

# Criss-Crossings: Literary Adventures On Irish And Welsh Shores

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**T**he Irish have always been very generous to me. It's 1980, I'm twenty years old. I've come down from Cambridge University, having suffered a breakdown. I have a waitressing job lined up in Cardiff and decide to go hitch-hiking on my own in Ireland over the Easter holidays. Lest you feel worried for my sexual security, I live permanently in a pair of dungarees which I consider an ample anti-rape device, simply because they're so difficult to shed in the Ladies.

I'm in the loo on the Fishguard-Rosslare ferry, facing an imminent tussle with the dungarees. Standing in the queue next to me is an elderly Irish lady wearing a beautiful silver Celtic cross. I compliment her on it. She immediately takes it from around her neck and gives it to me. The top link is worn by frequent use. I treasure it and, in my turn, pass it on to someone else who admires it. That's how the best things in life work, including literary traditions.

I hope the learned academics among you will forgive my use of a personal account of my encounters with the Irish tradition in order to forge an argument about lyricism. This is less an anecdotal journey than the story of a cultural conversation which has taken place over the last quarter century and which, no doubt, will continue. In that time, I have flown, ferried and sailed over to Ireland in a small yacht and back, so it has been a criss-crossing process in the sense of back and forth. But I chose this title because the Irish tradition is close enough to the Welsh to give us a sense of familiarity with stimulating differences. It's a family kinship. We send cards and visit but we're not so polite with each other that we never fall out. Indeed, a Welsh friend of mine married to an Irishman commented the other day that she'd been looking at the *Mabinogion*, the medieval Welsh tales, and was beginning to understand that the two nations don't exactly get on. Yes, I replied thinking of poor Branwen: great sex but not such good marriages. So I want to claim the privilege of cousinship and challenge to celebrate – criss and cross – some Irish solutions to dilemmas which also face Welsh writers. If I'm cross it's not because I'm angry but because I consider myself lucky to have such strong relatives against which and with whom to push in the literary enterprise. For me, the Irish tradition has provided a rich and illuminating parallel literature to that of Wales, a way of seeing alternative

and suggestive ways of dealing with specific cultural pressures. This also means seeing writers fall into traps which, in my view, should be avoided.

It's 1982 and the dungarees have perished (though they did their job well in Ireland and elsewhere). I've been back to Cambridge and finished my degree in English literature. I want to be a poet but, unable to resolve the cultural deadlock between the two languages which are available to me, I go to America on a Harkness Fellowship. I'm stuck. I can't bring myself to betray my Welsh-language background by starting to write in English and yet I'm already involved in a love affair with English literature. I'm in the Lamont Poetry Library at Harvard and I see a figure I recognise. He has a mop of thick, unruly hair and the air of a farmer. It's Seamus Heaney. I know that this is one of the decisive moments of my life, one of those junctions that can change everything. I pluck up all my courage and approach the man, explaining that I'm Welsh, I'm on a fellowship and please may I be allowed to sit in on his poetry workshop? Oh, and I write in Welsh.

"Ah, I couldn't cope with that," said Seamus. I had assumed that an Irish writer would understand completely what it meant to be part of a linguistic minority but wanting to enter the field of the majority without committing filial impiety. My first reaction to Seamus's comment – and I'm sure he won't mind my discussing this as I have talked to him about it since – was to feel utterly marginalised. What on earth was the point of trying to be a poet who honoured her own tradition if even Seamus Heaney didn't consider the enterprise viable? As you can see, I *was* a little worked up about this and Seamus could not possibly have known that so much was riding for me on this chance encounter. It took me years to begin to understand the contours of the Irish political landscape which might have made him wary of seemingly nationalistic bandwagons. After all, he had fought his own battle to resist the co-option of his work by the Republican cause. This was lesson number one: for all the similarities between the Irish and the Welsh traditions, there are differences which mean that the cultural politics of the two countries are further apart than their apparent proximity might suggest. In Scotland, Ireland and Wales, the aboriginal languages lie like a mineral in very different rocks and need to be approached and mined by distinct methods. Because we're all Celts doesn't mean that the pickaxes we use are the same shape, nor do we face the same creative hazards.

