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Ireland in poetry: 1999, 1949, 1969

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Ireland in 1999 appeared to be ending its trouble-strewn twentieth century as a remarkably prosperous, culturally confident and optimistic place. The Good Friday agreement of the previous year had moved the Northern Irish Peace Process further towards the cessation of the thirty years of violence that since 1969 had cost more than 3,500 lives. The new Northern Ireland Assembly met, briefly, for the first time. Capitalising on the benefits of a highly-educated workforce, the Irish embraced an increasingly globalised market. The Irish phenomenon of rapid growth based on foreign investment in new technologies mirrored the achievements of Asia, and the Irish economy became known as the 'Celtic Tiger'. To the world, though, Ireland still had the glamour of its ancient traditions, music and poetry. It represented a mix of authenticity and the intellectual and spiritual integrity of a cultural development which the popular stage hit of the 1990s, *Riverdance*, pictured stretching forwards from pre-history.

Irish literature was widely represented in the bookshops and campuses of the anglophone world, and new Irish poetry shared in that world's appetite for Irish music, cinema and art. Translated into many languages, the poet Seamus Heaney had received the Nobel Prize in 1995 and was a Harvard and Oxford Professor. The President of the United States, Bill Clinton, was so taken by the miracles of justice envisaged in a chorus from Heaney's 1990 version of Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, *The Cure at Troy*, that he hung a copy of it on the wall of his study in the White House. Heaney's chorus desired that 'hope and history might rhyme', and Clinton couldn't resist yoking it to his hometown of Hope, Arkansas in the title of his 1996 campaign manifesto, *Between Hope and History*.[1] Yet Heaney's international success had followed those of his fellow poets, Thomas Kinsella and John Montague, who had both held prestigious posts at American universities. Eavan Boland, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill and Derek Mahon were to follow. Paul

Muldoon was Professor in Princeton, and soon to be Oxford Professor of Poetry.

Irish poetry appeared to be thriving, in Ireland and further afield, as writing from a small country on the Atlantic seaboard of Europe assumed central importance for readers of contemporary literature in Ireland, Britain and the USA. In the years around 1999 a succession of prestigious collected or selected editions of Irish poets appeared, along with substantial and internationally-read anthologies. The 1990s had begun with the publication of the monumental *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, and its three volumes represented over a thousand years of writing in Latin, Irish and English. The anthology had its detractors, particularly those who felt it laid too much emphasis on the politics of Irish literature, or those who felt that it downplayed writing by Irish women. The literary history of the 1990s, though, tells of a renaissance of women's writing, for the stage and in fiction, as well as by poets. By 2000, an influential US-published anthology, *The Wake Forest Book of Irish Women's Poetry* portrayed a wide-ranging and diverse canon of writing. In 2002, two further volumes of the *Field Day* anthology appeared, a massive act of collaborative scholarship dedicated to the women's tradition in Irish writing.

Significant collections of Irish poetry, by men and women, in English and Irish, were also published by English, American and Irish presses throughout the 1990s. In 1999 the Irish-based Gallery Press published Derek Mahon's *Collected Poems*, and further substantial collections appeared from Richard Murphy and Pearse Hutchinson in 2000 and 2002. The British publishers Faber and Faber, and the American press Farrar Straus and Giroux, had long supported Irish poetry, and they published Seamus Heaney's *Opened Ground: Poems 1966–1996* in 1998. In 2001, Paul Muldoon's *Collected Poems, 1968–1998* also gathered together thirty prolific years of writing. Thomas Kinsella produced his second collected volume within ten years, from the British press Carcanet in 2001. Carcanet published Eavan Boland's *Collected Poems* in 1995, and she was also published by Norton in the United States. The work of Irish language poets, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill and Cathal Ó Searcaigh, appeared in handsome collaborative volumes, translated by leading Irish poets of the day. Irish poetry readings filled auditoria, with Ní Dhomhnaill, Brendan Kennelly and Paul Durcan popular performers of their poems and satiric commentators on the public realm. Durcan's 1999 volume, *Greetings from our Friends in Brazil* contained a long elegy written for the twenty-nine people who had died in the Omagh bombing of the previous year, but it also contained poems about the years in which Mary Robinson had been the first woman President of Ireland. Supporter of the arts, dedicatee of volumes by Durcan and Boland, she was one of the great liberalising influences on a changing Ireland. She was later to serve as a United Nations High Commissioner.

However, the investigations begun in 1999 by the Flood Tribunal in the Republic of Ireland, were the most prominent reminder of the corruption that had long attended southern Irish public life. Neither was optimism encouraged by the atrocity at Omagh nor the difficulties that the new Northern Ireland Assembly experienced in its early meetings. Nonetheless, constitutional and social change had come. In Northern Ireland, the devolved powers granted to the Northern Ireland Assembly matched those the Labour government of the United Kingdom had granted to similar assemblies in Scotland and Wales. From the 1980s onwards, not only politicians, but also historians, novelists, poets, critics and journalists, had shared new ways of thinking about the culture and history of Ireland, in relation to Britain, Europe and beyond. This being Ireland, controversy attended every part of this new thinking, but it centred around assumptions about its history as a colonised and now postcolonial country, and of the challenge of its new status as an important part of the European Union in a global market. There was still the continuing fact of the partition of the island, and other divisions existed, social and economic as well as sectarian and political. But these began to take new forms.

Emigration, for instance, has long been a fact of Irish life, and much Irish writing still took place outside Ireland. The enormous popular success of Irish-American writer Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* (1996) perpetuated the view that exile was the only antidote to poverty, repression and endless rain. But in a shrinking world, the poetry still told of the sense of place, voice and community, even from displaced locations. The poets Matthew Sweeney and Bernard O'Donoghue wrote Irish verse from London or Oxford. Eamon Grennan pursued a successful critical and poetic career in the USA. A younger poet like Justin Quinn could move to Prague and still co-edit the influential magazine of the younger Irish poets, *Metre*, exploring connections between the Irish experience and the no-less historic changes of the Eastern Europe of the 1990s.

