

INTRODUCTION TO THE NEW AND REVISED EDITION

It may be helpful, especially for American readers, to offer by way of preface a very brief sketch of the historical and cultural context in which Irish poetry after William Butler Yeats is rooted. This approach has the incidental advantage of not anticipating the reader's discovery of pleasure in particular poems and poets. It may also be particularly appropriate, in that literature in modern Ireland is more clearly distinguished by its engagement with history and culture than is English or American literature of the same period. Indeed, despite sharing the language of English literature, modern Irish poetry may have more apt parallels in the poetry of other postcolonial cultures.

What sets this body of poetry apart from the Irish poetry that precedes it (that of Yeats and the Irish Literary Revival) is that it reflects (and in part constitutes) the actual social and historical process of modern Ireland more accurately and intimately by far than Yeats's heroic myths and the mysticism of the Revival. Although the poets included in this anthology may follow a Yeatsian agenda in chronicling the life of their country, their collective attitude is closer to that of James Joyce than to that of Yeats; their poems, generally speaking, are contributions to a moral history of Ireland rather than to an aestheticizing of Irish historical events and personages.

The way of life that most of these post-Yeatsian poets reflect is the shared experience of most of the Irish people, which is rooted in Ireland's small farms, the social organization of the rural hinterland, its folkways, pastimes, work, education, and religious faith. These writers, from Patrick Kavanagh and Padraic Fallon to Seamus Heaney and Paul Muldoon, are representative of a still-emerging class with roots in the countryside but also with connections to modern urban life and, generally speaking, aspirations to a broader view of things. In their poetry we have a democratizing but complex version of pastoral that gives us the changing as well as the unchanging countryside; that juxtaposes ways of

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feeling associated with the city as well as the country; that mingles tradition and loss of tradition, past and present, nature and culture, the community and the isolated individual, faith and disbelief, and all those other antitheses reflective of social process and change. The imaginative topography of this collection of poetry, then, seems close kin to the Hardy country that Raymond Williams describes as "a border country so many of us have been living in: between custom and education, between work and ideas, between love of place and awareness of change."

Partly because of the widespread desire for political stability and the consolidation of workable political entities in both states of Ireland (what are now known as the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland) after the island was partitioned in 1920, both states were, in different ways and to different degrees, oppressive places to live in during the subsequent decades. Enervated by a guerrilla war with England and to an even greater extent by a civil war, then by severe and prolonged economic difficulties, the Free State (as the Republic was formerly called) was regrettably inward-looking and intolerant of all but the narrowest definitions of Irishness; it was, in addition, suspicious of literature. Not surprisingly, Ireland's writers were her public conscience, especially in the 1940s and 1950s. At the head of a tradition of verse commentary on social abuses and shortcomings stands the lonely and indomitable figure of Austin Clarke. Clarke's poems, speaking specifically for the dispossessed of his society and generally for human dignity, flay the complacency and bad faith of the times, condemn the collusion of church and state, and imagine another more ample and noble Ireland (based on the Celtic Romanesque era) in which love and art flourish. Clarke, like Thomas Kinsella later, writes out of the urban situation of Joyce, employing a Joycean realism and irony. In this tradition also, Patrick Kavanagh's *The Great Hunger*, as its title suggests, is a savage indictment of the spiritual deprivation that, despite political independence, afflicted rural Ireland in his time, just as physical hunger had racked the country a century earlier. Although social conditions improved greatly in the Republic, especially in the 1960s, and the atmosphere became a lot more congenial for writers, the abuses Clarke, Kavanagh, and others attacked continue to manifest themselves. The mantle of these writers has fallen in more recent times on the shoulders of such poets as Paul Durcan, whose poems puncture the hypocrisies and moral fatuities of life in Ireland today. Contemporary Irish poetry, then, has at least an affiliation with the older poetry in

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Gaelic that is marked, especially in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, by its tendency to engage social and political matters.

Despite the social dimension of this tradition of verse, it is not written in the service of an abstraction nor is its style a relentlessly grim realism. The poets are invariably concerned with the intersection of the personal and the social, and their poems are quintessentially human documents. To be sure, this verse is characterized by a salutary realism and irony but it also deploys humor, compassion, and a joyful and visionary element—an impulse to praise what is really life and to protect that from the nay-sayers. In Kavanagh, for example, one finds a joyous imaginative repossession of the ordinary countryside of Ireland, as though it had recently been liberated or were being seen for the first time as its unidealized yet radiant self.

