

The Pressure of Ideas

Michael Hartnett's *The Killing of Dreams*

In the Winter 2001 issue of *Poetry Ireland Review* the editor Maurice Harmon suggested that there was a loss or diminution of vision in contemporary Irish poetry. His observation was clearly without malice and it was intended, if I read him correctly, as a note of guidance, not complaint. "There seems to be a preference at present", Harmon writes, "for poetry in which the pressure of ideas is not a factor. There is nothing wrong with this in itself, but it seems so much is being left out. The thoughtful poem is hard to find these days." The understanding that a *book* of poems can be shaped and given an imaginative pattern is also becoming a thing of the past. The inter-linking and crafting of a poetic order—be that in visual terms, tone of voice, an aesthetic—is more often than not viewed, when seen at all, with suspicion.

Poems must stand on their own individual ground. But there is a sense in which the power of association, the accumulation of these sounds and images bring an added dimension to a poet's work when it is gathered into a single volume. *That* added dimension is elusive and it cannot be manufactured at will. The reviewer (and reader) whose appetite is more for the quick hit can miss it all together. One has to bear in mind, however, the context in which such an observation is made. Contemporary Irish poetry is written and published more or less in a critical vacuum. What responses there are depend more today than ever before upon how the individual poet's work is received *outside* the country—a reception which in turn is predicated upon whether or not the work is published in England or the US.

Michael Hartnett, one of the finest contemporary poets, had this condition under surveillance for quite some time. He was, after all, an astute observer of the rhetorical place of poetry in

Irish society and knew more than most about the power bases of language—English and Irish of course, but other continental languages as well, including Spanish. He also clocked the vagaries of the writing life and maintained an unfazed understanding of precisely what, when the chips were down, poetry actually *means* to the wider society. I think too that Hartnett displayed a vibrant stoicism and ironic edge in the best of his work which is also in danger of being packaged for easier consumption. The other side of this energy is his pure lyrical grace, particularly in his love poetry, such as *Poems to Younger Women* (1988).

While it passed by with not much of a stir, *The Killing of Dreams* (1992) is another such perfect “little” book, embodying the kind of prismatic clarity that is a hallmark of Hartnett’s work in English. It reads like stocktaking, engaged by and in the issues already raised here. It is a meditation on poetry and poets in Hartnett’s characteristically wry and sometimes hurt manner of speaking. It also reveals a poetic imagination at one with itself but at odds with the world it inhabits. A constitutional unease, let it be said, part of the poet’s own self, and not something prepared for the moment. Small wonder that there has been throughout Hartnett’s poetry a persistent feeling that the poet is a fugitive figure who dons various (Poundian) disguises and defences. From his own bilingualism to his versions of *Tao* (1972) and translation from Lorca’s *Gipsy Ballads* (1973), Hartnett has demonstrated a great facility with language. He seems to know that the language which he talks and thinks in as a poet yearns for some kind of authority which is no longer available. Hartnett also ironically chastises such aspirations.

There is quite a lot going on behind the chaste and amenable facades of Hartnett’s poetry. An icy acceptance, for instance, that the incidental, unexpected and idiosyncratic can yield *imaginative* truth. This kind of realism produces its own anger and rage like the kind of curse which concluded *A Farewell to English* (1975). In *The Killing of Dreams* Hartnett shifted the register towards an even more personal key. The collection, one of the most intriguing volumes which was published in the 1990s, is as much a lament as it is an *ars poetica*. *The Killing of Dreams* has also an added twist. In “Talking Verses” the poem itself strikes back, mocking the poet who earlier in the book has taken himself and his art too seriously for the poem’s own good. The poem insists:

I have survived the tribal scar,
 The decorative tattoo.
 What I say is what I am
 And is not open to tirades from you:
 Trying not not to be is what I do.

The poem's resistance could well turn out to be a radical thing. What never ceases to impress me about this volume of Hartnett's is just how fleet of foot it is: ironic, emotionally charged, visually strong, conversational, depth-charged *and* funny. Not bad for fifteen poems or, if you prefer thirty odd pages of verse. This impression has also been strengthened by recent readings of the poems in their new setting in the *Collected Poems* (2001) edited by Peter Fallon. The opening canto of the closing poem, "Mountains, Fall on Us" conveys this liveliness and grotesquerie. For while some of the poems might be said to veer a little too close to sentimentality, the dominant force of Hartnett's poetry in English, with *The Killing of Dreams* at the centre, depicts a tragi-comedy as austere, as troubled and as pure as Beckett's prose. The following is from "Mountains, Fall on Us", canto 5:

And now I sit forsaken and stood up
 in a no-star eating-house,
 a one-armed bandit hurdy-gurdying out
 the same synthetic notes,
 where the floorboards wear their patina of dirt
 as tourists wear a fading tan,
 as the overhead electric fan
 cuts slices from the curdling smoke
 and garlic curses clatter in the kitchens.
 Not for me the poet's gold *Dimaratos*
 stood up and staring at a plastic rose:
 I am living now in one of his more real fictions.

Is this fine achievement passing us by? If so, possibly a further indication of how forty years of a truly ingenious poet's work and vision, shaped and honed with the concentration of a sculptor, can be at best misheard and at worst overlooked. Michael Hartnett himself had the last laugh in *The Killing of Dreams*.

That he is not around to continue into his sixties, seventies and eighties where *The Killing of Dreams* and the subsequent volumes left off is a pity. With the bright temptation of a colossal Gaelic and European tradition at his back and the wicked knowledge of the contemporary world all around to give him food for thought, Michael Hartnett embodied the modern complications of the Irish poetic and, what is so important, he gave them voice.