I tend to meet the other Celtic writers abroad most often, come to think of it, in Germany where, perhaps, they still feel closer than the English do to the primeval forests. A few years ago I took part in a very lively debate between a group of Celtic writers. A poet who wrote only in the Irish suggested, when challenged about the size of his sales, that he was writing

for the dead. His counter-attack asserted, provocatively, that his compatriots who wrote in English weren't Irish at all. Bedlam ensued. As the only writer there who wrote in both the antagonistic languages of her country, I argued from personal experience that aggression toward the other has deep psychological ramifications for the bilingual speaker, and that a gentle permissiveness is in fact the best recipe for a creative life. I was regarded as an oddity, I feel, and after my speech, the opposing sides got on with enjoying baiting each other. Aggressive projection is much easier to bear than what analysts call the depressive position, which is basically being able to tolerate the pain of ambiguous feelings. If you're unable to move on from such a conflict, then you may become stuck in depression.

But back to Harvard. Whatever Seamus Heaney thought of the intense Welsh-speaker who'd accosted him in the library, he did let me join his class, an act of generosity for which I'm still grateful. I'd never been to a workshop before and so didn't know what to expect. What I remember about them most was their lightheartedness. One exercise, I recall, was to write a poem about your favourite word – much as Paul Muldoon had with 'Quoof', his family's name for a hot water bottle. Indeed, an even more wildly hirsute Muldoon turned up and read in the Lamont Poetry Library, as did a sombre Derek Mahon. One of the many lessons I took from that year was the importance of a serious playfulness in poetry, that you could only do good work if your whole personality, rather than earnest intent only, were engaged in the process.

Later that year, Seamus published *Sweeney Astray*, his version of the Irish poems *Buile Suibhne*, from a manuscript written in County Sligo between 1671 and 1674. Sweeney is a king who's cursed by the cleric Ronan Finn and, as a result, has to roam, half out of his mind, through the wild Irish countryside, exiled from human society. Re-reading *Sweeney Astray* now, however, I can see that I'd assigned Heaney's position a fixity which was far from being the case. This translation formed part of Seamus's argument with elements in his own culture which might want to fetter him as a poet. In the preface to the book, he says that "it is possible to read the work as an aspect of the quarrel between free creative imagination and the constraints of religious, political, and domestic obligation." During that year I heard Seamus read several times from his translation, and it took me back to the early Welsh verse that I'd encountered in school, as in this passage:

The alder is my darling,  
all thornless in the gap,  
some milk of human kindness  
coursing in its sap.

[...]

Sweetest of the leafy stalks,  
the vetches strew the pathway;  
the oyster-grass is my delight,  
and the wild strawberry.

Low-set clumps of apple trees  
drum down fruit when shaken;  
scarlet berries clot like blood  
on mountain rowan. (*Sweeney Astray*, Faber, 1984, pp. 36-37)

Seeing *Sweeney* – and, later other books such as *Station Island* – being published in the US made me understand that, in the right hands, Celtic material could seize the interest of an international audience at the highest level. This, of course, has much to do with the special relationship between the Irish and the East coast cities of America, especially Boston. But it was also a result of the unique position Seamus Heaney held at Harvard, where he was Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory. The presiding ghost over the Harvard department was Robert Lowell. I attended Helen Vendler’s formidable seminars on the poet’s work, sessions intensified by the fact that she had known the poet personally. Lowell had once written that Heaney is “the best Irish poet since Yeats.” After Lowell’s death, Heaney had, in some sense, inherited the former’s mantle, with its overtones of supreme East Coast American confidence. Thus, a poet who was translating from the Celtic tradition, far from being marginal, was speaking with authority at the centre of Ivy League privilege. It was as if Ovid had made his journey in reverse, from the barbaric shores of Tomis to Rome, the centre of the Roman empire.

During my time in America, and with the encouragement of poets like Joseph Brodsky and Derek Walcott, I started to write poetry in English. But I was unwilling to give up writing in Welsh. When I came back to the UK, to do research at Oxford, I decided to educate myself in early Welsh literature. This felt important to me because you can’t hope to think with your whole cultural brain unless you first attend to its earliest and most primitive activities. It’s like the sequence of buildings you see often in Ireland these days. A small, very run-down cottage is the hippocampus around which a bold modern bungalow complex of the cerebrum has been constructed. So, I applied myself to deciphering the poems in the *Oxford Book of Welsh Verse*, and was particularly captivated by some thirteenth-century descriptions of

cold weather. They are more primitive than the Sweeney texts and omit the main verb in a sentence, rather than doing nature full semantic justice. This has the effect of generalising the landscape. Indeed, my version of two of them combined makes me think of winter in the Oxford parks:

Bare mountain, bitter wind, more snow tonight.  
Sky pewter, stream opaque;  
Fish caught fast in frozen lake.

