

## Scattered and diverse: Irish poetry since 1990

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### I

In the introduction to *The Penguin Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry*, first published in 1990, editors Peter Fallon and Derek Mahon note that Irish poetry ‘speaks for itself in one or another of the many voices which have evolved over the years’<sup>1</sup> and this crucial acknowledgement in an important and popular anthology points clearly to the disparate, polyvocal and chimerical nature of a good deal of contemporary Irish poetry up to 1990 and beyond. Ranging from Cathal O’Searchaigh’s homoerotic odes to his gay lover to Paul Durcan’s laments over the crass materialism of contemporary Ireland, Irish poetry since 1990 has been clearly marked by the notable absence of a dominant voice and an eclectic, surprising and challenging *mélange* of subject matter. Light has been shone on almost every manifestation of contemporary Irish life by poets displaying, in Louis De Paor’s wonderful phrase, an ‘agitated intelligence’<sup>2</sup> in the wake of widespread social and economic changes. What can be said with some certainty is that contemporary poetry in the Republic is marked by a broad range of confident voices articulating a tentative recognition of the complex nature of major shifts in the traditional markers of Irish identity. In the North, a changing social and political landscape is equally reflected in the discontinuous narrative of the major poetic voices, including Ciaran Carson, Paul Muldoon and Medbh McGuckian, an uncertainty captured by Carson in ‘Belfast Confetti’ when his self-image reflects a national questioning: ‘My name? Where am I coming from? Where am I going? A / fusillade of question marks’.<sup>3</sup>

In the Republic, the economic boom of the 1990s continues unabated in the 2000s, heralding unparalleled prosperity, increased urbanisation and large-scale immigration, factors which place pressure on accepted models of a collective national perspective. Ironically, the very lack of a predominant school or voice places greater pressure on

critical reflections of the nature of contemporary Irish poetry in that the diffracted nature of poetic expression makes it resistant to categorisation. What can be said is that there are few, if any, areas of contemporary experience that lie beyond the scope of the poetic. This confidence in the future, and a tacit recognition of the resonance of the past, is summed up by Micheal O'Siadhail, one of the most accomplished and accessible poets to emerge in recent times:

Given riffs and breaks of our own,  
Given a globe of boundless jazz,  
Yet still a remembered undertone,

A quivering earthy line of soul  
Crying in all diminished chords.  
Our globe still trembles on its pole.<sup>4</sup>

O'Siadhail's work illustrates the nature of contemporary Irish poetry, particularly south of the border. Collections such as *Hail Madam Jazz* (1992), *A Fragile City* (1995) and *Love Life* (2005) showcase a poet at home in his own fragile sense of humanity, sensitively aware of the everyday concerns that consume so much time, and refreshingly free from any sense of an over-arching theme or agenda. His poetry is that of almost instant recognition, often unadorned, eschewing complex imagery yet crafted with a sharp eye on the unity of form and subject. Contemporary life in Ireland is shown to be something that cannot be grasped in its totality, but this frenzied cultural climate demands direct intellectual and emotional engagement.

During a visit to Poland, made at the start of the new millennium, Seamus Heaney gave an interview in which he defined the change that occurred in his understanding of the role of the poet and the practice of poetry:

I guess my own situation now is more scattered or diverse. I said to you the other night that if I were to choose a pseudonym now I would choose the name *Sartor*, and I do think more and more of the great grandfather tailor. The poems begin with digging with the spade, digging into the centre, but I think now I would use the image of the needle, perhaps, unpicking the stitches, and restitching it into a different shape and moving around like a tailor, the tailor moving around with the needle, rather than the guy with the spade. That's just the symptom of some kind of change, loosening of the roots.<sup>5</sup>

Heaney alludes here to his early poem 'Digging'. Published at the outset of his poetic career, on the opening page of his first collection, and usually read by the poet at the beginning of his readings, even now,

four decades after it was composed, this poem can be taken to stand for the poet's manifesto. The central metaphor of the title suggests the process of going deep, layer after layer, into the rich depth of the soil, to the hidden foundation which serves as the postulated, hypothetical starting point for the poet's work. But going *down* to the deep roots soon acquires a different meaning, that of going *back* in time, of digging into history, and more specifically into the poet's private and collective past. The process of writing poetry, grounded in the vertical geological/historical toil, is seen as a natural continuation of the useful work of the poet's fathers and grandfathers.

This significant change of metaphor from digger to tailor that Heaney talks about in this interview is resonant in a number of ways. Although the poet remains still with the heritage left to him by his *male* ancestors, the stitching which replaces digging is much less a male profession, and indeed might more readily be associated with the feminine. Whereas digging suggests consistent movement in only one, vertical, direction, with each generation contributing to the effect achieved by their predecessors, stitching may turn against itself and wander around: it is a work of doing, as well as of undoing. Significantly, Heaney's first image in the passage quoted above is that of 'unpicking the stitches', which points to the negative, critical or deconstructive aspect of the poet's work. It is only later, when the stitches have been unpicked, that the tailor can re-stitch them, thus linking in one image the dual act of negating and affirming, questioning and reassessing, dismantling and creating. The poet, as *sartor*, the tailor, tests the creative possibilities of various designs and arrangements, and in this way acknowledges the tentative character of each composition and each narrative his work may produce.

Another crucial difference that emerges in this shift of metaphor, from digging to stitching, is that in the tailor's work we no longer deal with an activity of going down for what is hidden, yet fundamental. The tailor works with surfaces, with flat materials which can be organised and composed in a variety of shapes and in numerous arrangements, which shows the tailor's ability to stitch most heterogeneous elements together. If flatness is characteristic of maps, Heaney's transition can be interpreted as the replacement of archaeology by cartography, history (genealogy) by geography, hence the search for the centre which supposedly lies at the bottom, at the roots of things, by a renewed acceptance of the simultaneity and multiplicity of the phenomenal world. The authoritative, essentialist concept of depth is exchanged for the fascination with the incessant processes of metamorphoses and differentiation.