Exile and change, however, did engage the Irish poet and his or her characteristic mode of elegy, still preoccupied with the sense that change may also mean loss, the loss of the traditions and certainties of a recognisable national identity. As the Irish poem was written in a world facing environmental as well as economic and social change, so it adapted its traditional concerns with elegy or nature, to these new conditions. Paul Muldoon's 1994 volume *The Annals of Chile* was written from the United States, and contained two great elegies, 'Incantata' for a former lover, and 'Yarrow' for his mother. They are concerned with the failing of the human body and the eradication of the rural past. Both poems end, grief-stricken and barely articulate before the facts of death from cancer, as they also watch a fast-disappearing pastoral world, in which even the singing birds – corncrake, bittern – face extinction.

The paradox may be that such writing about loss – personal, environmental or social – can come together in work such as Muldoon's, major poetry written with confidence for an increasingly international audience. That sense of its own confidence meant that Irish poetry could pursue its assimilation not just of the English, American or Irish language traditions, but also various world literatures, Eastern European, Hispanic, Modern Greek. Seemingly assured of modern classic status, in the 1990s Irish poetry also sounded an older classical note. As the poets tiptoed through the possible peace of the 1990s and into the twenty-first century, Michael Longley, Seamus Heaney, Eavan Boland and Muldoon all turned to the eclogue or the pastoral elegy. The models were Homeric or Virgilian, and their recurrent note was of exhaustion after war. Written from an old world, they faced the unknown world of the future in poems of homecoming or retreat. But they knew that peace was the first pre-requisite. In his sonnet 'Ceasefire', first published in 1994, Longley re-imagines a conversation from the Trojan wars, between Achilles and Priam. It reminds its reader of the difficulty of a necessary forgiveness, as it is allowed to conclude with the full rhyme of the concluding couplet of the English sonnet: 'I get down on my knees and do what must be done / And kiss Achilles' hand, the killer of my son'.[2]

II

Fifty years previously, around 1949, such confidence was hard to find. In the cinema, popular perceptions of Irish culture and politics veered between those in the English film-maker Carol Reed's dark tale of a wounded gunman on the run in Belfast in his 1947 *Odd Man Out* and the Irish-American director John Ford's piece of 1952 west-of-Ireland paddywhackery, *The Quiet Man*. Yet in 1949, Ireland had made a constitutional assertion of its independence. On a state visit to Canada the previous September, the Irish Taoiseach (Prime Minister), John Aloysius Costello, announced that he was going to declare Ireland a Republic. Since 1921, twenty-six of the thirty-two counties of the island of Ireland had been self-governing while remaining within what was left of the British Empire, the Commonwealth. In 1937, the previous Taoiseach, Eamon de Valera, had framed a Constitution for the new state which allowed it effective independence from Britain. The aim was to further the establishment of the institutions of an Ireland which was rural in population, agricultural in economy, Roman Catholic in religion and Gaelic in culture. Irish was to join English as the official dual language of the state. Ireland also sought to be non-aligned in foreign allegiance. Neutrality was to follow through the 1939–45 'Emergency', as the Irish referred to the period of war in which much of the rest of the world was to participate. The further break-up of the British Empire followed the war, with the British granting independence to India, Pakistan, Ceylon and Burma, and the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 on former British territories in Palestine. In 1949, Ireland and India declared themselves Republics. Unlike India, Ireland also left the Commonwealth.[3]

Surely now, Ireland was free and confident, self-sufficient in politics and culture? Given that it had secured its independent status, could it not also continue to contribute to the growing artistic culture of international modernity for which its writers had been so important? In the early years of the century, the establishment of the Irish Literary Theatre had proved a significant example to national theatrical movements across the world. In 1922, James Joyce had published a novel set entirely in one day in Dublin, *Ulysses*, from which world fiction has yet to recover. In 1923, William Butler Yeats won the Nobel Prize for Literature, and in 1925, George Bernard Shaw was to receive the same accolade. All of these achievements had been gained in writing in the English language, a language which the Irish had used to establish a powerful national culture with an international readership. However, Yeats and Joyce died in 1939 and 1941 respectively. Joyce had lived across Europe, and Shaw had lived in London. The writer who was to be Ireland's next Nobel Laureate (1969), Samuel Beckett, had left the safety of Dublin to return to Paris in 1940, deciding that it was better to lend resistance to the occupied French during the war than maintain the neutrality that his Irish citizenship gave him. 'You simply couldn't stand by with your arms folded',[4] Beckett later said, in marked distinction from the policy of the Irish government. After the war, he decided to write in French.

Politically, the April 1949 declaration of the Republic of Ireland was followed in June of that year by a reminder of one reason why the constitutional future of the new Republic might not be entirely settled. The recently-elected British Labour government retaliated with the Ireland Act, confirming the status of the six counties of Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom as long as a majority within that state voted to remain British. While it was to benefit greatly from the post-war health and educational reforms of the nascent British Welfare State, the culture and government of Northern Ireland was still remarkably conservative. The example of the poets Louis MacNeice and John Hewitt was to be important for a later generation of Ulster writers, but it was received with ambivalence in mid-century Ulster. The son of a Church of Ireland bishop, MacNeice was educated at an English public school and at Oxford, and had lived through, and participated in, the highly politicised movements of British 1930s writing. He was closely involved with a leftwing set that included W.H. Auden and the Soviet spy Anthony Blunt. While MacNeice was ambivalent to the politic commitment of his friends, he had directed a diatribe towards Ireland in the sixteenth section of his 1939 *Autumn Journal*. It contained a swingeing attack on factionalised Ulster and Irish politics. 'Kathaleen Ni Houlihan!' MacNeice had exclaimed, 'Why must a country, like a ship or a car, be always female / Mother or sweetheart?' 'Yet we love her forever and hate our neighbour', he continued, 'And each one in his will / Binds his heirs to continuance of hatred'.[5] While MacNeice worked for the BBC in London for most of his life, Ireland exercised a strong pull even on this self-consciously deracinated intellectual. He was to write his best poetry just before he died in the early 1960s, but this uncertainty of identity – an Ulster protestant Irish poet writing at the heart of the English Establishment – and the uneven quality of his work in the late 1940s and 1950s, meant that his influence was not as great then as it has become for those, like Derek Mahon or Michael Longley, who have paid tribute to his sceptical intelligence.

