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ASPECTS OF GAELIC POETRY – AND ITS MIRACULOUS SURVIVAL

A talk given by Gabriel Rosenstock to the Schule für Dichtung (Poetry Academy), Vienna.

‘Language, in the end, is all that matters. Our very survival depends on it. What we say and how we say it, the symbols that we use to represent reality, these are the things that will preserve us...’

De Valera talking to Schrödinger in *A Game with Sharpened Knives*, a novel by Neil Belton.

There is a magnificent poem by **Cathal Ó Searcaigh** in which Kathmandu is personified as a woman, a woman with endless chores and duties from morning to dusk. In a way I see the poem as standing for something indestructible in Irish-language verse. The language as a literary tool might be almost disappearing at home, or hanging on as a mere wraith. In foreign fields, look - she blooms, she recreates herself as a woman.

Could anything be older than this personification of place as woman? Ireland herself is the tripartite goddess Éire, Banba, Fódla, and an Irish-language poet is always subtly aware of this. (My latest bilingual volume is called *Bliain an Bhandé/ Year of the Goddess*, having decided to dedicate a whole year to her!)

Many Irish writers never even heard of Éire. George Bernard Shaw on receiving a message from Éamon de Valera afterwards stated that ‘Éire is a translation of Ireland’, not realizing that Éire existed for hundreds and hundreds of years before the word Ireland was ever written or spoken.

Does it matter? Of course it does. ‘Ireland my sireland’ was a bit of 9th century doggerel and that about sums it up as to gender mixup.

Mise Éire
Sine mé ná an Chailleach Béarra ...

I am Éire
I am older than the Hag of Beare ...

When a Gaelic poet reads these oracular lines by poet-rebel **P. H. Pearse (1879 – 1916)**, the feeling engendered may not necessarily be an atavistic one. It may be a feeling of language as alive before nationhood, older than nationality. An Ireland of landscape, of grass and heather and furze and acorns, mountains, lakes, cliffs, and horses and badgers and hares, and laughter and weeping, and myths galore, a land where to be dead means to be remembered. A land in which poets were once forbidden to utter their country’s name and so over two hundred names for Ireland evolved.

And the poet who reads Pearse’s lines will be happy that Pearse, the first of our modern poets in Irish and an enlightened language activist, was also a rebel. And when we come across the line, ‘Má bheireann carbhat orm, tachtfaidh sé mé’ ‘If a tie takes a hold of me, it will choke me’ by **Michael Davitt (1850 – 1905)**, we know that

the rebel condition is part of breathing the air of Ireland and that we will rebel against anything and everything except Ireland herself.

And so, following ancient rituals, Ó Searcaigh praises his spiritual home in Nepal, as previously he had praised the hills and valleys of his native Donegal. (A free translation as follows):

Kathmandu and her affairs

Day breaks out and she wakes me up suddenly
With a cock-crow kiss!
Looking out from the top window
I spy her in the streets, parading her morning saffron sari.
Her breath in traffic flow, pure draught of heat.

She's on her feet now, no time to rest,
Her clutch about her;
She rouses them with a noisy jackdaw voice, puts the skids under them,
Humouring them so that they might face this day breezily –
A day rising out from the yellowing globe of her eye.

Lunch hour, from the hotel balcony, I see her
Stretched in slumber,
Her urban contours lying awkwardly, dog tired,
Her bazaar bosom heaving, exhausted,
The dangerous laneways of her combed tresses.

Today the poor are huddled
In the backstreets of her cloak, fretful,
Their wants, their needs pierce her
And how she sighs over and over again when the strong
Walk all over the weak - kid goat teaching its mother to bleat.

Tutelary spirit of street shrines, wonder-woman of broken palaces,
Wise one of crumbling courtyards.
A while ago her sky-eyes darkened and she wept with consternation
Seeing her family rising up in rebellion
Against all oppressors.

