

“To flood, with vovelling embrace, /Demesnes staked out in consonants.” Aspects of Language in Contemporary Irish Poetry

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Irish poetry is among the most exciting bodies of writing in contemporary literature. Banal as this statement may be, the underlying idea of the why and wherefore of it is taken so much for granted that it rarely becomes a consideration in itself: that the language of most of contemporary Irish culture, and within that of literature, is English. The origin of this phenomenon opens colonial dimensions to the Irish context yet it also provides a warning at the same time of the problems of treating Ireland as a postcolonial place *par excellence*. Though the relation of England and Ireland is easily and justifiably seen in terms of coloniser and colonised, care must be taken when applying postcolonial approaches to the contemporary culture of the island, South and North alike, since Ireland does not demonstrate several of the typical features of formerly colonised lands due to the fact of its specific location on the same continent as the coloniser.

One salient aspect of colonial relations, and perhaps of their unique dimension in Ireland, is the question of the language, in this case of the English language. The long-standing antagonistic relation between Ireland and Britain has fostered a strange state of bilingualism in modern Ireland, both South and North. The imposition of the English language contributed to the decline of the Irish language yet it has to be noted that the Irish were in many cases more than willing to shed their old language for the advantages and conveniences of the new one (Kiberd 650) – as Sean De Fréine explains, the advance of English in the course of the 19th century was due to a “social self-generated movement of collective behaviour among the people themselves.” (quoted in Paulin 59)

The colonial pressure, however, is still not to be underestimated since the advance of the new language went together with an attempt at cultural homogenisation, aiming to deprive the Irish not only of their language but of their cultural heritage as well. One aspect of this project was the early nineteenth-century Ordnance Survey which renamed the Irish countryside either through translating the culturally loaded Irish place names into English ones, or through transliterating them to approximate the original pronunciation using an English

spelling. The underlying idea was that of linguistic as well as cultural dispossession as the renamed countryside would grow increasingly alien even for its native population. Despite colonial intentions Irish place names even in their ‘new’ form seek to preserve the past. Translated names, by virtue of translation itself, arrest something of the meaning of the original and though it may seem a reduction, it still contains a part of the heritage. Transliteration preserves another aspect, the pronunciation of the name – this may appear a very weak aspect yet the nature of language as sounds is not to be overlooked. Though fragmented and refracted, the cultural heritage shines through – and this may be mourned as well as celebrated: the loss is inevitable and this bears heavily on the consciousness of several poets yet the advantages of the English language are generally taken for granted.

Place names thus become emblematic of the general situation concerning the relation of the two languages, yet at the same time they are only one aspect of this. The Irish language may be cherished and mourned yet its decline is inevitable due to various historical factors several of which are still being felt. English may be imposed and alien yet it has become familiar to the degree of intimacy and has become the actual mother tongue of generations of Irish people, offering thus a wide enough audience even in the otherwise narrow Irish context. The language situation presents a dilemma with paralysing effects for the intellectual yet it is one that must be accepted as such since no solution exists for it.

Michael Hartnett’s short poem “Inchicore Haiku” masterfully sums up the dilemma of the contemporary Irish poet in relation to the question of the language. “My English dam bursts / and out stroll all my bastards. / Irish shakes its head.” (Hartnett 69) The antagonism of the two languages, their combat for the status of the language of poetry is given a special dimension by the history of Hartnett’s own poetic practice: a bilingual poet, he gave up his original activity of writing in English and turned exclusively towards Irish, just to be forced to recognise the futility of insisting on the latter language. As Declan Kiberd notes, Hartnett’s mission had the fruit that “he discovered that it may not be a question of a writer choosing a language, so much as a case of the language choosing to work out its characteristic genius through a writer.” (Kiberd 588) Though his English poems, and his Irish with them, may be considered “bastards,” and his Irish may justly shake its head, the march of the former cannot be stopped. The personal experience of the poet lends authority to the speaker, and the phraseology he opts for embodies the dilemma itself: both “bastards” and “stroll” reflect the frustrated but doubtless understanding of the relation of the two languages.