Breath thick, words thin, voices carry far;  
Snow in white waves earth cannot break,  
hands fumble, numb, while old bones ache.

Lone tree twisted by the leaning wind,  
Frozen rigid to the root;  
Brittle grass breaks like glass underfoot.

Earth burns its bodies under standing stone,  
Christ icy, Christ wielding the cold's slow fire,  
Loving the flesh, but needing bare bone.

Here I was trying to use Welsh prosody in English, which I'm attempting to do at a much larger scale at the moment. I had been influenced by Benjamin Britten's setting of the English 'Lyke-Wake Dirge' in his *Serenade for Tenor, Horn and Strings*, which shows how close the Celtic and Anglo-Saxon alliterative prosody can sound. Indeed, Seamus Heaney had no difficulty in moving to the Anglo-Saxon for his translation of *Beowulf*, and claiming the Viking part of his Irish heritage.

R. S. Thomas's famous lecture, *Abercuawg*, delivered at the 1976 Cardigan National Eisteddfod, highlighted the value of early Celtic nature poetry. As a starting point for his talk, Thomas took a line from the poetry of Llywarch Hen, a character from the sixth century but used as a poetic persona by a ninth- or tenth-century poet. The line is: "*Yn Abercuawg, yt ganant gogeu*" ("In Abercuawg, cuckoos sing"). The lecture begins like this:

Where is Abercuawg? I'm not sure if that's the right way to ask the question. I half fear that the answer to that is that it doesn't exist at all. And as a Welshman, I don't see any meaning to my life unless such a place as Abercuawg exists. So, let me ask the question in another way. What is Abercuawg? (*Abercuawg*, Gomer, 1976, p.5.)

Thomas then goes on to suggest that Abercuawg is a linguistic reality. He highlights the euphony of the place name within *cynghanedd*, the strict system of alliterative music deployed in traditional Welsh prosody. Thomas observes that “by using a word like Abercuawg, Llywarch Hen has caused something to strike like a bell in my ears and heart for ever and ever.” Abercuawg, Thomas seems to be saying, is the act of naming the place, is the sound of the *cynghanedd*. But Thomas isn’t content with this. Abercuawg is his name for an act of perception, a process of “coming into being.” Much like God, man can’t see Abercuawg but

by trying to see her, by longing for her, by refusing to accept that she belongs to the past, and that she’s ruined; by refusing to accept something second-hand in her stead, man succeeds in keeping her as an eternal possibility.

This could be a straightforward account of the Wales evoked in R.S. Thomas’s writings. It’s not so much a geographical entity as a spiritual condition to which the poet and, he hopes his nation, aspires.

Thomas has been reading the ‘Sick Man of Abercuawg’ verses, which I quote from Patrick K. Ford’s book on Llywarch Hen:

In Abercuawg cuckoos sing  
On flowering branches;  
Clamorous cuckoo, let him sing on a while.

In Abercuawg cuckoos sing  
Upon flowering branches.  
Woe to the sick one who hears them constantly.

In Abercuawg are cuckoos singing;  
It saddens me  
That those who heard them hear them no more.

I listened to a cuckoo on an ivy-covered branch.  
My shield-strap has slackened;  
Grief for what I loved grows.

From the top of the mighty oak  
I listened to the voice of birds.  
Lusty cuckoo, each remembers what he loves.

(*The Poetry of Llywarch Hen*, tr. Patrick K. Ford, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1974)

Thomas doesn't quote these verses in his lecture, which masks perhaps their most striking feature. He's longing for a time past represented by a poet who is... longing for a time past. In the Welsh tradition the song of the cuckoo evokes not joy but melancholy. Sir Ifor Williams derives its call from *cw*, which means "where" (cognate with *quo* and *où*), as if the bird were singing "*Où sont les neiges d'autan?*", "Where are the snows of yesteryear?" One might challenge Thomas and argue that the poems require no response because we're already in Abercuawg, therefore no act of political will is required to get there. So, what looks like a call to arms turns out to be little more than an act of purely poetic solidarity. Thomas can say this because he believes that "it is not necessarily facts which decide the course of a man's life, but words."

