the Republic is bound together by such antagonistic relations rather than by the affection outlined in the founding ideologies of the state, whereas Northern country locations are conditioned by the harshness of the surrounding physical environment and the internal divisions of the population. The country has a double nature in Thomas Kinsella's view: the country is not immune to modernisation either, yet the spirit of the past is curiously alive in historically significant locations. Brendan Kennelly's outing into the country yields the ultimate experience of a "land of loss," Michael Hartnett and Matthew Sweeney openly declare the backwardness and suffocating nature of certain, though unspecified and therefore general, country locations. Derek Mahon's accounts of the country focus on abandoned and even forgotten places, and Seamus Heaney's move to the Republic brings him into contact with a

rural world which is reminiscent of his childhood on a Northern farm. The harsh physical world of the North is hauntingly captured by Mahon, yet his visions of the country locations of his native province reflect a strange sense of belonging to those places. John Montague's later return to the scene of his childhood dispels any Romantic aura overhanging the place, though the location is addressed in terms which are recollected rather than seen on the occasion. Tom Paulin's Northern country locations bear the weight of the divisions of the population inhabiting them, which often leads to an open demonstration of disillusionment. Paul Muldoon weighs the communal significance of place and finds it less important than the personal significance of the location, and Medbh McGuckian likewise sees places through the filter of personal meaning.

All the examined poets were born into the present world of multifarious divisions whose most salient and immediate reminder is the embodiment of political separation, the border between the Republic and Northern Ireland. The border is regarded a frontier zone yet it is a man-made one, thus its features visit back upon the human population. The interpretation of the border by different communities shows fundamental differences, which indicates the problematic nature of the concept, yet the most palpable criticism of it is provided by the inhabitants of the border zone – the life of those people is often absolutely unaffected by their proximity to such a location. The most encompassing treatment of the border is given by John Montague – his frequent experience of crossing the border makes the event a familiar one yet each occasion has its own anxiety woven into it; this comes to be dispelled only during a late afternoon journey in winter into the border zone when the line of political separation becomes irrelevant as other frontiers are approached. Paul Muldoon's border-visions hint at the irrationality of the concept itself by providing instances which are deliberately exaggerated to make the border appear important.

The image of the West of Ireland is still that of the authentic Irish place, with a traditional culture which is basically untouched by modernisation. Accounts of the West, however, are dominated by observations of the natural world and human participation is reduced to marginal cases, which reveals a slowly but surely shifting view of the West and its cultural significance. The landscape still possesses magic powers yet the way of life belongs to an earlier historical period which sharply contrasts with the modernising world of urban Ireland. Michael Longley's finding a "home from home" in the West offers a counterpoint to his (basically unaddressed) Belfast residence, and this turns him into a diligent observer of the West, principally through accounts of the physical environment. Richard Murphy's familiarity with the West through residence there renders his vision an authentic one, though that vision

insists on the harshness of that world. Paul Durcan approaches the West with profound expectations only to face the frustration of those expectations as the place turns out to be no less alien than the city of his departure.

The landscape also allows for a temporary dismissal of the political division. The common geological heritage of the destruction of the ice ages and the present abundance of bogs both South and North overwrite the differences and unite the two parts of the island, foreshadowing a potential reconciliation of any difference. Complementing the natural element there are aspects of human life which also demonstrate the power of rising above the traditional divisions, yet one of the implied aspects is violence, which considerably reconfigures the vision of an Ireland ‘beyond divisions.’

HISTORY

The category of history is an indispensable one in the Irish context principally as a result of a highly troubled past. The close intertwining of the state-founding ideologies of the Republic with history is partly responsible for the tiredness of poets with the past, and though there are accounts of the past, there is a marked preference for the present.

The contemporary history of the Republic is dominated by far-reaching economic and social changes rather than by major political events, yet these changes provide sufficient raw material for a poetry with acute critical faculties. Poetic responses to modernisation and concurrent internationalisation point out the inherent duality of change and there is an observable leaning towards the portrayal of the negative consequences of these processes. Traditional foundations of the Republic, such as ideologies and the Catholic Church, are also addressed and these accounts display a strong revisionist spirit on part of the poets. Paul Durcan, John Montague, Michael Hartnett and Brendan Kennelly all point out the hypocrisies and bigotries of the founding ideologies of the state and the supporting institutions of those ideologies; Durcan is the principal critical voice, with the Catholic Church as his frequent target. At the same time these poets extend strong sympathies to people who demonstrate exemplary behaviour or are simply sufferers of the consequences of general deprivation and ignorance. John Montague’s familiarity with the life of the country dispels any illusions of the concept of “rural innocence”, and Michael Hartnett provides a similar readjustment of the official picture in his representation of the average old woman of the country. Kennelly’s accounts are often characterised by a strong ironic tendency, yet his poetic honesty is proven by allowing space for an imaginary monologue of de Valera.