Matthew Sweeney’s “The Eagle” suggests a possible counter-current to the usual English versus Irish relation in the choice of language for writing. Against all the charges brought against the Irish language, the poem reverses the general approach to the language question: the father figure choosing to write in Irish because English would not do is an open attack on the belief that the native Irish cannot compete with English. The topic decides in favour of the old language and it is the very modernity of English which renders it inadequate for the context:

“the unexplained return / of the eagle to Donegal” (Sweeney 10) cannot be treated in a language which is “too modern” (ibid), which is “good for plane-crashes, for unemployment” (ibid). The description consists of the past and the present, involves the coining of a new word, and includes “folklore / and folk-prophecy.” (ibid) It does not venture to say anything about the future, yet the aim is not that either – celebration and the historical dimension are targeted: “The research is new / and dodgy, but the praise / is as old as the eagle.” (ibid)

The poem, however, is cunning at the same time, since it involves the possibility of its own subversion. The end of the poem domesticates the opening irony and only traces remain but those are certainly there. The choice of the father is a rare one, so is the occasion: the English language may be too modern yet what it is capable of covering, plane-crashes and unemployment, are in fact more frequent constituents of the present than such a miraculous event as the return of the eagle. The Irish language certainly has a past yet practical wisdom favours the English. It is also of interest that the father is the one making the choice, thus the older generation is allied with the old language, which is basically a declaration of the time relation of the two languages as well which would subvert the optimism of the possibility of using the Irish instead of the English.

John Montague’s poem “A Lost Tradition” epitomises not only the relation between physical location and history in the Irish context but the principal focus of the poem is the dismal fate of the Irish language. The persona’s contemplation of a landscape coming alive as “shards of a lost tradition” (Montague 33) quickly becomes a catalogue of items all described in the English language: his native Garvaghey becomes the Rough Field in the first step and the rest of the points of reference are also identified in the imposed language. The once historically-loaded landscape is slowly turning into something increasingly alien:

The whole landscape a manuscript
We had lost the skill to read,
A part of our past disinherited;
But fumbled, like a blind man,
Along the fingertips of instinct. (ibid)

The colonial heritage of linguistic dispossession, however, is balanced and corrected by a new development, that of state education: the Irish language is ‘revived’ as part of the school curriculum – at least on the level of the ideal(ogy). There is a fine grade of irony in the juxtaposition of the ‘old’ and the ‘new’ Irish:

The last Gaelic speaker in the parish
When I stammered my school Irish
One Sunday after mass, crinkled
A rusty litany of praise:
Tá an Ghaeilge againn arís... (ibid)

The naïve optimism of the Irish phrase, “We have the Irish again” (*ibid*), is upheld for another half line in the next stanza; then the picture is quickly changed for a historical account of the failure of the O’Neill rising, an event followed by the Flight of the Earls, seen as the real beginnings of English colonisation in Ireland (cf. Vance 17). The cunning yet definitely sad choice of the word “last” indicates the practical failure of the attempt of encouraged revival in the context of a language, providing a more disappointed conclusion than the word ‘revival’ suggests in itself.

“A Grafted Tongue” enlarges the context from place names to a full-scale view as it compresses several lifetimes into the space of a relatively short poem: it provides a close-up view of the suppression of the Irish language and its later artificial revival, thus it complements “A Lost Tradition.” Possession, dispossession and repossession follow each other in the life of succeeding generations with a repeated pattern: Irish children are forced to drop their native language and to speak English at school, losing contact slowly with their native culture – and the reverse of it is repeated later, though in a somewhat more moderate way, with the Irish becoming a school subject for Irish-born yet English-speaking children. The method of teaching English reflects the colonial relationship between Britain and Ireland as it is done with force, with each mistake severely punished by the master. The logic is clear: the Irish will become aliens in their own land, losing touch with their world and even with themselves as the “altered syllables / of your own name” (Montague 37) indicate. The process is seen as growing a second tongue, with all its implications:

To grow
a second tongue, as
harsh a humiliation
as twice to be born. (*ibid*)

This unnatural condition is the fate of the Irish until independence changes the situation:

Decades later
that child’s grandchild’s
speech stumbles over lost
syllables of an old order. (*ibid*)

The compulsory teaching of the Irish language to children born into the English language, however alien and imposed it may be, is also a way of growing a second tongue, and though the measures involved are less drastic, the resulting state of linguistic in-between-ness is similarly confusing. Syllables are

“lost,” learning is “stumbling,” the prospect of proficiency and repossession is accordingly dubious, which is a sad recognition yet an inescapable one too.