Hewitt was an Ulster Protestant of Scottish descent, and his work emphasised regional identities within the United Kingdom. He could still describe himself, though, in the title of a 1945 poem, as 'Once Alien Here'. The poet movingly sought to speak with an 'easy voice', while aware that his British or southern neighbours possessed 'the graver English, lyric Irish tongue'.[6] A socialist in a state run by a Unionist party still dominated by the landed interest, his career as a museum curator was balked and in 1957 he had to leave for a job in Coventry, in England. There he helped in the cultural rebuilding of a city destroyed by war. It would take a particularly unusual imagination to find succour in the climate of the unreconstructed Belfast Hewitt left behind, like that of the English poet Philip Larkin, who travelled the other way. Coventry-born, he arrived to a job in Belfast in 1950. Belfast taught him, in the title of one of his poems, 'The Importance of Elsewhere' (1955). His strangeness in that part of the United Kingdom kept him 'in touch' with his characteristic sense of social 'difference'.[7]

As Ireland faced the second half of the twentieth century the poetic mood was one of estrangement, division, cynicism and aftermath. The best writing continued to take place in exile, and both parts of Ireland appeared to be turning their backs on the great changes which were about to beset a post-war world. In the South, the poets were, in the main, dissenting voices. With a few exceptions – Beckett's friends the poet and curator Thomas McGreevy and the diplomat-poet Denis Devlin, or the Irish-language poet Máirtín Ó Direáin – they were attuned neither to world movements in modern art nor the isolationist project of the new Republic. The farmer-poet Patrick Kavanagh's 1942 *The Great Hunger* had shown the pastoral ideal of the new nation suffering from spiritual and sexual famine. Alluding in his title to the potato famine of a century previously, in which a million Irish had died and after which many more had emigrated, Kavanagh had presented the actualities of toil and cultural repression in a rural world in which the future might only be viewed with cynicism and despair. His elders and contemporaries, the poets Austin Clarke, Padraic Fallon or Sean Ó' Ríordaín, the novelists and story-writers, Flann O'Brien, Seán O'Faoilain and Frank O'Connor, and the playwright Brendan Behan, made for a conspicuously disaffected group when they could be conceived of as a group at all. Memoirs of late 1940s and 1950s Dublin, such as the poet Anthony Cronin's *Dead As Doornails*, tell of begrudgery and anti-modern inwardness in the environs of Dublin's Palace Bar.[8]

The great danger, according to Kavanagh, was a settling down into provincialism. While Hewitt emphasised regionalism, Kavanagh contrasted the provincial with the parochial, since the parish was the basis of 'all great civilisations . . . Greek Israelite, English'. An embrace of the parish would then enable Irish poetry to return to international relevance, since, 'Parochialism is universal: it deals with the fundamentals'.[9] A signal moment thus occurs in the sonnet 'Epic' (1951), where he compares a dispute over a field boundary to the 1938 Hitler-Chamberlain agreement over Czechoslovakia. 'Which / Was more important?' he asks, and is answered by the ghost of Homer: 'I made the Iliad from such / A local row. Gods make their own importance'.[10] Epic may be made out of the 'local row' of a parochial poetry and politics, and Kavanagh shows it gaining expression in the small-scale sonnet form. The poet Eavan Boland recalls meeting with the older Kavanagh in the 1960s. She remembers that for all of her distinctness from him, not least that of gender, she found in work such as this 'an example of dissidence . . . someone who had used the occasion of his life to rebuff the expectations and preconceptions of the Irish poem'.[11]

Emphasising the small-scale and the parochial as he did, and then turning to satirise the provincial culture around him, Kavanagh's example was to be great for the generation that began to publish in the years following his death in 1967. Just as pastoral or anti-pastoral had given way to satire in Kavanagh's post-1949 work, so even established poets like Austin Clarke felt bound to mark their distinctness from the burgeoning institutions of the new Republic. Under the influence of the Catholic Church, censorship had been prolific throughout the period of the Free State, and even the spiritually-inclined came to find themselves satirically removed from the growing cultural and sexual repression of Church and State. Kavanagh's great hunger had been in one sense that of frustrated male sexual desire. Padraic Fallon's love poems from this period, too, tell of the fantasies of the Irishman. Fallon's goddesses, nuns or whores are placed in modern surroundings, influenced by Freud or anthropology. As in the poem 'Women', however, they still remain uncertain of how to move beyond an imagery inherited from Yeats:

> But a woman is a lie
> And I have a tower to climb, the tower of me,
> And a quarrel to settle with the sky
> But 'rest' says the woman. 'O lean back more:
> I am a wife and a mother's knee,
> I am the end of every tower.'[12]

There is ambivalence here: the poem either rejects Yeatsian self-sufficiency in the embrace of domesticity and marriage or it reiterates the auto-erotic's ultimate fantasy. But it does tell of an adaptation of the Irish poem to changing conceptions of sexuality, no matter how awkwardly male that new form initially was.