In the long philosophical debate between things and the words which describe them – the signified and signifiers – we Celts have tended to be on the side of the signifier. Indeed, the *Cú Chulainn* legends are a kind of heroism born out of exaggeration. The hero's exploits are tied closely to what may be said of them. They are the heritage of a culture in which linguistic ability is, itself, considered a heroic activity. And this is where my argument with R.S. Thomas and one of his great heroes, W.B. Yeats, begins. Yeats is a poet with whom I fall regularly in and out of love. Once in love, I suppose, one is never entirely out of it but I can see very well what W.H. Auden meant when he said that he was one of the few "truly evil" people he had ever met. This judgement is modified by Auden's great poem to Yeats, which has become the model for modern elegy.

For a poet, particularly a Celtic one, Yeats is a very dangerous literary forebear, in much the same way as is Dylan Thomas. Like those earworm tunes which are impossible to get out of your head once you've heard them, the Yeats timbre, like a parasite, enters your bloodstream and gives you malarial fevers when you least expect it. Listen to this, from 'The Song of the Wandering Aengus':

I went out to the hazel wood,  
Because a fire was in my head,  
And cut and peeled a hazel wand,  
And hooked a berry to a thread;  
And when white moths were on the wing,  
And moth-like stars were flickering out,  
I dropped the berry in a stream  
And caught a little silver trout.

(*The Poems of W.B. Yeats*, ed. Richard J. Finneran, Macmillan, 1983, pp.59-60)

One day I would like to teach a whole class on Yeats's use of the word "and" in this poem. He uses repetition both to advance and hold back the action. He deploys the conjunction in the paratactic way of romances as a means of breaking the strict chronology of time into a continuous present. By so doing, he's creating a place, much like R.S.Thomas's Abercuawg. Just like the Abercuawg cuckoo, which "remembers what it loves", I hadn't realised how thoroughly I'd absorbed this lesson until I wrote an elegy for my sister-in-law. *Zero Gravity* coupled the process of her dying with the voyage of my cousin, Joe Tanner, on the space shuttle, to repair the Hubble Telescope. Thinking of Jacqueline leaving the earth I wrote:

Get rid of time  
and everything's dancing,

forget straight lines,  
all's blown away.

Now's honey from the bees of night, music from the bees of day.

(*Chaotic Angels*, Bloodaxe, 2005, p.93)

My bees had clearly been feeding on the apple blossom in Yeats's great poem, before flying on to Houston and Cardiff.

But now to my quarrel with Yeats. Much as I'm ravished by the brilliant lyricism in his work, I'm also deeply suspicious of it. When I confess this distrust in polite company, I notice that a look of pitying incomprehension comes over people who immediately attempt to dissuade me from this heresy. The source of it is this: in the idealised smoothness of Yeats's lines, I don't recognise the messiness and ugliness which I find a necessary part of the reality of everyday life. In fact, I'd go so far as to say that a certain lack of beauty is a guarantor of truthfulness. I say this while at the same time believing, as a poet, that beauty is a clue to something important being said. But then, there's no one more suspicious of propaganda than a spin doctor. In a recent interview Ricky Gervais, creator of *The Office*, made an interesting comment about the difference between being an amateur and a professional comedian. He said: "It's a strange thing. I stopped being funny when I became a comedian." What he means is that, in order to become funny in a sustained way, he gave up being personally hilarious. In much the same manner, I feel it's important that poets have a healthy distrust of the lyrical which, as professionals, they know is not an absolute moral quality but simply an aesthetic effect to be manipulated. Like the painter and

decorator whose house is in bad order, the sign of a good poet might be an artist who eschews “the poetic.”

In a late poem, ‘The Circus Animals’ Desertion’, Yeats comes clean about his choice in what R.S. Thomas described as the troubled relationship between objects and their names: “Players and painted stage took all my love / And not those things that they were emblems of.” And this is the nub of my difficulty with Yeats. He had, I believe, a bad influence on R.S. Thomas, for one. Given that the anglicized contemporary Wales was not acceptable to him, Thomas rejected it in favour of a chimera suggested by the strong signifiers of early Welsh poetry. This clouded Thomas’s judgement about politics, I believe, and led to some very strange and conflicting pronouncements.