The softness of prayer in her wild words
As her body supports scaffolding –
Stink of pus in her bones –
In spite of this she sings a song of hope
In the cries of protesters, blossoming tongue of youth.

Evening. Pagoda-shaped she is,
Bright gems glisten in her ears;
She walks a stately walk among her own, blesses them
With incense chatter: hear the little peals of laughter
As she banTERS with market ladies, fiery eyed.

Night. She spreads the bright
Headdress of darkness
Over all, her satin cloak
Encrusted with silver brooches, an amber moon
Her torch, traffic horns her hum.

To her I will lift my eyes, my soul's nurse,
When midnight rings
And I stretch my limbs; she comes to me with a sleeping-draught
Full of giddy sparks from the sky. As she departs
She leaves a star in the window, sweet and soft as her kiss.

(Translation: G Rosenstock)

There seems to me to be a lushness, a richness, a sumptuousness in this poem which the English language has been shying away from since the days of Tennyson, James Elroy Flecker et al. Perhaps English-language poetry is more responsive to history than is Irish-language poetry. In a sense, Irish-language poetry, especially in the post-Jacobite era, has been more concerned with geography than history... certainly some of the defining movements in European thought and art, whether the Enlightenment, the Reformation, the Industrial Revolution, Impressionism, Expressionism, Psychology, Orientalism, Existentialism, Dadaism, Surrealism, Feminism ... few such influences coloured the consciousness of the Gael and then in the 1960s everything seemed to arrive together like a colourfully wrapped parcel waiting to be opened... and, of course, Irish would have to find words for all of these phenomena... Dadaism was easy as the word 'Dada' is Irish means 'Nothing'! Its founder Tristan Tzara, whose real name was Sami Rosenstock, would have been happy to know that another Rosenstock would be in Ireland to welcome him, if somewhat belatedly, to our shores.

New ways of thinking about the world included redefining Ireland as an entity shaped by neo-colonialism. Neo-colonialism often brings a degree of 'self-hatred' with it. So, it wasn't always easy to assert one's rights as an Irish speaker or to believe in the romantic notion of a language revival, especially as creative writers and language revivalists do not necessarily share the same views on anything other than the importance of the language itself.

The ancient shamanistic gift of shape-shifting is enshrined in the best of modern Gaelic poetry. For **Sorley Mc Lean** in Gaelic Scotland, time is a deer in the woods. For **Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill**, merfolk have come in on land. Irish poets in English have moved a lot towards realism, realizing that English may not be able to carry the full weight of ancestral magic ... even Yeats had to give it up, having exhausted its possibilities. For many, the notion of magic is inherently suspect. And yes, magic has had certain adherents whom one would not wish to bring home to one's parents. Nonetheless, throw out magic and you deal a death-blow to the imagination – and to the music of language.

Magic is far from exhausted in the Gaelic tradition. How could it be when words themselves are shape-shifting all the time, when the meaning of *gealach* is ‘moon’, shifting to ‘a thin slice of raw turnip’. All its magic is required if the language is to survive this 21st century. Ó Searcaigh didn’t have to go as far as Nepal. He discovered a magic in his own mountainy parish after returning from London and this return to a living landscape coincided for him with a return to a living tradition. The living tradition was there all the time but sometimes one must be removed from it to see it for what it really is.

For a long while, in living memory, there was a deep feeling of despair in Ireland. Was it in the 1950s? It was inherited from previous generations going back to the Great Famine of 1846/47 and language loss on a catastrophic scale. Ireland was being eaten away by emigration and poverty. Intellectuals and peasants shared one thing - they were slowly going out of their minds.

Old ways were fading as tradition – the Irish language itself - became associated with ignorance and poverty or sentimentalism. Real Irish music was being replaced, even at home, by phoney songs composed around pianos in New York, often by Italians, Jews or Germans who had never laid a foot on Irish soil. ‘I’ll take you home again, Kathleen’? Ah yes, it could have been someone pining for his own patch of the world in Eastern Europe - and it probably was.

