

*Michael Hartnett: A Life in Poetry*

I have come with meagre voice  
 to court the language of my people.  
 —“A Farewell to English”

The day of 13 October 1999 opened to a blue winter morning. I spent it walking the lanes over the Hill of Howth. When I got home there was a phone call from Paula Meehan to say Michael Hartnett was in hospital. Michael had been in hospital before, so I wasn't too worried. But a little while later she rang again with the news that Michael had died. He had always been frail; when poets write of him, it is nearly always as a bird. And yet, though Michael smoke and drank more than was good for him, I truly thought he'd go on until he was eighty, making or translating poems that would take my breath away. After all, his partner Angela loved and cared for him so well, and when things got bad, he would always slow down, batten the hatches, and ride out the storm. But this last storm must have been just one too many. Small as he was, his enormous gift for poetry burned brightly when he stood up to the dark, when he held the door closed while others danced. In the end, of course, it wore him out. For Michael there were no half-measures.

He had the extraordinary trait of all great poets: a total belief in his gift and a terror that it might desert him; there would be no peace inside or outside poetry. After all, it is not something you can practise or polish—it is a curse and a huge blessing. It was Michael who reminded me that the Irish word for a poem “*dán*” means “a gift”. Seamus Heaney said something like: “You live on the laurels of the last poem, in terror of the next.” I think that is probably the best definition of how a poet lives. I remember, before *Inchicore Haiku*, there were two years when Michael couldn't write. Asked by Mike Murphy “What did you do?” Michael replied, “Drink”.

Michael Hartnett was born in Croom, County Limerick, in 1941. His life was poetry. He said it gave him the power to love and celebrate. A book in his pocket, and a whole library of poets in his head, Michael was pure magic, pure poetry, gifted, as few others are—a poets' poet. He told the story that when he was a young boy, playing outside the house, all the baby wrens landed on his chest. He ran in to the kitchen and told his granny. "She said, in English, 'You are going to be a poet.' At the time I was six or seven years old. I didn't write until I was 14 or 15. But she was right." He was a member of Aosdána since its inception in 1983. Aosdána comes from the old Irish word "Aesdana" meaning "Poets of the Tribes". And I think this is how Michael saw himself: as a poet of his tribe.

Michael wrote in Irish and English. He used to say to me "I dream and think in two languages. It breaks my heart." And the older he got, the more aware of this he became. Yet Michael relished language, translating the Gaelic poets of the seventeenth century, in particular Aodhagán Ó Rathaille and Dáibhí Ó Bruadair he did a wonderful translation of Lorca's *Gipsy Ballads*. He also translated poems from German, Italian and Latin. I remember one morning—it must be nearly four years back—calling to his basement flat in Dartmouth Road. He was translating a tiny book of Catullus that I had bought him for a pound the week before. I read the translations out loud while he just sat by the window smoking. Even when it looked like he was doing nothing, Michael was working on poems: his own, or somebody else's. It took no genius to notice that the poets Michael was drawn towards (Catullus, Lorca, Ó Rathaille, R.S. Thomas—he also loved Joyce) were poets not unlike himself: poets with great natural gift, strong opinions and a wild, lively spirit (some that went wild on spirits), men and women who lived at the edge of crisis: religious, philosophical, moral or just the struggle of day-to-day living. I know there were times when Michael found life very difficult, poems like "The Old Catechism" and "That Actor's Kiss" testify to this.

He always wrote his poems out in beautiful longhand; even on the page they looked like works of art. In this age of computers and whatnots, I always thought, and think, of Michael's poetry as something organic and completely natural—something very good for you. Poetry as cleanser, as healer, as soul food: ingredients that are missing from much of today's formu-

laic, clever and empty poetry.