I was fascinated, last year, to hear Paul Muldoon’s reading of his own and Welsh poetry here at Cardiff University. Speaking of reading out loud, Muldoon made a deliberate stance against the theatrical styles of Yeats and Dylan Thomas. Muldoon resists the euphony in his own work by electing to read it in a strikingly flat voice. But this stance in this is not what it first seems. In his own verse, the lines themselves are on the surface anti-lyrical, but the complexity of his puns and rhymes make him a direct descendant of Yeats’s technical abilities, though they’re deployed in creating an anti-climactic dryness which is, itself, a high style. Muldoon’s post-modern free play of signifiers is, actually, an extension of Yeats’s work, rather than a corrective to it. Muldoon’s provocative statement that “the poem itself is, after all, the solution to a problem only it has raised” comes very close to Yeats’s preference for the signifier rather than the signified. This is an aesthetic in which style dictates the political and moral stance assumed by the poet. And what might the politics of the free play of signifiers look like? It might be a refusal of monolithic truth, but it might, equally, be the rejection of any kind of meaning which refers to reality outside the linguistic act.

In the narrative of my own personal relationship with Irish poetry, I’ve left myself mugging up on ancient Welsh poetry, as a way of helping me write in both languages. In due course, I began in both Welsh and English and found that, far from being mutually antagonistic, composing in the one language seemed to speed the process in the other. I published two books of poetry in Welsh and then became stuck. So far, I had avoided writing specifically about the fate of the Welsh language because I didn’t want to do so in the nationalistic idiom which had dominated that discourse since the 1970s. This didn’t make sense to me politically – though I’m pro-devolution – nor did it seem to produce poetry like that which I wanted to write, with

some notable exceptions. There seemed to me to be little point in banging on about the decline of the Welsh language in terms which were of interest only to those who spoke it. After all, the loss of the language is part of a global profligacy with our inheritance which includes the degradation of the environment. Rather than being anomalous, being multilingual is a natural human condition. Indeed it's very favourable for the poetic enterprise. It's no surprise, I feel, that Paul Muldoon studied Irish at university; his post-modern mischievousness may be, partly, due to his knowledge of at least one other language.

Vienna, another Celtic literary festival, and I'm talking to the distinguished Irish poet Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill. I was just emerging from a crippling bout of clinical depression. My husband had come along to supervise me and kept on sending me to bed, not for sex, but in order to rest. During the weekend (in which the Bretons read for two hours with no translations!) Nuala made a comment which stopped me in my tracks. She said that she'd noticed how those relatives of hers who had consciously chosen to forget their first language, Irish, had all suffered later from some form of mental illness. Here was a way in which honouring one's mother tongue might have relevance to a general audience and not just minority interest. As a direct result of that conversation, I was able to begin writing *Y Llofrudd Iaith* (*The Language Murderer*) which was an investigation of exactly what, philosophically and psychologically, language loss might do to a community. The book-length poem was cast in the idiom of a detective novel. The mother tongue is an elderly woman who has two daughters, and is found murdered. After she dies, the detective in charge of the investigation speaks a poem, which I subsequently translated:

#### What's in a Name?

Today the wagtail finally forgot  
that I once called it *sigl-di-gwt*.

It didn't give a tinker's toss,  
went right on rooting in river moss,

(no longer *mwsogl*) relieved, perhaps,  
that someone would be noticing less

about its habits. Magpies' fear of men  
lessened, as we'd lost one means

(the word *pioden*) of keeping track  
of terrorist words out in the back.

*Lleian wen* is not the same as 'smew',  
because it's another point of view,

another bird. There's been a cull:  
*gwylan*'s gone and we're left with 'gull'

and blunter senses till that day  
when 'swallows', like *gwennol*, might stay away.

(*Chaotic Angels*, p.147)

I resisted translating the book for some years but, when I was persuaded to attempt it, I found that I had to change the plot, characters and setting. Now, following more closely from Nuala's suggestion, I set the poem in a mental hospital. The detective was a psychiatrist and the victim a patient. I was able, then, to tease out explicitly the extent to which the kind of language we use has an effect on our well-being. My psychiatrist was a birder, and I couldn't help thinking of R.S. Thomas, who was a keen ornithologist, as I wrote this poem outlining what might be at stake for him in his work:

#### Psychiatrist, Twitcher

Words always return to the scene of the crime.  
They have a legitimate point of view.  
And I have mine.

You have to be patient, because speech is shy,  
won't come if you're noisy,  
or keep asking why.

