

ASPECTS OF IRISH-LANGUAGE POETRY – AND ITS MIRACULOUS SURVIVAL

Gabriel Rosenstock

‘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, at least in terms of readership. 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. (A bilingual volume of mine is called *Bliain an Bhandé/ Year of the Goddess*, having decided to dedicate a whole year to her!) As Ireland’s economic sovereignty became perilously

endangered in the Autumn of 2010, people's thoughts turned to 'internal' sovereignty.

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 [sic] of Ireland', not realizing (seemingly) 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 19th. 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 or nationalistic 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 Gaelic 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 (1950 – 2005), 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 of mine 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.

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. There are few revivalists left in Ireland. We are all survivalists now, I suspect.

The ancient shamanistic gift of shape-shifting is enshrined in the best of modern Gaelic poetry. For Sorley Mac 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 (or lightness) 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...

Wonderful placenames occur in medieval and early Irish poetry, including those poems of *An Fhiannaíocht* (The Fenian Cycle), Fionn Mac Cumhail and his band of Celtic samurai, out hunting in the glens and valleys when not defending the island of Ireland.

Ireland has its own islands, hundreds of them. 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. Umberto Eco, speculating on the perfect language, reminded us of the Irish pilgrimage to Babel, bringing back the best elements of the confusion of tongues to create the Irish language!

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.

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 Ardpatrick 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, 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, except in Belfast. 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 subject of a film which started out as homage to a great poet and ended by exposing his intimacies with Nepalese young men. The film-maker 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, infamy 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. Yet 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 of us 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 small 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.

Recently I saw signposts with numbers on them to assist satnav. Will numbers replace the names of towns, villages and townlands? (I never liked numbers and I like them less now).

Time for another backward glance.

Do bhíodh ag Laoghaire san lios

Do bhíodh ag Laoghaire san lios
gur traochadh ár dtír tar n-ais
súgh caora i gcuachaibh gan ghlas
's luachair ghlas co caolaibh cos.

Bun-ghlaise ghrianmhar an ghleann'
a bheann aoibhinn is mian liom,
ionann scáil a ciabh 's a com
fonn fághnathach fiadh na mbeann.

Bun-ghlaise ghrianmhar an ghleann'
ag teacht le sleasaibh na gcídh gcorr
ba ghnáthach ann le ceoltaibh crot
feoil bhroc, bradáin is breac.

Lusradh cois-mhín na ngort,
Oscar, Oisín agus Art,
Clanna Rónáin na lann nglas,
im ghleann ar chontráith ba chlos.

In Laoghaire's fortress once

Geoffrey O'Donoghue of Glenflesk (?1616-1678)

In Laoghaire's fortress once –
before our land began to die –
wine flowed freely from goblets
green rushes spread round ankle-high.

Sunny stream of the valley
my heart rises to the crags!
crest and hollow in deep shadow –
a land for wandering stags.

Sunny stream of the valley
from the sacred Paps flows out
to the wild music of harps –
meat of badger, salmon, trout.

Soft each herb underfoot,
Oscar, Oisín and Art
Clanna Rónáin of the steely blades
were heard in my glen before the dark.

(Trans. Gabriel Rosenstock)

Geoffrey O'Donoghue, Lord of Glenflesk (Séafradh Ó Donnchadha an Ghleanna) who penned the above poem, was a leading 17th century poet.

Once famed for his lavish banquets, Cromwell and his pack of 'madraí úisc' (greasy dogs) put a swift end to all of that. The prince turned outlaw. Legend has it that he and his men revived the banqueting tradition by feasting on some of the above-mentioned dogs!

Much of his work is lost but interested readers should read John Minahane's spirited treatise on Ó Donnchadha (and Ireland's War Poets 1641-1653) published by Aubane Historical Society, 2008. (ISBN 978-1-903497-49-4)

And if savagery existed on both sides – and we cannot deny it – the scales must be balanced by briefly alluding to the fantastic tradition of poetic piety that flourished from the earliest recorded literature until well into the last century: *Days of the Week* by Aonghus na Diagachta

We know little about Aonghus Fionn Ó Dálaigh, known as Aonghus na Diagachta ('Aonghus of the Divinity'). He flourished in the late sixteenth century. Over fifty poems survive, mostly of a deeply religious nature. He had a school of poetry in Duhallow, Co. Cork, at a time – from 1530 onwards – when ordinances were being issued to destroy the native literary classes ("Yryshe minstrels, rymours, shannaghes & bardes").

English version: Gabriel Rosenstock

O Christ, protect me!
How can I know your power?
Your peace I need now

Branch of fairest flower!

O child of Bethlehem
Please do not be hard!
Ruler of all
On Sunday be my guard.

On Monday, when you judge me
Save me from all harm,
Though angered by your wounds
Stretch out your arm.

On Tuesday, lovely Son
Who never shirked pain
Let the world's kings stand aside
Be my gain!

On Thursday, God the Father,
Do not deny your face,
Your pain stirs love within me
Seal your grace.

O Trinity, stand by me
Without you we are dust,
On Friday, hold back your anger,
Help us, you must.

On Saturday, save me!
My deeds leave me in danger,
Do not tax me too much,
I am no stranger.