It is significant that the two words uttered at the beginning of the quotation, 'scattered' and 'diverse', can serve as key terms in the characterisation of the paradigmatic shift that Heaney talks about and which is not untypical of contemporary Irish poetry more generally. The stitching metaphor opens the world of poetry to the realm of the flux, the many, and the heterogeneous. It cannot pass unnoticed that Heaney's description of his work – and, by extension, of poetry – fits perfectly well in any discussion of contemporary writing. The poet's words illuminate changes that have occurred not only in his own work, but also in a substantial amount of Irish poetry written at the end of the century. In historical terms, the changes seem to signify the shift away from various forms of modernist legacy towards a postmodern aesthetics and sensibility. In her study of A.R. Ammons's poetics, Diana von Finck claims that the American poet is representative of a development 'that has taken place in breaking away from a common impulse to find an encompassing order of reality – as it is put forth for instance in the poetics of W.C. Williams, Wallace Stevens and T.S. Eliot – to a general preoccupation and enforced interest in exploring the possibilities of disorder'.<sup>6</sup> By disorder she understands 'extremely complex information rather than an absence of order'.<sup>7</sup> Whether or not all three modernists mentioned here were equally interested in searching for order is a debatable issue. Nevertheless, the general reorientation from the one to the many, from the fixed to the ephemeral, from the patriarchal to the feminine, can be seen as characterising contemporary poetry, including poetry written in Ireland.

It is not by chance that one of the Irish poets whose debut collection appeared in the last decade of the century, Paula Meehan, also opens her work with an act of establishing her private genealogy and invoking the idea of the inherited design in the poem called 'The Pattern'. Yet, in *her* backward glance, Meehan looks to her mother rather than, as Heaney did, to a father figure, and introduces the image of knitting or embroidering – significantly closer to stitching than digging. The much more problematic and ambiguous relationship with the mother is described in terms that suggest both her acknowledgement of the parent's formative presence in her life and its ultimate, unconditional rejection. Meehan simultaneously invokes the pattern in which her mother tried to include or confine her, and revolts against it, exposing it as an emblem of violence, a repressive power that perpetuates historically motivated submission and self-denial. The poem ends with mother's words addressed to her daughter: 'One of these days I must / teach you to follow a pattern', but this seemingly innocent, innocuous statement, referring literally to the art of knitting, belongs to a scene in which the

daughter has to assist her mother in a submissive position, suggestive of enslavement, with wool around her hands resembling handcuffs:

Sometimes I'd have to kneel  
 an hour before her by the fire,  
 a skein around my outstretched hands,  
 while she rolled wool into balls.<sup>8</sup>

Though it would be inaccurate to see Meehan's 'The Pattern' simply as a direct polemical response to Heaney's 'Digging', its imagery invites comparison between the two poems, underlining their analogies and differences, ones which disclose many of the changes in Irish poetry in recent decades. The lines 'Her steel needles sparked and clacked, / the only other sound a settling coal / or her sporadic mutter / at a hard part in the pattern' invoke Heaney's description of his father's and grandfather's work similarly rich in visual, aural and tactile imagery. And yet whereas Heaney's poem ends with a declaration of the speaker's readiness to follow 'men like them' by digging with a pen, in Meehan's poem the daughter, uncomfortably wearing a dress made by her mother, resolves to watch 'the Liffey, for hours pulsing to the sea / and the coming and going of ships, / certain that one day it would carry me / to Zanzibar, Bombay, the Land of the Ethiops'.<sup>9</sup> One could risk elaborating on and extending Meehan's image, and claim that the Liffey indeed carried many poets of her generation, as well as her younger colleagues, if not to Zanzibar, then to Paris, Princeton, Prague and Warsaw, where – scattered and diverse – they would feel at ease to stitch and unstick the various patterns they had inherited, and so 'by transforming that past / change the future of it'.<sup>10</sup>

## II

The election of Mary Robinson to the office of President in 1990 is an event that has, in the 20–20 vision of hindsight, been heralded as a seismic shift not only in the political outlook of the Republic but in the self-perception of an entire generation. Robinson defeated Brian Lenihan, the Fianna Fáil candidate who was a shoo-in for the position at the start of the campaign, after a series of blunders and lies that allowed a rank outsider to enter Aras an Uachtaran as the first woman President. Paul Durcan, arguably the emblematic southern Irish poet of the 1990s, published *Greetings to Our Friends in Brazil* in 1999, a collection that encapsulates many of the changes represented by Robinson in her tenure as Head of State. For Durcan, Robinson's Presidency was an unambiguous symbol of the collective desire for change, a tangible

instance of a country prepared to accept voices from the margins and heralding a more pluralistic outlook on a variety of social, cultural and political fronts. In a poem entitled 'The First and Last Commandment of the Commander-in-Chief', Durcan notes her election as a crucial displacement of the predominant values that held sway in the south since the foundation of the state:

By 1990 in Ireland we'd been adolescents for seventy years  
Obsessed with the Virgin, automobiles, alcohol, Playboy, Unity.  
The Commander-in-Chief issued her first and only  
Commandment:  
First and last you must learn to love your different self.<sup>11</sup>

While Durcan can be accused of over-stating the optimistic response to Robinson's election, it serves as a useful marker for the emergence of a polyphony of voices on the poetic scene in the Republic. Durcan's targets frequently include the Catholic Church along with what he perceived to be the creeping philistinism of Irish society. A critic can easily trace the contours of Ireland's economic, social, cultural and religious development in Durcan's satirical and surreal verse. What also marks him out for special attention is the fact that he is one of the few southern poets to make Northern Ireland a significant poetic concern, and his collections from the 1980s and 1990s frequently contain poems that confront head-on the tragic human consequence of paramilitary violence on both sides of the sectarian divide. His 1998 poem, simply entitled 'Omagh', is a haunting catalogue of the names of the twenty-nine victims of the Real IRA bomb that exploded there on 15 August 1998. It later emerged that one of the victims, Avril Monaghan, was heavily pregnant with twins which, by Durcan's calculation, brings the death toll to thirty-one. The implied irony of the death of two unborn children by those claiming to uphold the ideals of a republic that constitutionally acknowledges the right to life of the unborn gives this poem its particular power.