I use my silence as a khaki hide  
to flush out the wildlife.  
I make tea inside,

have a textbook wish-list, hope for the rare  
so I can tick it,  
prove it was there.

Sometimes I catch the glint of an eye  
in my binoculars –  
in here, with me.

What is this presence that dares give chase  
and me, a doctor?  
My most dangerous case. (*ibid.* p.170)

The presence in the hide with the psychiatrist is language itself. I wanted to suggest in this poem that the process of testing language against experience was, rightly, a hazardous one and that the cost of failure could, personally, be as high as suicide for the patient. This is very different from R.S. Thomas and Yeats's confidence in language as a force for good, detached from the facts of a life.

Much of the heat of R.S. Thomas's poetry in English comes from his rage and guilt that he's unable to write in Welsh. Paradoxically, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's tone in her latest, wonderfully rich book, *The Fifty Minute Mermaid*, is much cooler, perhaps because she's writing in the Irish. Her poems are translated by Paul Muldoon. The central conceit of the book is that the poet's mother is one of the merfolk who have come ashore. The metaphor of a displaced person – for the Irish diaspora, if you like – is explored at different levels throughout the book. The move from the sea to land, from Irish-language culture to English, is offered as an explanation for mental illness. Of the merfolk, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill writes:

The high spring tides leave their mark  
on the sea-walls of their minds, the edge of every breaking wave  
ragged with flotsam and jetsam and other wreckage,  
words carried ashore like the shells of sea-urchins  
and left at the high-water mark when they get the head-staggers  
at the time of the Saturday moon, words that are still imbued  
with the old order of things, phrases like  
'wide-thighs, narrow-waist, hare-brain.'

(Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, *The Fifty Minute Mermaid*, tr. Paul  
Muldoon, The Gallery Press, 2007, p.29)

The next poem makes the connection between loss of culture and mental distress even more explicit:

A terrible sense of stress  
is part and parcel of these emotions.  
At the end of the day she has nothing else  
to compare it to.  
She doesn't have the vocabulary for any of it. (*ibid.* p. 31)

The central metaphor allows Ní Dhomhnaill to illuminate many of the denial behaviours associated with language loss. For example, in 'The Merfolk and Washing Hair': "Since they've put water entirely behind them / they can't as much as take a bath" (*ibid.* p. 65). Ní Dhomhnaill then goes on to give an account of an individual mermaid, the speaker's mother. The image now widens out to cover inter-generational conflict. The merfolk dislike music intensely:

I well remember our own mermaid  
one day when we were driving a long distance from one place  
to another, my Dad had Nat King Cole  
on the tape-player, singing so sweetly 'Georgia On My Mind',  
and we were all singing along with him, 'Georgia, Oh Georgia...'  
'Turn that bloody thing off,' said the mermaid, out of nowhere.  
We were all very taken aback. 'Why?' ventured one of us  
who was a bit more impudent than the rest. (Usually you didn't ask  
questions.)  
'Turn that bloody thing off,' she repeated.  
'That's the kind of music that turns people into layabouts.' (*ibid.* p. 105)

When Ní Dhomhnaill analyses the behaviour of her mermaid, we realise that many of us have been harbouring one in our own houses:

She always had a real difficulty with boundaries.  
She could never understand, for instance, that we were all  
separate and discrete, each and every one of us. (*ibid.* p. 131)

Finally, the narrative ends with the myth becoming a way of describing dementia:

In the end  
I think what actually happened  
with our own mermaid  
is that she slipped back under the sea  
to the place she'd come from.

It was as if  
she'd one day stumbled upon the magical hood  
that had been hidden for ages up in the back loft  
simply because of her endless poking and pottering about.  
Even though she was still physically in our presence  
it was as though she had wrapped a layer of sealskin  
carefully around herself  
and was swimming off in some deep subconscious ocean  
where none of us could follow her. (*ibid.* p.143)

I've quoted at length from this book because I think it's a wonderful example of Irish writing using its own issues not to exclude those outside it, but to universalise the general human experience. Ní Dhomhnaill employs her poems to interrogate the tradition she's inherited and isn't afraid to criticise it. At no point does she simply ride the waves of its euphony. She's a scuba diver rather than a surfer and what she sees is all the broader for that.