The recent history of Northern Ireland unfolds in the menacing atmosphere of violent political conflict. The twenty-five years of violence embody the division of the Northern population and they provide a challenging set of themes to assess. When addressed the conflict is univocally condemned; though approaches differ on the technical level, the outcome is basically uniform. The predominant experience of the conflict is that of loss which becomes tangible when violence intrudes the personal life of poets – elegiac dimensions take over and the accounts translate history into terms which are meaningful for any individual.

The present conflict is approached with the help of personal memories of relatives, past literary works and highly idiosyncratic personal convictions. John Montague's poems face the violence with a sad sense of perplexity in spite of his vivid memories of a Northern childhood; Seamus Heaney attempts first to mythicise and later to humanise the conflict, yet he cannot be happy with either approach. Michael Longley authenticates his response by the evocation of his father's figure and by Homeric parallels. Derek Mahon's scarce references reflect a reluctance to assess the conflict yet they at once acknowledge the impossibility of remaining aloof from it. Tom Paulin's poems display impatience with the very foundations of the conflict and he repeatedly proposes the vision of a secular republic overwriting any difference. The conflict becomes a source for mysteries for Paul Muldoon and he duly subverts any rationalising approach to the violence. These responses all acknowledge the antagonisms underlying the world of the North yet only few of them propose a solution and some even call into question the stability of those political concepts which fuel the conflict. The continuous exposure to violence leads to a perversion of the general value system which demands a conscious employment of openly grotesque elements to capture the attention of the audience; Ciaran Carson's grotesque or on occasion trivialising pieces indicate this conditioning power of the proximity of violence.

The Northern conflict as addressed from across the border as well yet a balanced view is difficult to present as distance and ideological conditioning can interfere with the honesty of interpretation: Thomas Kinsella is content with expressing his anger towards the authorities and the community they apparently serve, which results in a rather coarsened response. There are responses, however, which insist on a general human dimension to the conflict in which any form of violence is unacceptable regardless of its perpetrator – Paul Durcan lays blame on both sides in the conflict.

The personal dimension of history has a special relevance in the Irish context due to its close relation with the communal history of both parts of the island. History acquires a tangible dimension through the category of ancestry; fathers and mothers are commemorated

in poems which frequently render individual lives in the context of communal historical phenomena. Fathers feature more generously in the poetry, and they receive cordial embraces often in spite of hurts which they caused. Seamus Heaney's exemplary farmer father evokes a world in slow but inevitable decline. Michael Longley conjures the spirit of his father principally in the context of conflict, regarding him as a "belated casualty" of the war apropos of the Troubles. John Montague's Northern Republican exile father comes to be redeemed in an elaborate project; the lost man finally takes his proper place in the warm though only imaginatively reconstructed family circle. Paul Durcan's account of his father gives the image of a public figure who considers his public function superior to his role as a family man yet who does not fully lack a human dimension. Accounts of mothers are less frequent and they all share a perspective of retrospect, yet they are equally benevolent. Heaney's warm and affectionate relation with his mother strongly contrasts with both Montague's troubled one and Derek Mahon's shy and embarrassed feelings towards his mother figure.

Imaginative approaches to history involve the utilisation of objective correlatives. The Northern conflict finds a potential parallel in an ancient fertility ritual, postmodernist considerations subvert the nature of history as discourse, and there are visions, mainly of the past, which are on occasion rather nightmarish – these all suggest that the present is more easily and even more successfully addressed with the help of a less immediate approach. Seamus Heaney's bog-myth is an ample demonstration of the simultaneous phenomena of the frustrating irrationality and inescapable presence of violence. Tom Paulin's ideal of his secular republic beyond division remains an ideal only as the proposed solution would require a radical step forward by the involved parties. Brendan Kennelly's vision of deceased Catholic and Protestant soldiers joining forces similarly remain on a tentative level but Kennelly seasons his account with a sense of irony as well.