Another important, often overlooked poet producing major work during this period is Brendan Kennelly, whose great epics *The Book of Judas* (1991) and *Poetry My Arse* (1995) addressed in a most mischievous way the twin pillars of history and religion in the construction of Irish national identity. His development as a poet could be seen as indicative of the shifting paradigmatic boundaries of that decade. If Seamus Heaney can confidently describe his poetic mission as 'digging', then Kennelly's *Judas* could be accused of bobbing along upon the backwash created by the 'relentless, pitiless, anecdotalism of Irish life',<sup>12</sup> sure only that he is a cipher of often vicious vicarious expression. The implied

confidence that Heaney enjoyed in the mid-1960s with his 'snug' pen contrasts sharply with Judas' rhetorical question in the very first poem of the collection entitled *Lips*, in which he mulls over how often he had been betrayed by his words: 'They slave for me, ask nothing in return. / The harder they work the more I wonder / If I believe them.'<sup>13</sup> Kennelly sustains his exploration of the myriad manifestations of betrayal over 584 poems, the disjointed chronology unwittingly held together by the isolated, irredeemable figure of Judas, an outsider who embraces and absorbs both the forces that exclude and the consequences of that exclusion. He emerges from Kennelly's text as a complex exemplar of contemporary Ireland, dazed and confused by the ever-shifting markers of his diffracted identity. In many respects it would be more accurate to refer to what Kennelly identifies in the introduction as the 'Judasvoice' (p. 11), an often miasmatic articulator of vituperative anger, misogyny, greed, tenderness and denial. As well as his varied contemporary manifestations, Judas also appears in his historical guise, albeit pursued by – amongst others – film crews, journalists and talk-show hosts. It is in the poems in which Jesus and Judas engage in an often surreal dialogue that the collection achieves its sharpest focus and historical critique. Iconic historical moments are cleverly contemporised by the abrupt appearance of recognisable social stereotypes, characters whose narrative function is to bring the historical into sharp contemporary relief. The absurdity of the moment, both the historical and the contemporary, is highlighted by their strange parallel expression, the past and the present finding mutually informing moments of both intense illumination and simultaneous farce. One such moment arrives at a defining originary moment in Christianity when Jesus is stretched on the cross waiting to be nailed. However, no one can be found to 'finish the job' (p. 88), despite advertisements in the national newspapers and 'on the telly'. Finally, however, the ubiquitous Irish labourer appears on the scene, ready and willing to complete any job if the price is right. Flanagan nails Jesus to the cross with competent ease, pockets his money and vanishes, 'eschewing all displays of bravado or glamour', a professional job well done. The desacralising of Jesus's final moments purports the normality of the crucifixion at the time, leading us to infer that its sacred status is one that has accreted over the centuries. Flanagan epitomises the concept that individuals have no control over what history will do to them and actions carried out for purely pragmatic reasons will be wholly reinterpreted by succeeding generations. Equally, the time vortex through which the characters in the poem travel dislocates both the actuality of the historical event, inasmuch as it can have actuality, and the contemporary re-reading of that event.

Flanagan's appearance as a recognisable contemporary jobber hints at contemporary moral values driven by a desire for profit at the expense of the moral outcome of that action. Time is distended in the poem, the human tragedy of Jesus' final humiliation overshadowed by a cute Irish 'apparition' who elides the significance of the moment with his casual profiteering, a chronological conflation that Lucy Collins adroitly identifies in the poetry of Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin. Kennelly's epic sequence is a powerful indicator of the changes afoot in 1990s Ireland, where many of the social and cultural certainties were crumbling under the weight of their internal contradictions.

### III

One of the most interesting manifestations of the reconfigurations that have taken place in contemporary Irish poetry is the special place occupied by translation. Just as the art of stitching works by juxtaposition and extension, rather than by removing the layers and getting down to the centre, so does translation, extending horizontally, open poetry to the juxtapositioning of diverse voices, forms and viewpoints. As Bernard O'Donoghue has demonstrated, translation, particularly from Irish into English, has always been an invigorating factor in the history of Irish poetry, to the extent that 'what has come to be called the *voice* of Irish poetry in English was partly developed by the translators'.<sup>14</sup> O'Donoghue has in mind specifically the work of the two Celtic revivalists Douglas Hyde and Augusta Gregory, and consequently sees translations as one of the three main categories of Irish poetry, apart from 'poems in Irish' and 'poems in English'. These translations 'brought into English poetry formal qualities that are at one entirely foreign to it and totally successful within it, and which therefore remained a permanent option within English'.<sup>15</sup>

Yet although translations from Irish to English played a very special role in the history of Irish verse, marking English poetry with characteristically Irish prosodic qualities, translations from other languages also exerted and are still exerting strong influence. The growing popularity of central and eastern European poets that can be observed since the late 1960s were in part sparked by the famous Penguin Modern European Poets series, which introduced into the English language the works of such authors as Zbigniew Herbert from Poland, Miroslav Holub from Czechoslovakia, Janosz Pilinszky from Hungary or Vasko Popa from Serbia. The influence these poets exerted was political, aesthetic and ethical. Their voices were enabling because they embodied an art that faced up to fundamental political and moral questions. For poets

from Britain and Ireland these writers from the other Europe became exemplary figures because of their readiness to confront history in its barest, ugliest forms, and to accept the role of witness. In Ireland the most evident *hommage* to the significance of translation for native poetic traditions can be found in Heaney's essay 'The Impact of Translation' (1988), where the poet famously asked: 'Might we not nowadays affirm that the shortest way to Whitby, the monastery where Caedmon sang the first Anglo-Saxon verse, is via Warsaw and Prague?'<sup>16</sup> More a declaration than a question, Heaney's words refer to English poetry, but can well be applied to poetry written in Ireland, if the emphasis is put specifically on translation – the way to Whitby via Warsaw is the way of translation as opposed to the Tara via Holyhead route, which implies leaving the country and looking at it from a distance.<sup>17</sup> If Heaney's essay is a theoretical elaboration of the theme, then his collection *The Haw Lantern* (1987), influenced by Eastern European parabolic tradition, provides evidence of translation affecting the very practice of writing.