Seamus Heaney’s placename-poems illustrate one aspect of the operation of language in the specific context of Irish culture. The translated or anglicised names, in spite of the attempt of the coloniser, still preserve something of the native culture yet their partially alien nature liberates them for the acquisition of new meanings. As language lives in the speech of succeeding generations, the new associations take their place side by side with the old ones, leading to the formation of a rich and peculiar stock of meaning. Beyond this dimension the place names of Ireland also have the power of offering the sense of a “shared complicity” (Montague 44) for people of the same place: the unique sounds of a name are the common property of those who live there whatever community they happen to belong to yet these sounds remain alien and difficult for others. This idea can also incorporate a seed of hope as it cuts across the otherwise rigid sectarian divide by pointing out the common element beyond all division.

“Anahorish” is on one level the tracing of how the renamed country takes on new meaning for the linguistically dispossessed. The original Irish “Anach fhior uisce” (Parker 98) is partially preserved in the Anglicised version, though it is only the pronunciation which recalls the native. The tradition of the *dinnseanchas* is briefly recalled in the first line as the English meaning of the original Irish name is rendered as the “place of clear water” (Heaney 21), indicating the communal historical heritage of the name. The place then, however, is associated with childhood memories for the speaker and not with the ancient story preserved in the name, as a consequence of the renaming of the countryside. The name thus becomes “soft gradient / of consonant, vowel-meadow” (ibid), a sequence of sounds to be savoured and to take on a principally auditory dimension without the least indication of meaning apart from its reference to a physical location. The place in turn builds up its own associations and the “after-image of lamps / swung through the yards / on winter evenings” (ibid) is accommodated in an older cultural tradition as the “mound-dwellers” (ibid) are evoked.

The world that is lost through the renaming of the Irish countryside is slowly reclaimed as the new name comes to be possessed by the disinherited. The “first hill in the world” (ibid) exists before it is named and the child follows this sequence in his process of learning his world. The name is thus first associated with a place known from direct experience and its meaning is only recalled later, in translation from an obscure old language. In this form the name creates its own music, and when savoured and accepted it comes to be possessed by coming to life in the context of the old culture as well, acquiring meanings that link it with the previously lost world which is thus no longer beyond the reach of the disinherited and is therefore no longer lost.

“Broagh” is a placename-poem of a different kind. The lines of the poem bring together words of different origins – and these different origins emblematically

correspond to the general division in Northern Ireland: the title word is Gaelic, “rigs” is Scots and “docken” is Anglo-Saxon (Parker 99). These three strains then converge in the imaginative universe of the poem towards the concept of the “ford,” a manageable section of the riverbed where crossing is possible. The idea of crossing involves a specific meaning in the Northern context yet it is only on the tentative level of the poem that a common element is found: the word “Broagh” itself, with its last sound, “that last / *gh* the strangers found / difficult to manage.” (Heaney 25) That difficult guttural sound is endemic to the North, and the carefully articulated phrase of “the strangers” points towards a possible union beyond division, a point where division could become plurality with no hierarchy involved despite the historical sequence of the words in focus.

“A New Song” also harks back to place names through personal memories. The narrative experience is somewhat reminiscent of Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan,” a meeting with a girl from an exotic land, yet the exoticism of Heaney’s place derives not from physical distance but from a temporal dimension which is embodied by a place name. Derrygarve becomes “a lost potent musk” (Heaney 27) and the visual memory is immediately recollected – the river Moyola and its banks are recalled with a vividness that in turn evokes the “Vanished music, twilit water” (ibid) associated with the river. The river image presses the poem forward to the domain of language, with Heaney’s personal approach to the duality of Irish and English expressed in terms of vowels and consonants respectively (cf. Heaney quoted in Corcoran 85):

But now our river tongues must rise
From licking deep in native haunts
To flood, with vowelling embrace,
Demesnes staked out in consonants. (Heaney 27)

The normal course of overwriting, however, is somewhat revised in the account: the “vowelling embrace” will (if the prediction in “must” is accepted) reconfigure relations as the “Demesnes staked out in consonants” are redefined by that embrace. The fact that language is a combination of *both* vowels and consonants is not questioned, thus the language dilemma is addressed from a different angle, and Heaney finds an unusual, but promising, potential in the interaction of the two languages, understanding it as intertwining rather than conflict.