The history of Northern Ireland for the whole of its existence has been considerably more oppressive than that of the Republic. A sectarian state dominated for fifty years by what was essentially a one-party system, Northern Ireland was only nominally a democracy. With the advantage of hindsight, the outbreak of violence in 1969 and its apparently intractable continuation down to the present seem inevitable. The poems of John Hewitt and John Montague, before as well as after the outbreak of the present Troubles, are attuned to Ulster's cultural and political schisms. Indeed, even though the Ulster writers have resisted allowing an artistic agenda to be set for them by the present conflict and have been wary of turning into representatives for tribal attitudes in a situation where the feelings of intelligent people are necessarily tangled and ambivalent, they have all inevitably been compelled to write out of their experience of the Troubles.

As one might expect, there are many elegies for victims of the violence, by Seamus Heaney and most of the other poets from the North: at their best, these elegies are not only profoundly moving in their mourning of specific (and indeed of all) human loss but are also profoundly illuminating of the pathology of social relations in the North. Poems by writers like Derek Mahon and Tom Paulin, who come out of the Protestant tradition in the North, are informed by a scathing anger at the Calvinist mixture of theology and politics that pervades Ulster's dominant culture. There are, too, many excellent poems from the Ulster poets that explore the divergent cultural traditions of the North as they are embodied in neighbors from different sides in that ancient quarrel.

Again, it should be stressed that even though these poems emerge from the situation in the North, most are not in any sense a mere

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documentary reflex to that murderous upheaval. They are written by artists, not spokesmen, and are resonant in their deployment of image, symbol, and myth at the same time that they are shaped by the political predicament in less than obvious or predictable ways. One might take as examples Heaney's "The Tollund Man," Mahon's "Courtyards in Delft," and Muldoon's "Gathering Mushrooms." The connection with Ulster is not simple in any of these poems, which match the cunning passages of history with the complexity, obliquity, and distancing of art in order to achieve their truth. "Courtyards in Delft," for instance, a poem "about" a Dutch painting, manifests the ethos to which Ulster Protestants belong with an exactness, resonance, and power that is inevitably absent from less artful attempts to render the Ulster Protestant mentality.

The obsession with history on the part of the Irish is evident in many of the poems in this collection; not only the contemporary history of the Troubles but the plantation of Ulster, the Famine, the Rebellion of 1798, and even the archaeological past find their way into these poems. This preoccupation is not, however, a peculiarly Irish form of self-indulgence but rather stems from the understanding, gained from experience, that history is personal, that it affects individual lives in the present in urgent ways, and that it needs to be explored, rethought in the light of experience, and understood. So there is for many Irish writers, in George Steiner's phrase in a different context, "a past tense to the grammar of being." But although contemporary Irish poets see the present predicament as the outcome or repetition of a process that has gone on for centuries, they are sharply aware, as the writers of the Revival were not, that our interpretation of history (so Steiner and others have reminded us) depends less on literal facts than on "images of the past." Hence the metahistorical tinge to numerous recent meditations on the Irish past.

Despite their self-consciousness about history, these are not poems about the abstraction "history" but, rather, imaginative structures that make us feel the intimacy of the connection between the personal and the historical. It is the connection in John Montague's *The Rough Field*, for example, between personal and family history on the one hand and the history of Ulster on the other, that validates the sequence imaginatively. The feeling animating that sequence makes "A Grafted Tongue" (for example) not so much a commentary on the loss of a language and culture as an intense, personal enactment and realization of that historical experience.

Religion has always been of obvious and profound significance, spiritually and socially, in Irish life, and it is clearly a dimension of the

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crisis in the North. What Michael Longley has pointed out about Ulster, that it "must be one of the very few remaining areas in the English speaking world which are still likely to produce poets who write out of a response to religion," is true of all Ireland. Typically that response resists the oppressive aspects of the Catholic church as a social institution in Ireland and the inflexibility of its teaching, especially on social issues. Yet the contemporary poet's sensibility (like that of early Gaelic poets) responds also to the beauty of the liturgy; frequently chooses theme, metaphor, image, and allusion from Catholic belief; and is imprinted with a sense of nature as sacramental, of poetry as a type of prayer, and of the artist as a sacerdotal figure. One can trace the central role of religion, thus understood, in Irish poetry from Clarke to Heaney via numerous points in between. The framework of the pilgrimage to Lough Derg recently employed by Seamus Heaney in *Station Island* and earlier employed by both Denis Devlin and Patrick Kavanaugh is one important instance of Irish Catholicism offering a literary structure that is rooted in the experience of the people.