And now, today, Ireland is host to thousands and thousands of Eastern European workers. How many will stay and have their children educated in Ireland? Will there be new writers in Irish whose names do not begin with an Ó or a Mac? If so, it will make the scene less lonely for the Rosenstocks of the world!

Irish literature never had much need for science fiction – or even travel writing - until recently. The local parish was a mystery map, a treasure map. Look at this memorable poem by **Máirtín Ó Direáin (1910 – 1988)**:

Glór Acastóra

Cá bhfuilir uaim le fada
A ghlór acastóra?
Thiar i gcúl an ama atáir
Cé gur iomaí oíche i bhfad ó shin
Ba cheol thú i mo chluasa.

Carr Aindí Goill ar chapall maith
Bhíodh ag dul in aghaidh aird
Ar a bhealach go hEoghanacht.
Deireann súile m’aighe liom
Go raibh péint ghlé dhearg air,
Ach ní hé sin is measa liom
Ná is mó a airím uaim,
Ach glór an acastóra
A bhogadh chun suain mé.

Axle Sound

Where are you now this long time
Axle sound?
Locked away in time you are
Though it's many a night long ago
And music to my ears you were.

Aindí Goill's cart and a good horse
Pulling it all the way
Up the slope to Eoghanacht.
My mind's eye tells me
It was painted red,
But that's not what concerns me now
Nor is it what I miss most
But the axle sound
That rocked me once to sleep.
(*Trans.* Gabriel Rosenstock)

For the reader of Irish, the mention of a place-name - Eoghanacht – brings an extra magical enrichment to the whole poem. It is the same with many, many poems in the canon, such as *Cill Chais*. As Frank O' Connor translates the opening:

'What shall we do without timber
The last of the woods is down ...'

When we read these lines we think of Ireland being denuded of her woods to build ships for the British navy but we also think of our Tree Alphabet, A for *ailm* the elm, B for *beith* the birch, C for *coll* the hazel, D for *dair* the oak...

To an outsider, Aran is an island. To a native, such as Ó Direáin, it is each and every field, each and every stone wall. Even what appears to be one long sandy beach can have topographical subdivisions, as the writings of **Tim Robinson** on Aran and Connemara richly reveal.

In today's cacophony, who hears an axle sound anymore? Who would recognise it, who remember it years after? But there is a Zen-like purity in the perception celebrated in this poem. It gently proclaims that everything is significant, 'nothing is dead until it is lost to the memory' and I can't remember where that quotation comes from!

Which place-name is closest to the Irish psyche, Kathmandu or Eoghanacht? This is not a silly question Film maker **Bob Quinn** sees Ireland as an island with constant maritime influence occurring throughout the centuries, particularly from North Africa. Some of our "creation myths" if we can call them that, refer to invasion after invasion. Certain scholars emphasise the widespread nature of the Celtic realms, and their "otherness" in a European context; others downplay Celtic influence. Some people ask, who were the Fir Bolg, legendary colonisers of ancient times. Were they Belgae from Europe? Or does the word Bolg signify 'béalgha', a type of blowgun

originating in Africa? We have always amused ourselves with versions of pseudo-history.

But where scholars might sift between history and legend, folklore has always looked east, to such mythic characters as *Rí an Domhain Thoir* (The King of the Eastern World), while unaccompanied *sean-nós* singing has an eastern echo as far as the ear of many cognoscenti is concerned. And was it not said that the Irish visited Babel and listened to the confusion of language there and brought back the very best sounds to form our own language.

If Ó Searcaigh has created something of a Xanadu out of Kathmandu might it be because the notion of sacred place has been on the wane since the beginnings of modernisation in Ireland, culminating in motorways covering the land where kings and queens and restless bards once slumbered. The enemy is within. The enemy is infrastructure and infrastructure will have its way even if it means tearing everything down. Meanwhile, an internal infrastructure, a nation's psychic and spiritual balance, its relationship to the past and to the various keys that unlock the past, is left in a very delicate balance indeed.