Before going on to talk about another native Irish speaker's work, the Belfast poet Ciaran Carson, I want to make a brief detour into a contentious area of Irish-language poetry which offers a painful example of how Celticism may be associated with a denial of contemporary realities. As is usually the case, I met the poet Cathal Ó Searcaigh abroad, at a festival of poetry in endangered languages in New York. It was arranged that we would all read poems in our respective languages at the United Nations. When Cathal read his superb poem 'Lament', translated by Seamus Heaney, I forgot the collective nature of the occasion and succumbed to some base literary jealousy. Here was a poet working entirely in Irish who was risking a high emotional tone. The language is envisaged as a pet ewe lost on a cliff. The child is horrified as he watches as the sheep weakens and is attacked by birds. The pet becomes an image for the Irish:

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.

(‘By the Hearth’ in *Mín a’ Leá*, tr. Frank Sewell, Denise Blake and Seamus Heaney, Arc, 2005)

Even while I was riveted emotionally by this image, the less enchanted part of me did wonder if you can separate a language, even metaphorically, from its speakers. The same intense pitch informs Ó Searcaigh’s homosexual love poems, like this one translated by Frank Sewell:

My dark dear, dark-haired love,  
our kisses open Christ’s wounds up;  
don’t open your mouth, don’t tell a soul –  
your love’s on the wrong side of the gospel[...]

Lay your dark, dear, dear dark head,  
Lay your dark head on my breast, dear friend;  
I won’t say a word to a living soul –  
For you I’d thrice deny a gospel.

(‘Ceann Dubh Dílis’/ ‘Dear Dark-Haired Love’, *Suibhne*, Coiscéim, 1987)

Here Ó Searcaigh is drawing on the full lyrical resources of the Irish tradition, indeed, he’s out-Yeatsing Yeats, with his use of repetition as a lyric intensifier evoking, for example, the work of eighth-century Donal Og, “You have taken the east from me; you have taken the west from me.” Welsh and Irish, as we know, are intensely musical languages. They’re like a car which pulls to one side, in the euphonic direction. Fine, if you know about the drag on the steering wheel but dangerous if you allow the vehicle, not you, to do the navigating. You may well end up in a ditch, drive-shaft broken, you phoning for a tractor.

However, my envy of Cahal’s achievement has been short-lived. A scandal was occasioned recently by a documentary following one of his regular trips to Nepal. The film-maker challenged the poet’s portrayal of himself as a philanthropist helping young Nepalese men to educate themselves. The film appeared to show him behaving like a predatory sex tourist. Without first-hand knowledge, it’s impossible to gauge the situation

accurately and I make no allegations or personal comments. I'm interested in this matter *only* for what it might tell us about the relationship between style and content in a poem. Let me explain what I mean. What I'd admired in Cathal Ó Searcaigh's tone in his poems seemed to me, at first sight, a very pure evocation of, if you like, the singing of the Abercuawg cuckoo. However, what seems to me the most extraordinary aspect of the controversy about Ó Searcaigh in Nepal is that an Irishman, well acquainted with the poverty suffered by his own nation, should fail *even* to realise that, in a third-world country, he could be *perceived* as a rich exploiter of those in contemporary poverty. Recent Irish legislation on immigration seems to show a similar national blind spot. Are the Irish, who fled the famine and went all over the world as emigrants, often becoming wealthy in the process, now proving less than hospitable to the new immigrants into their home country? Has the lyric tone evoked by Ó Searcaigh – and refused, it now looks wisely, by Muldoon, Ní Dhomhnaill, Heaney and others – helped to blind the poet to the change in the balance of economic power which has taken place in the new, tigerish Ireland? The tunes you play in your poems do matter, because they facilitate or inhibit what you can say and the breadth of your human sympathies outside your own cultural circles: they can stop you thinking. I'm not saying that a poet's personal behaviour can neutralise good writing but I am asserting the existence of a complex but real connection between the life and the work. Those of us who have inherited old, highly musical poetic traditions, need to check constantly that their musicality isn't pushing us towards writing and behaviour which is, at best, out of date and, at worst, unacceptable and which may not be what we meant at all.

I want to end, though, with another Irish-language writer whose work shows the sheer joy of linguistic virtuosity. Ciaran Carson is an Irish-speaking Belfast poet. When I first came across his work, I felt immediately that it was necessary for me and that I needed to read every word. Being brought up Catholic, Carson was, in his early years, effectively trilingual: in Irish, English and Latin. His writing takes us back into the pre-linguistic of the child who can't yet make sense of the world. Here's the opening of 'Second Language':

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.