Heaney, however, is by no means the only Irish poet open to the possibilities offered by translations from Polish, Czech or Romanian poetry. Just before the period focused on this book, a collection of poems was published providing ample evidence that Irish poets acknowledged the importance of translations from Eastern European poetry. Marin Sorescu's *The Biggest Egg in the World* (1987) was, as the blurb revealed, 'hatched in Belfast' and includes English versions by, among others, Heaney, Michael Longley and Paul Muldoon, all introduced by Edna Longley. These various literary enterprises, which rediscover the importance of translation for the practice of poetry towards the end of the 1980s, determined the way in which Irish poetry developed in subsequent decades. Since 1990 Heaney has continued his involvement in Eastern European poetry, producing with Stanisław Barańczak a joint translation of *Laments* (1995) by the sixteenth-century Polish poet Jan Kochanowski, and conducting a poetic dialogue with Czesław Miłosz, and Zbigniew Herbert, two of Poland's foremost poets.

Though, arguably, interest in Eastern European writing was partly the side effect of the Cold War and so might well have waned with the fall of the Iron Curtain, the period covered by the present volume has in fact been marked by the continuation and intensification of cross-cultural and cross-linguistic links. In the light of this process, possibly the most important single translation was Heaney's rendering of *Beowulf* in 1999, which became one of the key texts in contemporary Irish poetry of the last decade. If, as O'Donoghue points out,<sup>18</sup> English renderings of Irish verse made a permanent mark on English, translations

meant a gradual emancipation of Irish English and its elevation from the status of a dialect to that of a legitimate, sovereign language, one that can engage itself directly as an autonomous source and resource in a reciprocal relationship with British English and its literary tradition. Heaney attempted a reversed transition when he took an Old English epic and rendered it not into modern standard or 'established' English, but quite consciously and systematically into Irish-English, the poet's original vernacular. The general orientation of his project becomes clear with the very first word of the poem, 'So!', as the Hiberno-English equivalent of 'Hwat!', evoking as it does the way in which the Irish storytellers start their narratives. This modelling of the language of his translation into the language spoken by his Northern Irish relatives is, as Heaney admits, 'one way for an Irish poet to come to terms with that complex history of conquest and colony, absorption and resistance, integrity and antagonism, a history that has to be cleverly acknowledged by all concerned in order to render it ever more 'willable forward / again and again and again'.<sup>19</sup>

Many other Irish poets were equally quick to explore imaginatively the aesthetic, cultural and political implications of the art of translation. Among the books shortlisted for the 2005 T.S. Eliot Poetry Prize was Tom Paulin's *The Road to Inver*. This consisted of 'translations, versions, imitations' of works by an astonishing variety of authors, including Sophocles, Horace, Goethe, Pushkin, Brecht, Ponge and Pessoa. Ciaran Carson, after publishing *The Alexandrine Plan* (1998) – a bilingual collection of his versions of sonnets by Baudelaire, Rimbaud and Mallarmé – set on a much more daring task of adapting into Irish-English Dante's *Inferno* (2002). In *Adaptations* (2006) Derek Mahon collected his free translations from French, German, Italian, Greek and other languages.

Younger-generation Irish poets have also been drawn to translation, acknowledging the impact the translated author has on their own work. One of the most recent examples is Justin Quinn's English versions of poems by the Czech poet Petr Borkovec. A separate category includes translations from Irish. In 1993 Heaney produced an abridged English version of Brian Merriman's eighteenth-century Gaelic poem *The Midnight Verdict*, adding in a later edition in 2001 two of his translations from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Merriman's poem has been translated also by Ciaran Carson and published as *The Midnight Court* (2005). Paul Muldoon's translations of Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's Irish-language poems (*The Astrakhan Cloak*, 1992) have been rightly praised, significantly helping to establish Ní Dhomhnaill as one of the major voices in Irish poetry to emerge since the mid-1980s.

While translation studies shed revealing and challenging light on the nature of the development of contemporary Irish poetry, an overview of this progression cannot ignore the vitality and range of poetry written in the Irish language. Throughout the 1990s, many Irish-language poets, including Michael Hartnett (1941–99), Michael Davitt (1950–2005), Nuala Ní Dhomnaill (b.1952), Cathal Ó Searchaigh (b.1956) and Gearóid MacLochlainn (b.1966) have written poetry in Irish that is every bit as socially and culturally challenging as its English-language counterparts. The principal difficulty facing Irish-language poetry is obviously the thorny issue of translation into English, and many prominent contemporary poets have used the kind offices of fellow poets to bring their Irish language poetry to an English-speaking audience. Indeed, that audience is principally an Irish one in that the readership for Irish language poetry is very small. A classic example of this linguistic exchange can be found in the work of Michael Hartnett, who famously turned his back on English in 1974 only to return triumphantly a decade later with his *Inchicore Haiku*, one of which beautifully summed-up his linguistic dilemma: ‘My English dam bursts / And out strolls all my bastards / Irish shakes its head.’<sup>20</sup>