I grew up within an ass's roar of Ardpatrik in East Limerick. There's a hill there on which St. Patrick stood. Looking away south west to Kerry, his missionary zeal began to falter and he said, 'Beannaím uaim siar sibh!' That is to say: 'Good Christ! I'm not going into Kerry. I'll bless ye all from here'. Everybody in Ireland has history at their doorstep. Too much history, some might say. And regional diversity is still quite strong. Cork humour is not the same as Cavan humour. Most traditional musicians introduce a jig, a hornpipe, a march or a reel with a few words as to its provenance, such as 'I heard this tune from Miko Russell in Doolin, Co. Clare in the summer of '82.'

Donegal fiddling is not Sligo fiddling is not Clare fiddling and so on. Who knows what factors feature in the subtle differences. The landscape? The people? It's everything. Regional English-language accents in Ireland still speak volumes about a person and his or her attitudes to life while, in some quarters, the practise continues of sending one's children to England so that they might lose their Irish brogue. Indeed, attitudes to the Irish language are often formed by the ethos of schools and by a policy, stated or unstated, which is favourable or not to the language. The recent rise in popularity of Irish-medium schools should not fool us into thinking that this is, in itself, can create a true restoration of Irish. The Gaeltachtaí or Irish-speaking districts, have been shrinking for over a century and there is no social cohesion among urban speakers of the language. I have been forgiven I think, for once responding to the question 'For whom do you write?' with the glib but deeply-felt answer, 'For generations past...'

By singing the mystery of place (as Irish poets have done for millennia), poets such as Ó Searcaigh perform a healing ritual and send signals of hope for our survival as integrated human beings, provided we are capable of interpreting such signals. At its best, local music blends with the music of the spheres.

Ó Searcaigh became the 'victim' of a film which started out as homage to a great poet and ended by exposing his intimacies with Nepalese young men. The filmmaker was a neighbour of his and I suspect they will be talking about all this in a hundred years from now. Perhaps forever.

I hope Ó Searcaigh leaves his skull to the nation. The skull of **O' Carolan (1670 1738)**, bard-composer and harpist, was used as a vessel from which to drink milk as a cure for 'the falling sickness'. And we are all falling now, falling in time, falling into fame or oblivion, in free fall ... and what's it all about?

Centuries ago, when English ways had eaten into the fabric of Irish society, poets such as **Ó Bruadair (1625 -1698)** decided it was time to throw in the towel:

I will sing no more song! the pride of my country I sang
Through forty long years of good rhyme, without any avail;
And no one cared even as much as the half of a hang
For the song or the singer, so here is an end to the tale ...
(*Trans.* James Stephens)

Miraculously, however the tradition survived and is still evolving. Societies exist today, even in Europe, which, seemingly, have no need for poetry. This can hardly be said about Ireland, however. Poetry in Ireland is still regarded by many not so much as one of life's ornaments as central to its sustenance. It's in the air, never far away at weddings, funerals, inaugurations and shenanigans. You insult a poet in Ireland at your peril. Irish poets – Shakespeare confirms this - were able to rhyme rats to death and the fear lives on that to curse a poet would be tantamount to cursing yourself.

Irish-language poetry will survive, I think, because of the extraordinary devotion displayed towards the language by her troop of loyal lovers. Let me explain what I mean: if one hears an English word mispronounced in Ireland, the reaction might be laughter, or a snigger or, indeed no reaction at all. A raised eyebrow, perhaps. If Irish speakers hear an Irish word mispronounced or see a public sign that is mangled somehow (as many are), the reaction is a painful wince or a terrible groan. Why is this? It is because of an extremely sensitive relationship which poets have with the language. What harms the language harms the speaker, the writer, the guardian of the language.