CULTURAL CONTINUITY

The category of cultural continuity provides a simultaneous assessment of place and history, of space and time, in the frame which is tradition itself. This includes the communities which populate the island and which claim the possession of the Irish experience, the question of language which still involves a conflict between English and Gaelic, and the conscious cultivation of that cultural heritage which belongs to the people of the island. The most explicit treatment of tradition is provided by Thomas Kinsella: he has addressed the question of the Irish tradition on several occasions, calling attention to the

general dilemma of the modern writer which indicates that fragmentation and discontinuity are not exclusively Irish elements though they are definitely characteristic of the Irish context.

The island is home to communities who share the notion of 'Irishness' yet their respective experience shows considerable differences beyond shared elements. Self-assessment and the assessment of the other are important exercises for self-definition. Though the communities are kept apart by antagonisms, there is a possibility of meaningful human relations across, and even beyond, the sectarian divide, which indicates the importance of personal experience at the expense of inherited behaviour-patterns. Derek Mahon and Tom Paulin mercilessly expose the narrow and constrained world of Northern Protestantism from the inside, whereas Seamus Heaney offers a (somewhat) conditioned account of Northern Protestants from across the sectarian divide. Paul Durcan cunningly introduces his own community under the guise of describing 'the other.' John Montague ventures across the divide in spite of his position as a Northern Catholic, and by this manoeuvre he declares the importance of individual experience as a strong humanising force acting against the dehumanising potential of sectarian conditioning.

The issue of the language is another element which cannot be escaped in contemporary Irish poetry. The domination of English on the expense of Irish Gaelic is a distressing phenomenon yet it is an unalterable one too. Though placenames are the most salient reminders of linguistic dispossession, they are at once the most important agents of preservation as the translated or transliterated names preserve the old in the new and thus stand for the special heritage which is the result of the contact of the two languages. Though Michael Hartnett's hierarchy of languages displays a profound antagonism between English and Gaelic, and Matthew Sweeney even demonstrates the possibility of preferring Gaelic to English as a medium of describing actual experience, the frequent stance is that of the acknowledgement of the loss of the original native language. John Montague's poems indicate the inevitable decline of the old world, and within that of Gaelic, too, as he focuses on the placenames of his region of upbringing and his memories of Gaelic at school. Seamus Heaney's poems attempt to infuse more reassuring elements into the language issue as he appears principally interested in the fruitful combination of the old and the new, of Gaelic and English, in the placenames of his district. Paul Durcan outlines a surrealistic vision in which rigid insistence on the Gaelic language even leads to a catastrophe. Eavan Boland describes an experience of attempted cultural re-programming through education in English in an English location. Against all odds Ciaran Carson manages to reconcile the two languages: Carson's

own experience of possessing both languages provides significant motivation for him in this belief.

The decline of Gaelic involves the prospect of neglect and oblivion for the earlier literature written in that language. The change of language dislocates the old tradition and makes it available only through hard work, yet it provides an exotic addition to the universe of the new language, eventually leading to the full possession of that language. The employment of motifs from early Irish literature, principally from *The Book of Invasions*, has another dimension beyond its cross-traditional role: the favoured choice of Fintan and his survival during the Flood is emblematic of the fate of the old tradition as well. Thomas Kinsella's elaborate projects of repossessing early medieval Irish literary material and of importing it into his poetry form a part of Kinsella's quest for his tradition. John Montague also employs legendary figures in his poetry and his choice of characters carries certain self-reflexive considerations too.

The exploration of tradition is also carried out on a more personal scale, involving a more limited temporal dimension. The return to the past offers a similar enrichment and it becomes partly an assessment and partly further inspiration. The involvement of canonical figures and various acquaintances lends authority to the personal convictions of the speaker, which reflects a profound immersion in the tradition and a subsequent possession of it; Seamus Heaney's "Station Island" is such a project.

The assessment of the heritage of the past yields the recognition that the tradition is a given category: it is the foundation of the present. Though the past may be full of tragic events, it still is the Irish past, and as such it is embraced in its entirety. This decision is a demonstration of the understanding of the concept of Irishness and of the willingness to identify with it. This is the most saliently demonstrated by Brendan Kennelly – he does not fail to commemorate the tragic dimension of Irish history, yet he refuses to be overwhelmed by it: the past is a source to utilise regardless of its tragic nature, and the determination to accept this past and identify with it is an important recognition of becoming a part of that tradition which is called Irishness.