In 'The Siege of Mullingar, 1963', a poet of the next generation, John Montague, viewed with delight the frank sexuality of the youth at that year's Fleadh Cheoil (music festival). The poem's refrain parodies Yeats, before taking a dig at his dissident elders (his emphasis): '*Puritan Ireland's dead and gone / A myth of O'Connor and O'Faolain*'.[13] Maybe the conflation of political and personal dissidence with the sexual repression of Church and State was passing, but one important poem remained to be published from these dry years, Clarke's 1966 *Mnemosyne Lay in the Dust*. His long career had suffered in conditions of personal breakdown, religious crisis and political trauma, and the attention that his early work gave to instilling the rhythms of Irish-language poetry within the English poem had given way in the 1950s to satire and frequent polemic. Clarke's breakdown occurred in 1919, a year of revolutionary insurgence, and the poem tells of personal crisis against a background of initial political upheaval and liberation, written through conditions of reaction and repression. The poem of alienation and recovery was not to appear until the year of the celebrations of the fiftieth anniversary of the 1916 Easter Rising.

One of those executed after that rising, the poet and critic Thomas MacDonagh, had taught Clarke much at University College Dublin. But Clarke's later style was to show ambivalence towards what MacDonagh called the 'the Irish Mode', the mixing of the accents of Irish language poetry with the metric of the English poem. In these revisionary conditions, though, the Irish language poem continued to thrive. The leader of the Rising, after all, was an Irish language poet, Padraic Pearse. The Irish poetry of the 1950s is marked by innovation and an openness to experiment that is rare in the corresponding English-language poem. Seán Ó Ríordáin, Máirtín Ó Direáin and Máire Mhac an tSaoi produced poetry influenced by American and English modernist models. Ó Ríordáin's 1952 *Eireaball Spideoige* introduced a poet influenced alike by James Joyce and the Catholic theology with which Joyce quarrelled for so long. The poet Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill has complained that accounts of Irish poetry around mid-century ignore these poets.[14] Yet the audience that spoke and read Irish was small and dwindling. An Aran Islands writer like Ó Direáin knew that the western rural areas in which Irish survived was suffering waves of emigration which rivalled those of the nineteenth century.

The new beginning of 1949 was not matched with a new beginning in Irish culture. In the two decades that followed, the continuing partition of the island, the conservative political majorities associated with the dominance of non-conformist Protestantism in the North and Roman Catholicism in the South, and the struggle between that conservatism and attempts to modernise the Irish economy, seemed to be returning Ireland to a provincial backwater, unnoticed by the world. Yet as Montague's 'Siege of Mullingar' suggests, even this Ireland couldn't ignore the 1960s. The growing affluence of western economies did not leave Ireland alone. And the struggles for Civil Rights in the American South and the student risings of 1968 in the US and France were not unnoticed by the Irish of 1969.

III

After a decade of economic modernisation, the Ireland of the late 1960s was lambasted by Thomas Kinsella, in his long modernist poem *Nightwalker* (1967). Kinsella had served in the office of T.K. Whitaker, the Irish Secretary for Finance. Working with the Taoiseach, Sean Lemass, Whitaker suggested that one reason for Ireland's economic problems was the country's isolationist approach to economic, and by association foreign, policy. He recommended that the Irish economy expand, and that it open itself up to increased foreign investment. Kinsella, for one, saw danger in what such changes might mean for an Ireland which had recently left the Commonwealth but would soon exchange it for the Common Market (in 1972, the Republic voted to join the European Economic Community). In *Nightwalker*, the disillusioned civil servant Kinsella described an Ireland suffering from the odd mix of residual Republicanism, Catholic conservatism and a freed entrepreneurial business class, sponsored by a new class of politician, often less than scrupulous in its dealings. Rather than be faced with a statue of liberty, say, or even Kathaleen Ni Houlihan at the mouth of Dublin harbour, the Irish are greeted by another female allegorical figure, 'Robed in spattered iron . . . Productive Investment'. She asks of the nation that would treat with her: 'Lend me your wealth, your cunning and your drive, / Your arrogant refuse'.[15] Kinsella is ambiguous on the subject of the dissenting poet: whether this means that the arrogant who refuse are mere refuse, rubbish, to Productive Investment, or whether Ireland's refuse be allowed the arrogance of a wasteful modern economy is not clear. What is clear is the poem's turn to elegy for the loss of the Gaelic culture which was supposedly supported in the constitution of the greedily modernising state. The third section ends with Irish silent across irrecoverable time: 'A dying language echoes / across a century's silence'.[16]

Kinsella's concerns in *Nightwalker* were primarily with the South, with language, and the unaccommodated self of the modern poet. They were not, explicitly at least, with the unsettled 'national question' of how to accommodate a divided island. But events in Northern Ireland were soon to affect the whole island, and the United Kingdom as well. In January 1967, the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association had been formed, pledged to restore the equal electoral representation of Catholic and Protestant, primarily within the increasingly segregated and ghettoised cities of Northern Ireland. Poet and critic Seamus Deane's 1996 memoir-novel of the 1950s and 1960s, *Reading in the Dark* presents a grim picture of the poverty and repression suffered by working-class Catholics in the city in which he was born.[17] To its majority Catholic and nationalist population the city was called Derry. Its Unionist City Council – guaranteed a majority by electoral divisions which were engineered or 'gerrymandered' according to religion – insisted on its seventeenth century colonial title, Londonderry. Divided by class and religion, Northern Ireland was unable even to agree on the names of places. For the Civil Rights protestors, Northern Ireland was like the southern US states, a divided part of a supposedly liberal modern democracy.