While most Irish-language poets eventually succumb to the irresistible attraction of translation, some notably resist, the most prominent of these being Bidy Jenkinson, whose resistance to translation has become something of a *cause célèbre* in Irish-language circles. Of the poets who have been translated, Ó Searchaigh remains the most subversive. The 1996 publication of *Na Buachaillí Bána* deals unambiguously with homosexual love. The fact that the poems are often set against the backdrop of a remote part of rural Ireland only serves to heighten the feeling that his poetry is attempting to redefine, or at least reshape, the traditional landscapes of Irish poetry. In a poem entitled ‘Caoineadh (i gcuimhne mo mháthar)’, translated by Seamus Heaney as ‘Lament (in memory of my Mother)’, Ó Searchaigh expresses a profound regret over the inevitable decline of Irish, while English is portrayed as a language picking the bones of its Celtic counterpart:

To-day it’s my language that’s in its throes,  
 The poets’ passion, my mothers’ fathers’  
 Mothers’ language, abandoned and trapped  
 On a fatal ledge that we won’t attempt.  
 She’s in agony, I can hear her heave  
 And gasp and struggle as they arrive,  
 The beaked and ravenous scavengers  
 Who are never far. Oh if only anger  
 Came howling wild out of her grief,

If only she'd bare the teeth of her love  
 And rout the pack. But she's giving in,  
 She's quivering badly, my mother's gone  
 And promises now won't ease the pain.<sup>21</sup>

Many of Ó Searchaigh's translated poems are also a clear indicator of the broadening perspective of contemporary Irish poetry. His homoerotic poems celebrating sexual union are unambiguously explicit, allowing 'the love that dare not speak its name' a clear expression in the context of a society far more at ease with competing models of sexual orientation, recognised by the decriminalisation of homosexuality in the Republic in the early 1990s. This legal recognition of homosexual partnerships only came about after a tortured legal wrangle in the European Court of Human Rights. Ó Searchaigh's erotic celebration is a marker of the degree to which contemporary Ireland can no longer point to the axis of heterosexual/Catholic/married as a secure repository of an imagined national identity. The fact that these poems originally appear in Irish further enhances the perception of a shifting linguistic paradigm where the national language becomes the carrier of cultural change rather than a perceived repository of traditional values.

#### IV

If so much space above has been devoted to the presence of translation in contemporary Irish poetry, it is because it seems, along with the emergence of women poets, the most important development in the most recent Irish verse. The special role of translation reflects the changing attitudes to language and poetic diction, as well as to issues of cultural identity, authorship and originality. Irish poetry since 1990 has become 'more outward-looking and open to developments going on elsewhere',<sup>22</sup> more truly multilingual. For example, *The New Irish Poets* anthology by Selima Guinness includes poems with quotations in French, German and Polish.<sup>23</sup> The term 'multilingual' is used here not only because so many Irish poets have been practising as translators of foreign verse, but also because of the concomitant diversification of the languages of contemporary Irish poetry. Nowhere is this tendency better demonstrated than in the work of Ciaran Carson.

Perhaps one of the other most significant features of the development of contemporary Irish poetry since 1990 has been the emergence of a variety of women poets ready and willing to challenge the old orthodoxies, although it is as difficult to identify a predominant school amongst contemporary woman poets as it is amongst their male counterparts. The more established figures of Eavan Boland, Nuala Ní Dhomnaill,

Medbh McGuckian and Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin have been joined by a wave of interesting poets with a broad range of interests, including Sinéad Morrissey, Vona Groarke, Paula Meehan, Kerry Hardie and Colette Bryce. In her chapter in this volume, Lucy Collins perceptively traces the significance of the home in the poetry of Ní Chuilleanáin and Groarke. She highlights the refreshing instability of contemporary perceptions of personal and national identity as she points to the simultaneity of past and present in the work of both poets. Collins argues that they inscribe the home as a place of creative inhabiting, at once secure and unstable, ripe for annotation. In his chapter, Michael Parker sets his sights on the work of two other poets born in the 1970s as exemplars of a new poetic hermeneutics. His study of the poetry of Sinéad Morrissey and Nick Laird points to a recurring theme of the 1990s, namely a pervading and palpable sense of local and personal displacement, and Parker particularly identifies what he refers to as a 'sense of restless, continuing motion' in Morrissey's and Laird's work, again a characteristic that could easily be applied to their southern counterparts.

Equally the poetry of Rita Ann Higgins might have been cited as particularly resonant of the brasher manifestation of contemporary Ireland. Her work is as evocative and resonant of contemporary life in the Republic as McGuckian's poetry is of the North. Higgins's Ireland is a place of social and cultural disillusionment, populated by a tranche of individuals who have, unwittingly and otherwise, missed the bus of the economic boom. Her satirical and lacerating critiques of the pretensions of 'the chattering classes' are laced with a biting humour. Her harassed characters act as a wonderful counterbalance to a culture that prides itself on an unwavering confidence. Higgins unflinchingly deals with the darker side of life in the Republic, ranging from the epidemic of suicide to the unrelenting death tolls in road accidents. Her poetry is a barometer of the many casualties of Ireland's social and cultural development. Indeed, the witty, surreal cover to her 2001 collection, *An Awful Racket*, features the late Pope John Paul II preaching to a flock of penguins on an iceberg in the Arctic, an image indicative of the drift away from clerical authority that is so characteristic of 1990s Ireland.