In writers who come out of the Irish Protestant tradition, a comparable process of rejection and transformation of religious orthodoxy can be seen. From Samuel Beckett, Louis MacNeice, and W. R. Rodgers to John Hewitt, Derek Mahon, and Tom Paulin, one finds a sequence of poetic disputes with biblical injunctions, wrestling matches with a Calvinist God or his adherents, essentially attempts to countermand the implacable qualities of that variety of Protestantism. For writers who come out of the Ulster Protestant tradition, in particular, their sense of struggle is intensified by the awareness that this Calvinist belief is the direct source of so much bitterness and violence in the Ulster context, not to mention a more widespread crippling of creative possibilities for the human spirit. At the same time, this strain of poetry, in its Puritan energy, in its capacity for assuming conscience and judgment, and in its self-awareness of being a voice crying in the wilderness, is colored (like the literature of the New England Renaissance) in a compelling and positive way by the belief system it rejects.

Language as well as politics, history, and religion inevitably plays a crucial role in the cultural self-awareness displayed by Irish poetry. Most Irish poets (including those in the North who come from a nationalist background) are haunted by the Gaelic language and have felt bound to come to terms with the literary tradition in Gaelic by creatively translating poems from that tradition. Many of those translations have been included in this collection.

Yet while there is a manifest and pressing need for contemporary Irish poets who write in English to recover Gaelic literature in some

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measure, there is also an awareness that this heritage is, as a whole, distant and shattered. Of course, there are still poets in Ireland who write in Gaelic (Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, for example, translations from whose work have been included) and at least one (Michael Hartnett) who started writing in English, later switched to Gaelic, and is now writing in English again. The important thing is that the Gaelic linguistic and literary tradition is a continuous presence and pressure for the Irish writer; moreover the history of Ireland has given the English language in Ireland a distinctive and separate identity. Also, there is in this poetry a more-than-usual self-consciousness about language itself, and a sense of the danger and difficulty of utterance that probably originates in the colonial situation.

Even though Austin Clarke's attempt to import the technique of Gaelic verse into his poems was experimental and resulted at times in oddities, and even though his approach was a bit programmatic, it should be understood that he was trying to create a poetry in the English language that would be distinctively Irish. None of the poets who succeed Clarke are as self-conscious about their indebtedness to Gaelic poetry, but it may be that Clarke's experimentation served to relieve the burden of anxiety of poets who write in English. Poets after Clarke have absorbed elements of technique and form from Gaelic poetry in what now seems like a fairly natural and painless transaction. The Gaelic genre of *dinnseanchas* (the lore of places), for example, is evident in place-poems by Heaney, Montague, and many others: clearly this fascination with place is a major characteristic of Irish literature in English as well as in Gaelic. For the poet who writes in English, the Gaelic place-name is a kind of capsule history that carries him or her back to origins and makes a bridge to a potent aspect of history or myth. Although this type of poem sometimes functions as an intense expression of love for a particular place, most often the place is only the setting for ideas, so that the poem's landscape, rooted in an actual place though it may be, becomes a landscape of the mind.

The cultural self-awareness of these Irish poets does not prevent them from writing many poems that are much less obviously, if at all, dependent on the Irish cultural context—poems about art, the self, childhood, marriage, family, work, and the modern way of life that Ireland, in some respects, now shares with western Europe and America. Indeed, most of these writers would probably argue with considerable justice that their poetry maintains a creative tension between the inner and outer worlds of self and history.