Do English-language poets in Ireland actually love the English language with the same fervour? Whether they do or not, it is of another intensity, another flavour, to the Gaelic poet's love of Irish. And, whether we like it or not, English was the language of the Pale in Ireland, the language which sought to wield a political, moral and aesthetic superiority over the rest of Ireland, a propaganda war lasting over seven hundred years and one which may not yet be over. We can forgive and forget, of course, but what's history but remembering?

Poet **Seán Ó Riordáin (1916 – 1977)** wrote many self-accusatory poems in which he questioned his own handling of language, as though torn between allegiance to what was well expressed in the past and an urge to make things new, even if that meant risking being contaminated by *an striapach allírach*, that 'foreign whore' he called English!

But the cult surrounding the language itself – in which 'great speakers' of Irish became the new royalty – had certain inherent dangers. To know that the Irish word *turcaí* means not just a 'turkey' (that would be too easy) but also an animal allowed to graze with another herd without permission is all very fine but does it qualify one to brush shoulders with European intellectuals? Hardly. As far back as 1969 **Gearóid S. Mac Eoin** complained: 'Few Irish people read, much less buy books, and there is little hope for a thriving publishing industry until the prevalent anti-intellectual attitudes have been educated out of the people...' (*A View of the Irish Language*, Dublin 1969).

Western society in general has experienced a 'dumbing down' of arts and entertainment as though a cultural hollowness now exists which must immediately be

filled by hollow laughter. Is there a danger that serious Irish-language writers might be tempted away from the poem, the essay, the play, the short story or the novel for more instant success and financial reward via the entertainment industry with all its triviality, crudity and sensationalism? Or perhaps popular culture can exist side by side with more refined expressions of arts?

We don't know what the future will bring. Will there be poets writing in Irish two hundred years from now? Will there be an audience? A literary festival IMRAM was set up in recent years. The old word means a mystery voyage and as long as this sense of mystery survives we have a chance. It's better than the somewhat blasé attitude we find across the water, an over-confidence, an inherent sense of superiority. Certain plants thrive better in the shade and maybe Irish is better off outside of the limelight.

I blinked the other day and found out that I was no longer a young poet but a senior one, almost. And so I am asked to edit the occasional volume by an up and coming poet – and maybe throw in a blurb while I'm at it. And when a volume by **Dairene Ní Chinnéide** came my way I had to take note of a phrase 'ar bis le hársacht', which could mean high on history, stoned by antiquities. Of course, she comes from an area where Irish, as the first language, is rapidly declining. But it is a landscape bristling with ancient stones, standing stones, ogham stones, and she is among them like a mountain goat, her poetry full of the wonder of natural things and billowing waves. And even the waves contain the blood of history, the ill-fated Armada. She reminds us that we are an island, albeit in fortress Europe.

In name, at least, Ireland is a bilingual nation. The naming of a place was, in a sense, the blessing of a place, the sanctification of a place. All over Ireland one can find this sense of *temenos*, of sacred place, whether connected to the pagan tradition, to Christian piety or to the blood sacrifices of history. Naming a place, even a mythical place such as Tír na nÓg/ The Land of Youth or Í Bhreasail/ Hy Brazil, gives a ghostly presence, another reality, to such places on days when heat-shimmers appear off the western coast.

Irish poets writing in English have been infected as well by this wonderful naming disease. Here's the opening of Paul Durcan's 'The Haulier's Wife Meets Jesus on the Road Near Moone':

"I live in the town of Cahir
In the Glen of Aherlow,
Not far from Peekau
In the towland of Toureen,
At the foot of Galtee Mór,
In the County of Tipperary ..."

Yes, I think we get the picture. Might this obsession with naming places be another way of saying, 'I belong here' after centuries of dispossession and absentee landlordism? It's strange. I wonder is *The Irish Times* the only newspaper in the world which carries a weekly topographical column, *Where's that?*

Brian Friel's famous play *Translations* deals with the period and the events relating to Irish place names being given official anglicized forms. Just when we think certain matters are safely confined to history, they flare up again and recently we had the high drama of the good people of Dingle wondering should they jettison the English name of their town or not.