The initial years of protest for civil rights were non-violent, but the ruling Unionist party was slow to grant the legitimacy of the claims of the minority. After all, they could point to the religious intolerance and corruption of the new Ireland south of the Border as a warning against conceding too much to those who wished to rejoin their co-religionists. A subsequent escalation of violence followed, through rioting and the heavy-handed response of the police. In August 1969, increasing civil disorder meant the arrival of British troops on to the streets of Derry and Belfast. By November 1969, eventual electoral reform righted the civil wrongs which had led to this state of affairs. Instead of peace and political settlement, however, the violence was to get worse. The Irish Republican Army (IRA) was conspicuously absent from these early 'troubles', but the actions of armed police and troops quickly led to increased support. In January 1970, the Provisional IRA was born, committed to an 'armed struggle' in the cause of the expulsion of the British and the reunification of Ireland. In 1969, eighteen people died in political violence in Northern Ireland, ten of them killed by the army or police. But only three years later, in 1972, the worst year of the troubles, 496 were to die, 234 killed by the IRA. Political terror became an everyday occurrence in Northern Ireland, and in April 1972 the British suspended the Northern Irish parliament and assumed Direct Rule.

It is tempting to find consolation for historical trauma in imaginative renaissance. Coincident with the upsurge of political violence in Ireland around 1969 was the extraordinary increase in the volume and quality of Irish poetry. However, while historical events may have provided the conditions in which this poetry was written, they cannot entirely account for its causes.[18] Landmark collections from both North and South appeared at the end of the 1960s and early 1970s. Kinsella's *Nightwalker* volume contained his great poem of illness and rebirth 'Phoenix Park', and paved the way for the experimental poetry of his subsequent career. Richard Murphy had also viewed the divisions of Irish history in his inventive long sequence of 1968, *The Battle of Aughrim*. The poem mixed lyric, epic, ballad and history in an account of the final defeat of Gaelic Ireland in 1691, and the subsequent flight of the Wild Geese. The internationalist, anti-clerical and libertarian poems in Pearse Hutchinson's 1969 *Expansions* would have been recognised across much of the more peacefully dissenting late 1960s Europe and America. Imaginative and political energies were released in many countries across the world, liberalised by pop music, cinema and a briefly-politicised youth culture, and Ireland shared in this great upsurge of creativity.

Poetic energy did not come only from the powerful subject matter that local events now suggested. The 1960s had seen the development of a newly thriving poetry scene in Belfast, famously gathering around the poet and critic Philip Hobsbaum. A product of the universities of Cambridge (F.R. Leavis) and Sheffield (William Empson), and friend of English poets Ted Hughes and Peter Redgrove, Hobsbaum had arrived to teach in Queen's University Belfast in 1963. He subsequently established a writer's seminar, 'The Group', and was to find that young talent of the calibre of Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley or James Simmons joined in its famously combative discussions. In 1966, Heaney's first book, *Death of a Naturalist*, appeared from the English publishers Faber and Faber. Rural in subject matter, romantic in outlook, highly formal in execution, the book showed the influence of Kavanagh, Gerard Manley Hopkins and Robert Frost. It was already demonstrating the range of this new poetry in its appeal to Irish, English and American literary traditions. Simmons founded a poetry journal, *The Honest Ulsterman* in 1968, and in the same year Oxford University Press published Derek

Mahon's *Night Crossing*. Longley's *No Continuing City* was to come out from Macmillan in 1969. The poets were talking, performing and publishing well before the outbreak of violence in 1969.

Derek Mahon had maintained his distance from the Hobsbaum coterie, allowing the influence of French literature and Samuel Beckett to develop his characteristic tone of social and philosophical estrangement. But very early after the events of 1969, he made one of the most telling statements about these poets' relation to the history unfolding around them. In a piece from 1970 called 'Poetry in Northern Ireland', Mahon was careful to distinguish between the traditions of Protestant poets like himself, Longley and Simmons and those of the Catholic poets, Heaney and John Montague. The voices of the latter could remain 'true to the ancient intonations' of Ireland. They could thus 'assimilate to the traditional aesthetics which are their birthright some of (to risk pretentiousness) the cultural fragmentation of our time'. Speaking of Longley and Simmons, but implicitly about himself, Mahon makes the contrast: 'ironic heirs of a threadbare colonialism, [they] have as their birthright that very fragmentation'. The difference may seem small, but it relates not only to the greater cultural fragmentation of modernity, but the smaller-scale local rows of Irish religion and politics.

Mahon ends with a vision of the function of poetry within these competing local and international fragmentations:

> Battles have been lost, but a war remains to be won. The war I mean is not, of course, between Protestant and Catholic but between the fluidity of a possible life (poetry is a great lubricant) and the *rigor mortis* of archaic postures, political and cultural. The poets themselves have taken no part in political events, but they have contributed to that possible life, or to the possibility of that possible life; for the act of writing is itself political in the fullest sense. A good poem is a paradigm of good politics – of people talking to each other, with honest subtlety, at a profound level. It is a light to lighten the darkness; and we have had darkness enough, God knows, for a long time.[19]

The darkness was to continue for nearly three decades, but Mahon's lubricant, his good poem which is the paradigm of good politics, focused the debate on the political responsibilities of the poet in the violent decades ahead.

The poets did feel a need to respond, touched as many were by atrocity. How, then, can we learn from the way the Irish poem treated these events? Writing in 1999 about the Belfast artist David Crone, Michael Longley says that Crone's attitude to the Troubles in his work is that of 'the Ulster poets . . . an oblique approach'. Crone, he says, 'prefers us to view his concerned expression out of the corner of his eye'.[20] Taking its title from a poem of Mahon, Frank Ormsby's anthology of poetry about the Troubles, *A Rage for Order*, contains oblique and direct treatments of the history and politics of the period. One event, though, in January 1972, when British soldiers shot dead thirteen civil rights protesters on 'Bloody Sunday', produced expressions which were varied in their approach to the obliqueness and concern appropriate for the poem in the circumstances. Ormsby gives a small selection of Bloody Sunday poems, by poets North and South: Thomas McCarthy, Seamus Deane and Seamus Heaney.[21] The responses range from invective to elegy. Heaney also wrote ballad verses on the subject and sent them to Luke Kelly of The Dubliners folk group to sing. Kelly never took up the offer, and Heaney waited twenty-five years before he consented to the publication of the ballad in a 1997 commemorative issue of the *Derry Journal*.[22] The ballad, 'The Road to Derry', courts what is rare for Heaney, the risk of direct rather than oblique political comment: 'And in the dirt lay justice like an acorn in the winter / Till its oak would sprout in Derry where the thirteen men lay dead'.