To some people it often looked as if Michael had his hand firmly over the self-destruct button—maybe some days he had—but when I used to say to him that drink would be the death of him, he'd reply, "I've no wish to die". But still he went on drinking, believing it a necessary part of his creativity. Since his death I find it's his great humour that comes to the surface when there's talk of him amongst his friends. That and the fact, like a lot of poets, he was a great storyteller. He often spoke about his early years in Newcastle West. He told me that in those early days for the All-Ireland final they used to place the one radio in the town on the window of a local pub so all the people could hear the match. Of course, the more important people got to sit close to the radio. Michael said he never heard a word of the commentary. He was always at the back—and is that any wonder, for he was always an outsider, even as a child. As a poet, Michael was a country onto himself or an annex of Munster and Dublin. There was a part of him that believed the gift of poetry was given to him by God—a calling, if you like—and the price was that he carried the burden and responsibility as a speaker for his tribe.

My dead father shouts  
from his eternal Labour:  
"These are your people!"

This haiku is the last of the eighty-seven that make up the masterful long poem *Inchicore Haiku*. Beautifully made and carefully crafted, this sequence of haiku is now well known as the poem that brought Michael back into writing in English after exclusively writing in Irish for eleven years. He told me that he was sitting in a pub in Inchicore when it happened:

My English dam bursts  
and out stroll all my bastards.  
Irish shakes its head.

He wrote the haiku in a storm of writing that lasted for about two weeks. Like *Krapp's Last Tape*, the play that brought Beckett back into English after ten years writing in French, you can feel the precision and relish of the language used by the poet and the

playwright. It is as if they have freed themselves from decisions they made when they were younger; play and poem were a catharsis for the writer. Both Beckett and Hartnett took what they knew best and made it new. Beckett used a monologue wrapped cleverly around a tape recording that allows us to hear Krapp in his youth, his middle age and, finally, old age—the three ages of Man. Michael, newly returned to Dublin, took the ballad of a lonely man, pared it down to the precision and grace of Japanese haiku. *Inchicore Haiku* is a heartbreaking poem that captures the poverty and emptiness of life in Dublin in the '80s, replicating his own real sadness at this period of his life:

Dark sits here in me  
and I leave all the lights on.  
But nobody calls.

I always think of this beautiful poem as Michael's song for all he and his tribe had lost.

He was a quiet observer of nature, of the city and the village, of the pagan and the deeply spiritual, of the crowd and the lonely I. This heady brew often made for a poetry that was quite intuitive and strange. Some might use the term avant-garde to describe some of his poems. Take this for instance from "The Naked Surgeon":

Sand silts the world—  
Dockleaves in the yard,  
Broken teeth eat sadness  
In the hayless barn.  
Silence knocks on men's doors  
And silence answers it—  
But music is heard in space.

But no one questioned his style, for it was brilliantly his own. Michael's poetry came from a fusion of the Irish and European traditions. This eclectic mix also made Hartnett one of the best translators of old and modern Gaelic poetry. One only has to glimpse at his translations of Ó Rathaille or Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill to see how gifted he was. Nuala herself has often commented on how beautiful his translations of his own poems are.

Michael also loved to travel and his travels always turned into epic adventures. The stories of his trips abroad to readings or translation seminars are the stuff of legend, almost unbelievable—were they not being told by Michael Hartnett. He was arrested in Spain for shouting “Down with Franco!” when everyone else in the pub had shut up. On a trip to Barcelona with Theo Dorgan the Catalan kitchen-staff gathered in the foyer and presented him with a paella as he was leaving the hotel; to this day no one knows why this came about. There was a trip to Milan where he ending up stranded on a farm way out in the hills; a trip to America where some rich patron gave him a new suit; a trip to England where someone bought him a new pair of glasses. Then there was his everyday life in Ireland. A poetry reading in Cork for Paddy Galvin and he somehow managed to end up on a bus with a hundred Oasis fans. A reading in Bantry House with the Chamber Orchestra, he removed his shoes and read in his stocking feet because the wooden stage creaked. There were the annual trips to the literary festivals in Clifden, Listowel, Loughrea, Bantry and Ballyvaughan. One of my earliest memories is from 1987 when Michael, Angela and myself arrive in Tralee at high noon. “What time is the next bus to Listowel?” Michael asked a passing busman. “The next bus to Listowel’s at three o’clock, sir.” We turned and began to walk towards the town. “Hold on there now,” the busman said, “Are you Hartnett the poet?” “I am,” says Michael, and tips his cap. “Then damn it man, the bus leaves now.”