Of course, name-changing is nothing new. It has happened before. It will happen again. Bombay is now Mumbai. Or is it? It's when official use and popular use clash that problems of identity or identification arise.

On our Dublin tramlines, each station is announced bilingually. Thus, Smithfield is announced as Smithfield and also as Margadh na Feirme which literally means Farm Market but sounds like one has arrived at last in Shangri La. Or Hell, depending, I suppose, on a myriad of factors which colour attitudes to language. The question I ask is this: does Margadh na Feirme really exist? Does it have an objective, legitimate reality or is it only a shadow of Smithfield? Multiply this example a million times over and you have a metaphor for Irish itself, for all that is spoken and written in the language. It exists and yet it does not exist, it is an echo, a shadow, a type of *doppelgänger* or ghostly twin, half hidden from the world.

Our national epic, *The Táin*, dates from the eighth century but may be a thousand years older than that in its oral form. Naming goes on in *The Táin* at a fierce rate:

“Then the harpers of the Venerable Tree of Caim Bile came from the Red Cataract of Ess Ruad to play for them. The Connachtmen took them for spies sent by Ulster. They hunted them until they turned into deer and vanished into the standing-stones at Lía Mór, for they were druids of great power.

“Lethan – the Broad – came to his ford on the river Níth in Conaille. Galled by Cú Chulainn's deeds, he lay in wait for him. Cú Chulainn cut off his head and left it with the body. Hence the name Áth Lethan, Broad Ford. Many chariots were broken in the fighting just before that in the next ford. Hence the name Áth Carpat, Chariot Ford ...” (Translation: Ciaran Carson).

This then is the ancient landscape of an ancient people transmogrified over the centuries. One of the great novels of our time is *Broken April* by the Albanian genius Ismail Kadare. In it he describes boundaries and the medieval - if not Homeric - rituals that go with boundaries amid the stone cairns speckling the High Plateau. A landscape of blood and pain and memory that will not go to sleep. It would be wrong to say that the Irish landscape is not also one of pain and desolation to match all its beauty and magic. Cathal Ó Searcaigh has a poem called *Gort na gCnámh, The Field of Bones*. A young woman, violated by her father, buries her newborn child in the 'field of bones'. Cathal was read out from the altar, as they say, about this poem, namely condemned from the pulpit at Sunday Mass. What better example could you find of the ancient frisson between the Christian and the pagan or natural world! This tradition has lived long in Ireland and will, I believe, continue to live – even though we may not be conscious of this or any other particular tradition all of the time or any of the time. Clive James says in *Cultural Amnesia* (2007): ... ‘ a tradition is an accumulation through time of inspired works, created by people who do not have tradition on their minds. If they have anything on their minds, it is their own uniqueness: the way in which they do not fit in, not the ways they do ...’

Poet **Liam Ó Muirthile** is among the essayists writing in *A New View of the Irish Language* (2008) and he believes that broadcasters, not poets, are the new high priests. ‘There is little room for the real poem,’ he says, ‘that form of emotional and intellectual engagement with the world that can change our lives. A new home must be found for the poem in Irish.’ A bleak vision, is it not? A bit like those campaigns for adopting or sponsoring a child from the Third World. Anybody out there to adopt, to sponsor, to nurture poetry in Irish?

In the sextet that ends his poem *Death of an Irishwoman*, **Michael Hartnett**, who wrote in both languages, said:

She was a summer dance at the crossroads.
She was a cardgame where a nose was broken.
She was a song that nobody sings.
She was a house ransacked by soldiers.
She was a language seldom spoken.
She was a child's purse, full of useless things ...

If poetry in Irish is to continue, the joys of Irish will vie with the sorrows of Irish to attract new recruits. 'She was a language seldom spoken ...' There is a poignancy beyond words in this... a call to words, a call, indeed, for poems.