## V

One of the most prolific and certainly the most protean of contemporary Irish poets is Ciaran Carson, whose reputation continued to grow in the last years of the old and early years of the new century. Building on the phenomenal success of *The Irish for No* (1987) and *Belfast*

*Confetti* (1989), Carson took diverse routes and detours, developing the possibilities that the new poetics offered him. He approached the nearly Ashberyean non-referentiality and free play of signifiers in *First Language* (1993) and *Opera Et Cetera* (1996), experimented with the form of a sonnet in *The Twelfth of Never* (1999), changed his poetic alliances – from C.K. Williams to W.C. Williams – in *Breaking News* (2003), and ventured very successfully into the realm of prose with a sequence of books.<sup>24</sup>

Of special significance for his work, as well as for the discussion of the language of poetry, is his T.S. Eliot Prize-winning collection, *First Language*. The book's very title invites polemical debate.<sup>25</sup> Does it mean one's mother tongue, the language with which, or into which, one is born and which one learns first? Or does it refer to the myth of the Tower of Babel and stand for the first language ever, the one people spoke before they tried to erect the Tower, before their language was confounded? The first language in that second, mythological sense is the *Ursprache*, the root of all other tongues. To alert his readers to its central significance, Carson decided to reproduce on the cover of the book a painting of the Tower of Babel. Symptomatically, as one can discover from the reproduction of the painting, the work is neither Irish nor English, but Polish. The Tower of Babel figures in *First Language* in a Polish phrase as 'Wieża Babel'; the poet bought the painting from a street artist whom he came across during a visit to Warsaw. The polylingual character of the whole collection, both in its subject matter and in its very material, is introduced in the opening poem written in Gaelic, yet with a French title 'La Je-Ne-Sais-Quois' (sic). In 1998, in a conversation with Jerzy Jarniewicz, Carson spoke about his linguistic background, saying that he *thinks* Irish was his first language. He talked about his parents who had accepted Irish as their tongue for ideological reasons, as a sign of their Irishness and Catholicism. Hence, their family language was not their first language, but an adopted one. Carson, having been born in a family where Irish was spoken, treated it as his first language, although it was the language in which he could not communicate in the street: 'I realise everyone spoke English'.<sup>26</sup> And if today Irish can be heard in Belfast it is English Irish, spoken again for ideological reasons, the language infused with English structures and rhythms. 'Is it Irish?' Carson asks, and evades the question, as he has to.

Language is, after all, never pure, but a protean phenomenon, or a process. George Steiner claimed that 'language is the most salient model of Heraclitean flux. It alters at every moment in perceived time'.<sup>27</sup> Interpreted in the context of such views, Carson's use of foreign tongues in his poetry raises the question of the possibility of a

pure language, pure Irish, pure English, and demonstrates that no such language is possible. This inherent impurity of language – something that many Irish poets examine today – allows for the noise, the verbal commotion, the sprawl of linguistic items which even native speakers of a given language find incomprehensible: language is set loose, liberates itself, as abstract art, from the subjection to meaning and starts acting with its phonic quality and distant, often non-verbal, associations.

It can be argued that Carson's examinations of the possibility of a first language brought him to inspect not only his first tongue, i.e. Gaelic, but, perhaps more interestingly, the foreignness of English. The foreignness that Carson tries to uncover in *First Language* makes English strange to all those who claim it is their mother tongue:

English not being yet a language, I wrapped my lubber-lips around my thumb;

Brain-deaf as an embryo, I was snuggled in my comfort-blanket dumb.

Growling figures campaniled above me, and twanged their carillons of bronze

Sienna consonants embedded with the vowels alexandrite, emerald and topaz.

The topos of their discourse seemed to do with me and convoluted genealogy;

Wordy whorls and braids and skeins and spiral helices, unskeltoned from laminate geology.<sup>28</sup>

Ostensibly, the poem recalls the poet's acquisition of English as his second tongue, starting from the stage when it was not yet a 'proper' language. But the multifarious vocabulary, suffused with foreign terms, makes the text difficult even to many native English-speaking readers, who could find its fragments incomprehensible without the aid of a comprehensive dictionary. What, for example, are 'carillons' and 'helices'? The seemingly obvious claim that the poem is written in English has been severely questioned: how *English* is the Italian noun 'campanile', or the adjective 'Sienna'? How English are the Greek 'helices' or Latin 'lamina'? And such words and phrases taken from the poem as 'Araphoes', 'Nimrod', 'I-Ching', 'Ad altare Dei', 'che sera', 'fleurs-de-lys', 'Pharaonic unguents', make the poem look like a multilingual collage, an example of the post-Babelian confusion of the tongues, exploding any possibility of a homogenous and pure diction, and unveiling the essentially hybrid nature of English.

*First Language*, unavoidably perhaps, finds room for poems which are translation, from French (Baudelaire) and Latin (Ovid), but it also includes a poem called 'Tak, Tak'. This un-English title is taken, again,

from Polish (the poem is dedicated to Piotr Sommer, the Polish poet, translator and Carson's friend). The story of Babel continues: firmly set tongues become confounded,<sup>29</sup> words change their meanings, sometimes surprisingly so. The title phrase with the repeated affirmation, 'tak, tak' means 'yes, yes', but also, as Sommer explains it to the speaker, it may mean 'Of course' and 'Is that so?' The twice repeated word may affirm something and express great disbelief: it is a paradoxical, self-contradictory statement that is both positive and negative, that claims and disclaims at the same time.

Heaney has remarked that the language of *Beowulf* gave him an opportunity of moving 'into some unpartitioned linguistic country, a region where one's language would not be simply a badge of ethnicity or a matter of cultural preference or an official imposition, but an entry into further language'.<sup>30</sup> Carson's vibrantly multilingual *First Language* may be considered such an unpartitioned country, in which language rather than delimiting or confining those who use it (language as 'a badge'), opens its doors and leaves its essentialist definition behind, confronting 'further language' and second tongues, language itself as 'an entry'.

The widely defined notion of translation as discussed above allows for the introduction of the poetics of the many and the heterogeneous, of the scattered and the diverse. In the wake of the Good Friday Agreement, former inherited boundaries and strict categories of exclusion lose their legitimacy, with the growing number of translations as cross-boundary and cross-cultural shifts making their mark on contemporary poetry. Most conspicuously, perhaps, the former divisions into the poetry from the North and from the Republic have become increasingly problematic, ever since the apparent disappearance of the physical frontier between the two territories and the acceleration of the processes of political and economic unification in Europe. Furthermore, the old label of Ulster poets, which in most cases meant Belfast poets, lost its meaning when the key figures of that literary phenomenon changed places: Heaney, Mahon, Gerald Dawe, all formerly associated with the North and Belfast, have been living now in Dublin for many decades, while Muldoon is now an American citizen.