One day he said to me, “Tony, always be kind to Macdara [Woods] he did me a great favour when I was young.” “What was that Michael?” I enquired “He saved me from drowning in the sea. He reached in and grabbed me out when I was going under.” He used to tell great tales about himself and Paul Durcan working in London in the early ’60s: a newspaper in Ireland called them “The tea-boys of the Western World”. They also worked as security guards—a picture in itself. Michael told me that they also made a record. Paul and himself squeezed into a recording booth in London’s Euston Station and spoke or maybe even sang—who knows? I’ve asked Paul Durcan about this and he confirms that they did make a record. However, I’m not sure if he remembers what was on it. Michael told me, but I honestly can’t remember. As to what happened to this precious disc? Michael’s memory was that his children, Niall and Lara,

used it as a flying saucer. Other jobs Michael tried were the telephone exchange, a commis-chef and strangest of all, curator of Joyce's Tower in Sandycove. He said the key to the door was huge and was always a great conversation piece when he took it out of his pocket. His job as curator of the tower has since been immortalised by Paul Durcan in his beautiful poem "Ulysses":

"Mr Hartnett, I understand  
 You stock copies of a book entitled *Ulysses*.  
 I would like to purchase one copy of same."  
 "Certainly, Your Lordship, certainly,"  
 Replies the ever-courteous, Chinese-eyed curator.

Last year, in a tribute to Michael, poets, including Paul Durcan, read in Newcastle West. Next morning in the hotel, Paul Durcan spoke to me of his earliest memories of meeting Michael Hartnett. He remembered how those early poems of Michael's set the standard for my writing at the time.

Michael loved Paul's poetry but was terrified by the length of his readings. Michael liked to keep it as short as possible. Once, at a reading in the National Concert Hall, a poet had been asked to read for twenty minutes and was passing the hour mark when Hartnett began to slide down his chair. Thinking him unwell, I enquired if he was all right. "No," he said, "I am being bludgeoned by poetry." At his last book launch in Waterstone's, for the *Selected and New Poems*, Paul Muldoon (who keeps it short) had read from *The Prince of the Quotidian*, Paula Meehan (who keeps it short) had read from *Pillow Talk*. However, with the great crowd that had gathered, things were running late. Asked by Peter Fallon to keep it short, Michael got up and read half a poem. The piece he read was from "The Old Catechism" a poem about being overlooked and realising that time is running out:

As I, past fifty, realise  
 it's certain I shall leave  
 many songs unsung;  
 and the poems I have made  
 (all written out of praise  
 for you, and all for you)  
 shall get scant hearing.

In my memory of that night, Michael cut out the middle of the poem and went straight to the last stanza.

However. There is a house I've heard of  
 where the herbs are always fresh  
 and where, at last, pain and panic are dismissed,  
 and you can walk in, take off your aches,  
 sit down, discard your fear,  
 and say: "Hello God. I'm here".