(Ciaran Carson, *First Language*, Gallery Books, 1993, p.10)

As if to make up for lost time, the grown-up Carson makes a full-scale

assault on the English language, exploiting its musical capacities to the full. This poet hasn't even considered being that provincial might make him culturally marginal. He attacks European culture with the aggression of a Belfast handshake. Here are a few brief quotations:

Baron von Richthofen swooped out of the sun in his red Fokker tri-plane,  
Writing cursive loops and firing hyphen-guns...

(Ciaran Carson, *Opera Et Cetera*, Bloodaxe, 1996, p.67)

It's all a tangled tagliatelle linguini Veronese that I'm trying to unravel  
From its strands of DNA and language. Perhaps I need a spirit level.

(*ibid.* p.84)

Carson has read and learnt from Berryman, and is just as ludic as Muldoon in the jungle gym of language. But he never loses the sense of being in dialogue with a reality, albeit a shifting one, outside his own utterances. He writes:

I am the hinge of language, you its door. I think you understand my cant.

I am karaoke, you the guy with the mike. (*ibid.* p.19)

He bases a lot of his work on externally verifiable structures – the history and geography of Belfast city, the phonetic alphabet, a catalogue of the saints. This means that the reader is free to disagree with him, even while being regaled with the most outrageous musical effects:

Hibernian winter permafrosts his soul;  
He haggles like a lunatic with naked trees, his frozen birds and ice-floes  
Creaking like somnolent Antarctica. He speaks of seeds as unexploded  
Atom bombs. Swans drift by in caravanserai across the colour-coded

Blue ice of one eye; you could catch a pike in the pupil-black bullet-hole  
Drilled in the other. (*ibid.*p.54)

Ciaran Carson is a musician and spent many years travelling around rural Ireland playing the flute on the folk music circuit. His book about Irish

music, *Last Night's Fun: In and Out of Time with Irish Music* (North Point Press, 1996), is a tribute to that tradition but is illuminating about Carson's approach to his own poetry. He writes about a melody called 'Ask My Father', "the tune is not a story, but stories might lie behind the tune" (p.8). This reading of the interdependence between the tune (the signifier) and the stories (the signified) which condition it is quite different from letting the melody lead you by the nose. I'm a great admirer of Irish folk music, its half-tone elisions and deliberate refusal of an overly-lyrical line in favour of percussive structures built up over time. The Welsh folk tradition has been almost terminally tainted by nineteenth-century sugaring. Give me the three-string harp and playing with the fingernails, rather than the sighing of the Grecian concert harp, any day. But I want to end with Ciaran Carson describing playing in a bar. This description interests me not just because it's a small glimpse of heaven, but because it gives a model for how a Celtic poet might safely deploy the volatile music at his or her command. Carson is playing in company, which is crucial. The singer reaches for the hand of the listener, who acts as a guide, pulling the singer back from the precipices over which the tune, without its stories, might push him. In the company of the other, this lyricism is re-directed, earthed, and begins its work of changing the world through our perceptions of time – a fair definition of poetry itself:

The music is that great direct Tyrone rhythm full of draw and push, little leanings-into notes and off notes; no need to ornament except in tiny off-beat grace notes, the merest finger-flick. This music goes. It's like driving uphill, down-dale, riding with the peaks and troughs. Then you're bursting, swaying at the roofless jacks, pishing spattery patterns on the wall, and the old boy peeing next to you is saying, "Powerful, powerful music, mighty", and both of you are gazing in your concentration at the stars. You hear the music back there float and lift beneath the corrugated-tin shed roof; the stars swirl by like dandelion seeds. Going back, you turn your head and in the dark beyond the candle-light, the daffodils have taken on a spiky yellow glow.

Then at a rainy *fleadhanna* you'd find yourself in some rigged-up, jerry-built construction in the backyard, where the cute boy had put up a roof of heavy-duty polythene, this sheeting stretched between the yard wall and some teetering, precarious poles. From time to time the wobbly ceiling would yaw and sag beneath its weight of water, and the boy would

come along as if he were a trident-bearer armed with brush,  
and spear it up against the plastic sheet to shuck the water off,  
and everyone would cheer as the edge of the crowd got soaked.  
Everyone is spluttering and laughing into their wet pints, and  
they don't give a damn, for this is any-weather music.

*(ibid. p. 37)*

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