Son of the Father, help me,
Only son most high,
Pardon us, in spite of all,

I cry.

Do English-language poets in Ireland actually love the English language with the same fervour as the Irish-language poet loves his? 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?

Our first President, Douglas Hyde, gave us this colourful anecdote:

'At Abbey Knockmoy, County Galway, I noticed the name Rabbit, and inquired from the old caretaker if it was a common one in the locality.

'It is, your honour,' said he, 'I'm a Rabbit myself.'

'That is not an Irish name,' said I.

'Thru for ye; me rale name is Ó Coinín, which is Rabbit when Englished.'

Poet Seán Ó Ríordáin (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 allúrach*, 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). Without bursaries and honorariums for outward and inward translations, remnants of this anti-intellectualism will live on and Irish-language literature will remain on the periphery, I regret to say.

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 (in England), an over-confidence, an inherent sense of cultural superiority. Certain plants thrive better in the shade and maybe Irish is better off outside of the withering 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 bís 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. What an incredible literary outpost is the Dingle Peninsula, for natives and visitors alike, a promised land or 'Tír Tairngire' which was the title of a volume of poems (2009) by Peadar Ó hUallaigh, one which continues the great tradition of celebrating the magic of place. It is but one of so many substantial Irish-language titles which are shockingly ignored not only by the mainstream literary establishment but even by Irish-speakers as well.

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.

Practically every modern Irish-language poet has a reverence for place and for more than one place. This is obvious from even a casual glance at the work of Michael Davitt, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, Liam Ó Muirthile, Biddy Jenkinson, Paddy Bushe, Cathal Ó Searcaigh, Peadar Ó hUallaigh, Proinsias Mac an Bhaird, Áine Uí Fhoghlú. . . the list is endless. What is striking is that most of these poets suggest that Ireland is a portal to another world. Many English-language writers, especially urban realists, scoff at this notion. (They should read *Mythic Ireland* by Michael Dames, or *Invoking Ireland* by John Moriarty). The notion of a magic kingdom at our doorstep is an old and enduring theme and I'm not sure that all Irish-language writers are conscious of it but is there one among them for whom this medieval poem, one of my favourite poems which I translate below, does not work a spell?

A Bé Find

A Bé find, in rega lim
I tír n-ingnad hi fil
rind?
Is barr sobairche folt
and,
Is dath snechtai corp
co ind.

Lovely Lady (Mír's Wooing
of Éadaoin)

Lovely lady, will you go
To that kingdom where
stars glow?
Primrose there the colour
of hair,
Snow-white each body
fair.

Is and nád bí muí ná
taí,
Gela dét and, dubai
braí,
Is lí súla lín ar slúag,
Is dath sion and
cech grúad.

'Yours' and 'mine' are words
not known yet,
Ivory teeth and brows of
pure jet;
Foxglove the colour of
every cheek,
The whole company
radiant and sleek.

Is corcur maige cach
muin
Is lí súla ugae luin,
Cid caín déicsiu
Maige Fáil
Annam iar ngnáis
Maige máir.

Every plain of purple hue,
The **blackbird**'s eggs flecked
with blue,
The plains of Ireland will
seem bare
After you have lingered
there.

Cid mesc lib coirm
Inse Fáil
Is mescu coirm Tíre
Máir,
Amra tíre tír as-biur,
Ní tét oac and ré

For Ireland's beer you will
not long,
The Great Land's beer is
twice as strong!
It is a land of purest gold,
The young don't die before

siun.

the old.

Srotha téithmilsí tar
tír,
Rogu de mid ocus fín
Doíni delgnaidi cen
on,
Combart cen peccad,
cen chol.

All round gentle streams
entwine,
Mead is drunk, the best of
wine,
The people have not
learned to hate,
It's not a sin to copulate!

Ad-chiam cách for
cach leth
Ocus níconn-acci
nech;
Teimil imorbais
Ádaim
Dodon-aircheil ar
árain.

We see all on every side,
Though none sees us – we
do not hide
But Adam's sin has caused
a cloak
Between us and ordinary
folk.

A ben, día rís mo
thúaith tind
Is barr óir bias fort
chind,
Muc úr, laith,
lemnacht la lind
Rot-bía lim and, a Bé
Find.

Woman, if you come with
me,
On your head a crown will
be,
Fresh pork, milk, the finest
ale
Await us now beyond the
pale

Irish poets writing in English have been infected as well by invoking Ireland. 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 Peekacun
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 once carried a weekly topographical column, *Where’s that?* Of course one could argue that Durcan’s poem is marred by meaningless place names but he shouldn’t be singled out until such time as English-language poets collectively make a decision to eschew anglicised names, something that’s not going to happen!

Brian Friel’s famous play *Translations* deals with the period and the events relating to Irish place names being given official anglicized (bastardised) 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 around us 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 or more than that in its oral form. Naming goes on in *The Táin* at a fierce rate:

"Then the harpers of the Venerable Tree of Caín 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 card game 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 more poems, even poems with not the most hopeful of endings, as in these lines that end a poem by Colm Breathnach on the Poetry International website (which at the time of writing this in early 2016 still continued to exclude Cathal Ó Searcaigh):

Between two hues
between two names
between two views
between two words
between two tongues
between two worlds
I live my life
between two lives.