The ballad measure was also adopted by Thomas Kinsella, in what is the most outspoken of poetic responses to the event, his 1972 *Butchers Dozen*. Kinsella's anger was provoked by the findings of the official inquiry, the Widgery Report, in which the British Lord Chief Justice exonerated those responsible for the killing. Like Heaney's ballad, it recounts a visit to the city:

> I went with Anger at my heel
> Through Bogside of the bitter zeal
> –Jesus pity! – on a day
> Of cold and drizzle and decay.

Mixing testimony from the ghosts of the dead in the manner of an eighteenth century Irish vision poem, or *aisling*, *Butcher's Dozen* reaches for the tone of *saeva indignatio* of the satirising classical poet, a bitterness which is quite deliberately removed from Mahon's 'people talking to each other, with honest subtlety, at a profound level'.

It is a poet of the succeeding generation to these poets, Paul Muldoon, who brings together these seemingly conflicting tonal approaches to the fact of atrocity in a heightened political climate. Muldoon's 1973 debut *New Weather* ended with a long poem which he subsequently said was a 'direct response' to Bloody Sunday, 'The Year of the Sloes, for Ishi'.[23] The poem tells of the last member of a tribe of Californian Indians. His death will mean the eventual extinction of his people, in conditions that imply genocide. The conceit of the conclusion to the poem is chilling, as it envisages the dead lying side by side across the land:

> I realised that if his brothers
> Could be persuaded to lie still,
> One beside the other
> Right across the Great Plains,
> Then perhaps something of this original
> Beauty would be retained.[24]

This is not just a play with the picturesque, or the chill of seeking to make aesthetic the facts of atrocity or death through the recreation of 'original / Beauty'. Muldoon's environmentalism also grieves the loss to nature of the tribes who subsisted across the Great Plains, those who were for centuries its indigenous people. But in its evocation of a story of colonialism and the destruction of a natural and social order, 'The Year of the Sloes' brings itself obliquely back to the matter of the Ireland from which it was written in 1972. Its politics may indeed appear to be a direct response, given the narrative of genocide that they tell in the context of the bloody events of January 1972. It is the form, though, which expresses elegiac concern out of the corner of its eye: the poet doesn't so much take sides as construct colonialism and atrocity in allegorical or parabolic terms, as Emily Dickinson might say, telling the truth slant.

It would be a mistake to think that all Irish poems from this period were preoccupied with violence or atrocity. While elegy might be a characteristic mode of Irish poetry, it is one which can be private as well as public. The still-dominant Irish pastoral or even anti-pastoral mode showed an Irish culture still substantially agricultural in economy and rural in preoccupation, continuously engaged with the natural and the environment. Formally too, Irish poetry sought to find its shape in both of the languages of Ireland, aware that it was written from within a dual or divided linguistic tradition. After the innovations of Murphy's narrative of the defeat of Gaelic Ireland in *The Battle of Aughrim*, Irish poets played with a mixing of genres and language. Kinsella conflated his *Butchers Dozen* with elegies for John F. Kennedy and the Irish composer Seán O Riada, thus linking the historical and the personal. The year 1969 had seen the publication of his great translation of Irish myth, the Cúchulainn cycle of *The Táin*. Yet Kinsella's *New Poems* of 1973 returned to the matter of family and memory as he embraced the longer evolutionary histories of Darwin, while attending to myth read through the Jungian archetype.

The Táin appeared from Liam Miller's innovative Dolmen Press, with striking illustrations by Louis le Brocquy. Dolmen also published John

Montague's *The Rough Field* in 1972. The loss of Irish also haunts a number of its lyrics, which Montague had brought together from many of his poems of the 1960s. The new sequence of the poems then told of the history of the divided mid-Ulster townland from which Montague came, attending to Kavanagh's prescriptive parochialism. But it is the volume's innovative physical sense of itself which is most striking, influenced as it was by experiments with the concrete poem in the American modernist tradition, by Ezra Pound or Charles Olsen. The book's mixture of lyric, narrative and newspaper report was matched by its appearance with illustrations from sixteenth-century woodcuts, and the sequence was performed and recorded with the musicians who were later to become The Chieftains.

Montague's sequence brought together pastoral concern and modernist invention, but it was still ambivalent in its grief for the loss of the continuity of tradition and in its concern for what Mahon terms the 'cultural fragmentation' of the new. In the words of poet and critic Dennis O'Driscoll, speaking about the international significance of Montague's 'global regionalism', 'The global village casts light on the deserted village'.[25] A similar engagement with the politics of pastoral – land, ownership and sovereignty – may have been inherent in this new global regionalism, but it also meant that Irish poets sought equivalences outside the violent confines of parish, province or nation. Seamus Heaney's *North* (1975) received the greatest international acclaim (and local controversy) in these years. Its inventiveness was parabolic or allegorical, seeking historic or archetypal equivalences across Northern Europe and in classical myth for seemingly unbearable local events. It ended, though, in an internal exile of a sort, with 'Exposure', written from County Wicklow in the Republic. As Heaney says in that poem, he had now 'escaped from the massacre'. Other poets were to follow.