The process of invalidating or at least problematising the old division is due also to the increasing traffic observable between the poets from the North and from the Republic. Symptomatic of these ties is Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's poetry, which has been translated from Irish into English by the two outstanding poets from the North: Paul Muldoon and Medbh McGuckian. The Irish-into-English translation is dominant, but movement in the opposite direction also takes place.

Ní Dhomhnaill, for example, has written Irish-language versions of McGuckian's poems.<sup>31</sup> This rapprochement finds assistance in the politics of many poetry publishers, such as Gallery Press, whose lists include poets from both parts of Ireland. Though in the period under discussion there were attempts to anthologise separately poets from Ulster (most recently in *Magnetic North. The Emerging Poets*, edited by John Brown) or from the Republic (*The Inherited Boundaries. Younger Poets of the Republic of Ireland*, edited by Sebastian Barry),<sup>32</sup> it seems that in post-Troubles Ireland these categories become blatantly extra-literary, reflecting no intrinsic formal or thematic qualities of the poetries in question, nor defining any significant aspects of literary life associated with the two geographically labelled regions. Such a division looks more like an imposition of schematic political categories on the phenomena which exceed, if not openly subvert them.

Yet the gradual dissipation of the well-established North–South divide which we are now witnessing does not imply that the poetry written in Ireland today is uniformed and subsumed best under the one totalising heading 'Irish'. On the contrary, in the place of the two main politically defined centres Irish poetry has now many more specific and focalised centres, defined by divergent, though often overlapping, literary and cultural criteria. In the time of accelerated social mobility the question where one was born and lives loses its former significance in determining one's stance in various literary debates. Poets would rather declare themselves with respect to their attitude to the many contending programmes (such as formalism, open form, performance poetry) and to larger cultural issues (feminism, gay culture, multiculturalism). It is symptomatic of the changes discussed, that the greatest divide now is between the poets of the 'mainstream' tradition(s) and the modernist, or neo-avant-garde revisionists, like Randolph Healy, David Lloyd, Maurice Scully, who 'propose Brian Coffey, Denis Devlin and Thomas MacGreevey as alternative avatars to Kavanagh and Clarke'.<sup>33</sup>

What contributed to this dispersal or decentralisation of the poetic scene in Ireland since 1990 is certainly the unwillingness of the poets to form poetic groups, schools, or announce poetic manifestos, though this was precisely what helped to create the concept of Ulster poets of the 1960s: Heaney, Mahon, Longley, Simmons, who bound by poetic friendship wrote poems to one another, and were mistakenly seen from afar as representatives of one single literary movement. Similarly, a few years later, the equally individual voices of Medbh McGuckian, Paul Muldoon, Ciaran Carson or Tom Paulin were lumped together as representative of the second, or 'postmodern', generation. The rest of Ireland seems not to have had then, nor to have now,

an equivalent to Hobsbaum's seminar, *The Honest Ulsterman* or the Troubles as a collective experience that helped critics to label and identify the movement. The tendency, persistent especially outside Ireland, to assume that it is poetry from the North that stands for the whole of contemporary Irish verse was further strengthened by anthologies published in Britain which focused exclusively on the few canonical poets of the Ulster group, such as Heaney, Mahon or Muldoon.

Yet though the group has ceased to be perceived as such – and many new poetic voices, including Paula Meehan, Sinéad Morrissey, Vona Groarke, Catriona O'Reilly, Tom French and Justin Quinn, have since emerged – the poets of the two Ulster generations have all been producing an important body of work in the period since 1990. As with Heaney and Carson, the last decade of the century was particularly fruitful for Michael Longley, who broke his long silence with a sequence of exciting new collections: *Gorse Fires* (1991), *The Ghost Orchid* (1995), *The Weather in Japan*, winner of the T.S. Eliot Prize (2000), and *Snow Water* (2004). Paul Muldoon opened the decade with an astounding genre-defining project of *Madoc. A Mystery* (1990), which was followed by collections which further affirmed his reputation as one of the most original voices in modern poetry: *The Annals of Chile* (1994), *Hay* (1998) and *Moy Sand and Gravel* (2002), and now *Horse Latitudes* (2006). For Derek Mahon the 1990s meant the publication of *The Hudson Letter* (1995) and *The Yellow Book* (1998), two collections marking a radical departure from his previous tightly formal style. Medbh McGuckian has been consistently extending the territory of her work, addressing, for example, the bicentenary of United Irishmen with commemorative poems from *Shelmalier* (1998) and *Had I a Thousand Lives* (2003). As McGuckian's most recent work reveals, the concern with history, always an ambivalent hallmark of Irish poetry, has by no means disappeared.<sup>34</sup> And yet contemporary Irish poets tend now to travel more often in space than in time. The theme of dislocation, 'the importance of elsewhere', leading to the redefinition of home and national identity, has been severed from the traditional, highly politicised theme of exile. Travelling or living abroad, no longer tied to economic or political necessity, have contributed to the linguistic and imaginative diversification of poetry. The 'elsewhere', not surprisingly the title of one of the more recent collections by an Irish poet,<sup>35</sup> provides poets with an opportunity to look at the home in a critical, comparative manner, which often results in what John Brown aptly called 'mobile poems', 'bifocal visions'.<sup>36</sup>

Apart from the familiar dislocations, to America (Muldoon) or England (Tom Paulin), there is a conspicuously growing number of