Paul Durcan’s “The Persian Gulf” arrests a more tragic aspect of the language situation in modern Ireland. The poem draws a haunting picture of a nightmarish vision of fire eating up the building in which the speaker is situated. The train of associations is launched by the sight of the skylight, the only “escape route in the event of fire” (Durcan 110). The speaker is engaged in the exotic act of reciting the “Rosary in Irish” (ibid) – exotic as the language is no less strange to him than foreign languages are. The mind of the speaker wanders off easily – he dreams of the Persian Gulf and tries “To imagine what the skylight would look like / On fire”

(*ibid*), without apparent success at first. Yet the enterprise yields satisfaction as the vision of their “three-storey house going up in flames” (*ibid*) carries the thread of the narration away. They clamber up to the roof, the fire brigade invades the neighbouring streets and the moment of being rescued nears – only to disappear in the wake of the reaction of the father. The fireman receives the Irish sentence “We don’t speak English” and then he disappears, taking the rescue team with him, leaving the refugees “to burn to death speaking Irish.” (Durcan 111) The surrealistic picture of the ruins of the house “floating upstream” (*ibid*) in the Persian Gulf concludes the poem and this image leaves the poem suspended in an exotic world.

The exotic practice of reciting the Rosary in Irish turns out to be a fatal luxury from the speaker’s perspective – the insistence of the father on a language virtually devoid of practical applicability is responsible for the family’s perishing. Though Durcan presents an experience in the form of a dream, the suggestions are easily decoded: a proud and defiant insistence on an outdated and impractical habit out of equally outdated and impractical hatred is not only absurd but outright destructive too.

In contrast to the general hostilities there is a rather peaceful reconciliation of two diverging traditions in Ciaran Carson’s “Second Language.” The poem does not make explicit any conflict between the two languages, though perhaps the greater force of English is demonstrated by its connection with writing, which in turn can also be seen as the second language referred to in the title. “Second Language” is an account of coming into the possession of a language, or rather, of acquiring another ‘native’ language after one is already in the possession of the speaker. The title imports autobiographical material into the poem by alluding to the fact that Carson himself was a native speaker of Irish before he acquired his English in the street, picking it up rather than learning it.

The poem opens with a surrealistic non-language system: the preverbal state is composed and constructed with the help of images and impressions of colours and shapes, and this state nearly blends into another, equally strange situation, that of an Irish-speaking child. In a weird way the possession of the Irish language seems to be linked with immersion in Latin, yet this does not work on the literal level; the exoticism of a no-longer spoken language opens figurative parallels with the Irish dimension. Urban, mainly industrial noises hang like a curtain in the background of this strange process, and once the speaker’s recollected self acquires a language, the experience becomes more encompassing, with objects now seen as “a hieroglyphic alphabet” (Carson 12). The ‘revolutionary’ change comes with a dawn: “I woke up, verbed and tensed with speaking English” (*ibid*). This moment opens yet other perspectives, “the as-yet morning, when no one’s abroad” (*ibid*), which is a particular time of day with the potential of vision as well as an unchartered territory for individual exploration. English also brings writing, and what this may bring is as yet unknown and unpredictable: “What comes next is next, as no one knows the *che sera* of it” (Carson 13). The future-might-bring-anything idea is cunningly checked by a shift back into past tense,

rendering the experience a dream in the last moment; however, it is at the same time the reinforcement of the narrative thread governing the poem: “I woke up blubbering and dumb with too much sleep. I rubbed my eyes and ears. / I closed my eyes again and flittingly, forgetfully, I glimpsed the noise of years.” (ibid)

Carson’s solution of bringing together the two languages into such a relationship is indicative of the historical perspective too as it proves the possibility of the coexistence of the two languages without loading this fact with stereotypical emotional content. Irish is still present yet the language of much of contemporary Irish culture is English, which is a fact to face: the English language has become as good as indigenous in Ireland at the expense of the native Irish which has not disappeared yet the attempts to revive it as the first language in the Republic after independence all seem to conclude in a palpable failure. This is the situation to be assessed by poets – their approach to the question of the language is thus marked by an acknowledgement of the decline of Irish, yet several recognise the survival of some form of it in the English spoken in Ireland. This recognition turns the language of contemporary Irish poetry into a potent medium, and as Heaney weaves his vision of the “vowelling embrace” around the “Demesnes staked out in consonants” (Heaney 27), the complementary sounds combine to create a genuinely Irish idiom which is simultaneously a variety of English, at once familiar and exotic.

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