IV

How was Irish poetry to change between the late 1960s and early 1970s and the last years of the twentieth century? The answer, in part, lies as much in the matter of the typical allegorical or parabolic approach to history in these poems, as in any sense of historical change. The objection initially came from those who had been cast as images in the allegories of the Irish tradition, and not as poets: 'An é go n-iompaíonn baineann fireann / Nuair a iompaíonn bean ina file?' (Is it that the feminine turns masculine / when a woman turns into a poet?) Seán'Ó Ríordáin had asked in 'Banfhile' ('Woman Poet'). 'Ní file ach filíocht an bhean.' (A woman is not a poet, but poetry.)[26] Montague's *Rough Field* and Heaney's *North* had both taken a common trope from the aisling poems of Irish literary tradition, that of the figure of the nation as a woman, sometimes beautiful, sometimes aged, frequently evanescent, usually violated. Then, through the 1980s and 1990s, the writing of Irish women poets such as Eavan Boland, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, Medbh McGuckian and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, began to engage in debate about their position as metaphor in the history of Irish poetry, and the whole question of the oblique approach implicit in metaphor itself. This, after all, was writing taking place after the other great changes wrought on literature in the late 1960s, and new thinking in feminism, psychoanalysis, linguistics or philosophy.

Boland was a major critical as well as poetic figure in this new turn of Irish poetry towards a critique of its traditionally-gendered forms. In the essay 'Outside History', in *Object Lessons* (1995), she discusses a ballad elegy by Francis Ledwidge for the executed leaders of the 1916 rising, which relates the keen of a 'Poor Old Woman' mourning the loss of her blackbirds. The poem revives old figures and forms as it faces a new political situation, adapting tradition for the purposes of sounding grief at the failure of a present insurgency. Boland fastens on the figure of the woman, who disappears out of the poem as soon as the meaning becomes clear:

> The woman, on the other hand, is a diagram. By the time the poem is over, she has become a dehumanized ornament. When her speaking part finishes, she goes out of the piece and out of our memory. At best she has been the engine of the action, a convenient frame for the proposition.[27]

The mourning nation is represented by a female figure in Ledwidge's poem which is merely one example of an Irish poetic tradition in which women appear as mere diagram or ornament. In Ó Ríordáin's terms, they are poetry not poet.

Boland's sequence 'Outside History' (1990) ends kneeling at a roadside beside the dead of the Troubles, bemoaning that she has come along 'Too late'. In the third poem in the sequence, 'The Making of an Irish Goddess', the myth of the sudden loss of the goddess of the harvest, Ceres, is used to represent the Famine, that great historical trauma of the nineteenth century to which Kavanagh had alluded in the title of his *Great Hunger*. The poet uses her own scarred menopausal body as an image for the infertility of the land and the scar in the national memory. She points to her concealment of 'the stitched, healed blemish of a scar' and says that it 'must be // an accurate inscription / of that agony' of Famine.[28] Moving all the way from her own body to the horrors of famine and cannibalism, Boland attempts to figure the national trauma through the metonym of her own Irish woman poet's bodily history. That 'must be' doubly reinforces the traditional figure, describing a reaching after significance ('ah, that must be it!') and an unavoidable necessity, as if there is nothing she can do to avoid the use of the body as an inscription for what it must be.

Generations of Irish poets after 1999 may not feel bound to this determination to represent the body of the nation. Certainly Boland's poem ends with a vision of her daughter, 'her back turned to me', and thus hopes for the future. For Irish, too, there is hope, although the Irish language poet Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill has found some horror in the responsibilities of her success. In '*Cailleach*'/'Hag' she dreams that she herself has become the Kerry landscape and consequently allows her typically whimsical reaction to this fantasy give way to horror, as she sees the dangers of binding her daughter to this tradition. Walking along a beach, she is surprised by the daughter's crying: ' "Cad tá ort?" "Ó, a Mhaim, táim sceimhlithe. / Tuigeadh dom go raibh na conic ag bogadaíl, / gur fathach mná a bhí ag luascadh a cíocha, / is go n-éireodh sí aniar agus mise d'íosfadh" '. (' "What's wrong?" "O, Mam, I'm scared stiff, / I thought I saw the mountains heaving / like a giantess, with her breasts swaying, / about to loom over, and gobble me up" '.)[29] This is a gothic note, in which the fantasy figure becomes real, terrifying those who might object to the continuance of such repression. But Ní Dhomhnaill's poetry is also a welcome reminder to the reader that sometimes visions of women in Irish poems may not inevitably be symbolic of the national fantasy. Irish love poetry has its earthy, material tradition too.

Younger Irish poets thus strive to express not only the nightmare of the dead generations but the need to get away from their deathly influence. This younger generation may be less than patient with the traditions of their parents. Caitríona O'Reilly's poem 'Fragment', in *The Nowhere Birds* (2001) takes the daughter's position and watches a mother suffering dreams of an animated land – and seascape. She views with dread the creatures from the past emerging from the sea of nightmare or memory.

> I see them, those obsessive dead –
> their watery features sea-blurred, merged, evasive.
> I hold my breath above her sinking head,
> dreading their opaque past and fossil histories,
> inky and indistinct as night water.[30]

The danger is of being dragged not into 'an accurate inscription' but the oblique allegorical tradition which prizes the 'merged' forms of the hybrid, or the 'evasive' positions of the colonised. For O'Reilly, like Boland's and Ní Dhomhnaill's daughters, the alternative to embracing the new thing that has happened is the continuation of the family nightmare.