'translated' poets who chose as their temporary or permanent habitat countries associated much less, if at all, with traditional Irish migrations. Justin Quinn has produced a series of poems set in Prague, where he has been living since 1994. Cathal McCabe has spent over a decade in Poland, translating modern Polish poetry and opening his own verse to his Polish experiences,<sup>37</sup> Sinéad Morrissey has lived and taught in the Far East, which affected a sequence of poems 'Japan' from her second collection, *Between Here and There* (2002). Harry Clifton, who lived first in Italy, then in France, with intervening periods in Africa and Asia, has, in Derek Mahon's words, 'taken the world as his province',<sup>38</sup> Nick Laird, having spent some time in Poland, included 'A Guide to Modern Warsaw' in his debut collection *To a Fault* (2005). Leontia Flynn wrote of herself as living 'on the beaten track, the sherpa pass, between Kraków / and Zagreb'.<sup>39</sup>

Affected by the rapid economic and social changes in the Ireland of the Celtic Tiger boom and in the political order in the North following the Good Friday Agreement, with no single group or coherent movement that would dominate the scene and inform its identity, it is a nomadic art of many voices, equally prone to probe into local traditions as to take on the risks of unstitching the patterns and looking for inspiration elsewhere, in 'further languages', in 'Zanzibar, Bombay, the Land of the Ethiops'.

### Notes

- 1 Peter Fallon and Derek Mahon (eds), *The Penguin Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry* (London: Penguin, 1990), p. xxii.
- 2 Louis de Paor, 'Contemporary Poetry in Irish: 1940–2000', in *The Cambridge History of Irish Literature*, ed. Margaret Kelleher and Philip O'Leary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 349.
- 3 Ciaran Carson, *The Irish For No* (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 1987), p. 31.
- 4 Micheal O'Siadhail, from *Tremolo*, in *Globe* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe Books, 2007).
- 5 Quoted in Jerzy Jarniewicz, *The Bottomless Centre. The Uses of History in the Poetry of Seamus Heaney*, Łódź University Press, 2002), p. 173.
- 6 Diana von Finck, 'A.R. Ammons's Poetics of Chaos', in *Freedom and Form: Essays in Contemporary American Poetry*, ed. Esther Giger and Agnieszka Salska (Łódź: University Press, 1998), p. 120.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Paula Meehan, *Mysteries of the Home* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1996), p. 13.
- 9 Paula Meehan, 'The Pattern', in *Mysteries of Home*, p. 13.
- 10 Paula Meehan, 'Fist', in *Dharmakaya* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2000), p. 13.

- 11 Paul Durcan, *Greetings to Our Friends in Brazil* (London: Harvill, 1999), p. 236.
- 12 Brendan Kennelly, *The Book of Judas* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1991), p. 11.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 15.
- 14 Bernard O'Donoghue, 'Poetry in Ireland', in *The Cambridge Guide to Modern Irish Culture*, ed. Joe Cleary and Claire Connolly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 178.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 180.
- 16 Seamus Heaney, *The Government of the Tongue* (London: Faber, 1988), p. 41.
- 17 Stephen Dedalus notes in his diary: 'The shortest way to Tara was via Holyhead', James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, ed. Seamus Deane (London: Penguin Books, 1992), p. 273.
- 18 Bernard O'Donoghue, 'Poetry in Ireland', in *Modern Irish Culture*, ed. Joe Cleary and Claire Connolly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2005), pp. 173–89.
- 19 Seamus Heaney, Introduction, *Beowulf. A New Translation* (London: Faber, 1999), p. xxx.
- 20 Michael Hartnett, *Inchicore Haiku* (Dublin: Raven Arts Press, 1985), p. 9.
- 21 Cathal Ó Searcaigh, *Ag Tnúth leis an tSolas 1975–2000* (Cló Iar-Chonnachta Teo., 2000), p. 150.
- 22 Justin Quinn, 'The Irish Efflorescence', *Poetry Review*, 4: 91 (winter 2001/02), p. 46.
- 23 Selina Guinness (ed.), *The New Irish Poets* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 2004).
- 24 Ciaran Carson, *Last Night's Fun* (London: Cape, 1996), *The Star Factory* (London: Granta, 1997), *Fishing for Amber* (London: Granta, 1999) and *Shamrock Tea* (London: Granta, 2001).
- 25 The following part of the chapter is based on Jerzy Jarniewicz, 'After Babel. Translation and Mistranslation in Contemporary British Poetry', *European Journal of English Studies*, 6: 1 (2002), pp. 87–104.
- 26 Interview with Ciaran Carson and Michael Longley, *Literatura na Świecie*, 4–5, Warsaw, 2000, pp. 251–68.
- 27 George Steiner, *After Babel. Aspects of Language and Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 18.
- 28 Ciaran Carson, 'Second Language', in *First Language* (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 1994), p. 10.
- 29 'And the Lord said, Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech'. *Genesis* 11: 7.
- 30 Seamus Heaney, Introduction to *Beowulf* (London: Faber, 1999), p. xxv.
- 31 *The Southern Review*. A Special Issue: Contemporary Irish Poetry and Criticism, 3: 31 (summer 1995), 444–9.

- 32 John Brown (ed.), *Magnetic North: The Emerging Poets* (Derry: Verbal Arts Centre, 2005); Sebastian Barry, *The Inherited Boundaries. Younger Poets of the Republic of Ireland* (Mountrath: Dolmen Press, 1986).
- 33 David Wheatley, 'Irish Poetry into the Twenty-First Century', *Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry*, ed. Matthew Campbell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 253.
- 34 Another example being Tom Paulin's book-length poem on the origins of the Second World War, *The Invasion Handbook* (London: Faber, 2002).
- 35 Michael Murphy, *Elsewhere* (Nottingham: Shoestring Press, 2003).
- 36 Brown, p. 12.
- 37 It was in Poland that his first poetry books were published.
- 38 Derek Mahon, Foreword to Harry Clifton's *The Desert Route* (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 1992), p. 9.
- 39 Leontia Flynn, 'The Furthest Distances I've Travelled', in *The New Irish Poets*, ed. Selima Guinness (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe, 2004), p. 101.