Nonetheless, a large minority of the poets represented in this

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anthology vigorously dispute, implicitly or explicitly, the Irishness of the agenda—cultural identity, Irish history and society, the rural world, and the Gaelic tradition—set by their fellow poets. For them Irishness and modernity are incompatible. They impatiently dismiss the cultural self-awareness of the others as archaic and provincial, as (at times) dangerously atavistic; they distrust the idea of a national literature, of an Irish poet as opposed to a poet who happens to be Irish. Although there are significant differences between them, one might point to two groups of Irish poets who disclaim Irishness—the European Irish poets led by Beckett and the Ulster poets under the aegis of MacNeice. Beckett categorically rejects the idea of “an accredited theme,” proclaiming rather the importance of “self-perception” and “the hegemony of the inner life over the outer life.” For MacNeice, the Irish past (the most “accredited” of Irish themes) is “narcotic.” Both sets of exiles from Ireland (whether actual exiles or inner exiles) are preoccupied, instead, with the idea of modernity. Their poems reflect an urban or, rather, a cosmopolitan sensibility, and modern feelings of loss and alienation as well as, paradoxically, feelings of being at home in the modern world. They reflect, too, a sense of history based in the convulsions of the two world wars coupled with a sensitivity to humanity’s potential for total self-destruction in the nuclear age. For these writers, the literary pantheon is defined by Joyce and European literature. Instead of translations from the Gaelic, they undertake translations from the European languages and the classics. Beckett, Thomas MacGreevy, Brian Coffey, Devlin, MacNeice, Mahon, Longley (and a considerable number of others who do not belong to either the European Irish or the Ulster grouping) reject Irishness for numerous and complex reasons, but those reasons must include a sense that Irish themes and styles are provincial and inadequate for the purpose of expressing the human condition, as well as a need to distance themselves from a political and cultural identity they do not fully share.

Of course, this either/or distinction between Irishness and modernity is too rigid. In practice, those poets who refuse to be identified by Irishness also struggle frequently with Irish history, society, and politics and are fascinated by the landscape, especially of the West of Ireland. By the same token, those poets one might be tempted to identify only in terms of their cultural self-awareness also possess distinctly modern sensibilities.

The technique of contemporary Irish poetry, taken as a whole, varies a great deal but, with certain rather obvious exceptions, is traditional rather than innovative. Most of it is accessible to the

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general reader, although the experimentalism of Clarke, Kinsella, and Muldoon makes some of their work intriguingly hermetic. There is nonetheless a certain polarity in the matter of form, with classic examples of the well-made poem cherished by the British Movement of the 1950s and much looser and more organic structures akin to the forms of American poetry shaped by Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams. One might add the observation that certain formal properties of poetry—notably, free verse—no longer seem especially modern or experimental (in fact, may seem by now quite traditional); the corollary process also seems to hold true, that traditional forms such as the sonnet gain new interest from their use in the Irish context by writers such as Kavanagh, Richard Murphy, Heaney, and Muldoon.

The range of accomplishment in contemporary Irish poetry is great, and I have not been tempted to invoke any definition of poetry that might eliminate all but a half-dozen or so of these writers. I have found all the poems enjoyable or, at least, interesting for their attempt on our behalf to make sense of the world that is Ireland and elsewhere. Many of the poems are more than interesting and enjoyable: a considerable number remind us of one test for the truest poetry by giving us the sensation, to paraphrase Emily Dickinson, of having the tops of our heads taken off. My choice of individual poems cannot please everyone, but that is inevitable; I have selected these particular poems deliberately if not dogmatically because they seem to me good poems and because they are in some way typical (or, occasionally, atypical) of the writer's work as a whole. In my inclusion of several generations of poets after Yeats, I have wanted to demonstrate both the rich diversity of that body of poetry as well as its coherence and continuity.

A good deal of critical commentary on this poetry is now available: readers may wish to consult two excellent recent books—Dillon Johnston's *Irish Poetry After Joyce* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1985) and Robert Garratt's *Modern Irish Poetry: Tradition and Continuity from Yeats to Heaney* (University of California Press, 1986). Both books contain extensive and useful bibliographies of criticism.

I am grateful to the University of California Press for offering me the chance to revise this anthology; it is one sign, at least, of the vitality of contemporary Irish poetry that many selections have had to be updated so extensively, and new poets added. With considerable pangs, I have felt compelled to omit a few writers who were featured in the first edition, notably Stewart Parker, whose energies have been channeled away from poetry into theater to make him the significant and accomplished dramatist he now is. That regret is, however, offset

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by delight that there are so many promising young poets in Ireland today (more of them women than before) who will renew and extend the tradition of Irish poetry in the years to come, as they sing what the great Fionn esteemed the best music in the world—"the music of what happens."

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