As Ireland and the world contemplated the future of a new millennium, the 1990s brought a number of significant commemorations to a land still obsessed with memories of its violent past. These might have been of recent events (the 1997 25th anniversary of Bloody Sunday, for which Heaney had released his ballad), those earlier in the century (the 75th anniversary celebrations of the Easter Rising were notably muted), or those from a longer past (commemorations for the 150th anniversary of the Famine continued throughout the decade and 1998 brought celebrations for the bicentenary of the Rising of 1798.) In millennial circumstances, though, memory might have given way to thoughts about the future, and thoughts about the role that poetry might play in its shaping.

In 1998, Ciaran Carson gave his version of the Irish tradition of imagining lands beyond the known. These places might only exist in an impossible time, the *Twelfth of Never*, to adapt the title of his sonnet sequence. Nonetheless, they are the lands that poetry might be within its responsibilities to imagine. In the sestet of 'Tib's Eve', he says,

> This is the land of the green rose and the lion lily,
> Ruled by Zeno's eternal tortoises and hares,
> Where everything is metaphor and simile:
>
> Somnambulists, we stumble through this paradise
> From time to time, like words repeated in our prayers,
> Or storytellers who convince themselves that truths are lies.[31]

From the reminder of more than three hundred years celebrating the Battle of the Boyne every Twelfth of July, through Zeno's paradox of the immeasurable instant at which one object overtakes another, to the paradox of a time outside time, the twelfth of never, Carson imagines an allegorical place which exists in metaphor and simile and cannot distinguish between truth and lie. This is one virtual world of poetry and even if it may never have existed, it is a place where Irish poems and their readers in a new century must figure out their responsibilities. As seen in Carson and the other poets discussed in this book, the means of figuring out an approach both to history and a changing contemporary society has led to a writing which is by turns oblique, metaphoric, allegorical and opaque. The reader of such poetry must recognise metaphor and simile but not make the Platonic mistake that in fictional worlds truths might as well be lies.

NOTES

1 Seamus Heaney, *The Cure at Troy* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), pp. 77–8.
2 Michael Longley, 'Ceasefire', in *The Ghost Orchid* (London: Cape, 1995), p. 39.

3 For further historical background on these and other events related here, see Terence Brown, *Ireland: a Social and Cultural History*, 1922–1985 2nd edn. (London: Fontana, 1985); R.F. Foster, *Modern Ireland, 1600–1972* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1989); J.J. Lee, *Ireland, 1912–1985: Politics and Society* (Cambridge University Press, 1989).

4 Samuel Beckett to Alec Reid, quoted in James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), pp. 304 and 763.

5 Louis MacNeice, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), p. 132.

6 John Hewitt, 'Once Alien Here' in *The Collected Poems of John Hewitt* ed. Frank Ormsby (Belfast: Blackstaff, 1991), p. 20.

7 Philip Larkin, *Collected Poems*, ed. Anthony Thwaite (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), p. 104.

8 Anthony Cronin, *Dead as Doornails: Bohemian Dublin in the Fifties and Sixties* (Oxford University Press, 1976).

9 Patrick Kavanagh, 'The Parish and the Universe', *Collected Pruse* (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1967), pp. 282–3.

10 Patrick Kavanagh, *Collected Poems* (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1964), p. 136.

11 Eavan Boland, *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet in Our Time* (Manchester: Carcanet), pp. 99–100.

12 Padraic Fallon, *Collected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1990), p. 71.

13 John Montague, *Selected Poems* (Winston Salem: Wake Forest University Press, 1982), p. 62. The allusion is to Yeats's 'September 1913': 'Romantic Ireland's dead and gone / It's with O'Leary in the grave'.

14 See Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, 'Why I Choose to Write in Irish', *The New York Times Book Review*, January 8, 1995, p. 27.

15 Thomas Kinsella, *Collected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2001), p. 78.

16 Kinsella, *Collected Poems*, p. 82.

17 Seamus Deane, *Reading in the Dark* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1996).

18 I am adapting a remark from Louis MacNeice, in *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats* (1941) (London: Faber and Faber, 1967), p. 23: 'Critics often tend to write as if a condition were the same thing as a cause'.

19 Derek Mahon, 'Poetry in Northern Ireland', *Twentieth Century Studies* 4 (Nov. 1970), pp. 92–3.

20 Michael Longley, 'The Fire in the Window: A Response to the Paintings of David Crone', in *David Crone: Paintings 1963–1999*, ed. S.B. Kennedy (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1999), p. 7.

21 Frank Ormsby, ed., *A Rage for Order: Poetry of the Northern Ireland Troubles* (Belfast: Blackstaff, 1992), pp. 112–16. The poems are 'Counting the Dead on the Radio, 1972' (McCarthy), 'After Derry, 30 January 1972' (Deane), 'Casualty' (Heaney). See also the poem that leads in to this selection, Eamon Grennan's powerful 'Soul Music: The Derry Air.'

22 *Derry Journal* (Bloody Sunday Commemorative Issue, 1 Feb. 1997).

23 Muldoon is quoted by Clair Wills, in *Reading Paul Muldoon* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1998), p. 38.

24 Paul Muldoon, *New Weather*, 2nd edn. (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), p. 47.

25 Dennis O'Driscoll, 'Foreign Relations: Irish and International Poetry', *Troubled Thoughts, Majestic Dreams: Selected Prose Writings* (Loughcrew: Gallery, 2001), p. 84.

26 Seán Ó Ríordáin, 'Banfhile' ('Woman Poet'), *Tar Éis Mo Bháis*, p. 45.
27 Eavan Boland, 'Outside History' in *Object Lessons: The Life of the Poet and the Woman in Our Time* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1995), p. 143.
28 Eavan Boland, *Collected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1995), p. 151.
29 Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, *Pharaoh's Daughter* (Loughcrew: Gallery, 1990), pp. 134–5; trans. John Montague.
30 Caitriona O'Reilly, *The Nowhere Birds* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 2001), p. 12.
31 Carson, *The Twelfth of Never* (Loughcrew: Gallery, 1998), p. 13.

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