All of Michael is in this poem but what shine through are his sadness, his joy, and his deep spirituality. I had to laugh at the notion of Michael's idea of Heaven included fresh herbs at the gate. In Leeson Street, Dartmouth Road and out in Dundrum, Michael always planted herbs close to the front door. This little herb garden was a handy sign if you were looking for his house. While I couldn't say he loved eating, he did love cooking. On a practical basis, Angela was out working all day, so it was up to Michael to cook the evening meal. Often, in the morning, I'd find him listening to classical music (Mozart, Beethoven, Sibelius) and reading a Spanish or Italian recipe book. The meal decided, we trudged around town in search of some exotic cheese or some strange ingredient like lemon grass or kumquats; the bread would be rye or *panini*. Even when he had little money he would always buy the very best extra virgin olive oil. This was only fifteen years ago, yet to the shopkeepers he was odd: "You're looking for what?" But this was Michael's character, strangely European, with odd, exotic tastes. Ó Bruadair and Ó Rathaille wrote out of a European tradition and I think that Michael was following, maybe a little late, in their footsteps. Moreover, he'd travelled through Morocco, Greece and Spain and these countries had left their impression. He'd greet you on the street with a Spanish flourish of the cap and hands—it was like part of a dance. He was tactile like the French and Italians. It used to break his heart that in the modern Ireland you couldn't give a child a sweet or pat on the head for fear of being arrested. And I'm sure there was a part of Michael that saw reflections of himself in the life of Patrick Kavanagh. Personally, I think they had only a few things in common. In a late poem, Michael wrote:

I, too, was a country child  
 adrift among untalented battalions;  
 I understood the smokescreen of your talk  
 about fillies, about stallions:  
 I sometimes placed your bets.

I remember him writing this poem “Aere Perennius” in July 1993. The poem is about the statue of Kavanagh that they erected on the banks of the Grand Canal. John Coll made what I think is a beautiful bronze casting of Kavanagh. President Mary Robinson unveiled it and gave a speech about Patrick’s struggle: the drink, the poverty, and the poetry. But Michael never took to the statue. Every year Angela and himself would be at the seat on St Patrick’s day along with the others who loved Patrick and Patrick’s poetry. But as for the new statue, no thank you. He wrote: “And there you are Paddy watching your canal and—to use your own rhyme—banal in bronze.” He started writing the poem after he had seen a wino with his arm around Kavanagh’s neck deep in conversation. As Michael walked home, he began to imagine what the wino might be saying to Patrick. This is what he came up with:

If all the world was sweet, sweet wine  
 And all the seas were gin,  
 If all the flowers were Baby Powers  
 What a pickle we’d be in.

And in case anyone is thinking of erecting a statue to Michael. The poem ends with these lines:

Let me escape a similar fate.  
 I’d rather be forgotten out of hand  
 than wronged in bronze:  
 let the sad facts stand...

That summer of 1993 was a good time for Michael: *The Killing of Dreams* had come out in 1992 and was warmly received. His translation *Haicéad* was due out in November and the *Selected and New Poems* was pencilled in for the summer of 1994, as was a French translation of *Le Chirurgien mis à Nu et Autres Poèmes*.

He was already working on the translations of Ó Rathaille. He was also writing some wonderful poems all of which, at this time, he referred to as “strays”. For a while he talked of collecting them under the title *A Book of Strays*. However, after he’d watched the short film that Pat Collins made about him, *Necklace of Wrens*, he rightly changed his mind and instead was going to complete another proper collection—sadly he didn’t finish this work. Eight of these poems appear in the new *Collected Poems in English* published by Gallery Press. One of these poems is the heartbreaking “Prayer for Sleep”. I will never forget the morning he read “Prayer for Sleep” to me for the first and only time. It was about ten o’clock in the morning and he was sitting in his vest by the window of the garden flat in Dartmouth Road. He was smoking his Players Black and drinking red wine, he looked like he hadn’t slept for a month. He blew out the smoke and began to read the poem—it was pure Hartnett reminiscent of one of Ó Rathaille personal elegies:

Grant me good rest tonight O Lord:  
let no creature prowl  
the tangled pathways in my skull.

Another poem he wrote at this time was “The Ghost of Billy Mulvihill”. This little gem is as yet uncollected. It may appear in *A Book Of Strays*, which Gallery Press plans to publish. I remember Michael used to sing it in O’Brien’s pub in Leeson Street—where Patrick Kavanagh had his wedding reception. Pictures of Michael and Patrick now share a wall; in those days only Patrick was up there. Anyway, sing it Michael would. The poem is about a friend of his, Billy, from Newcastle West who had died of drink—or so Michael believed. And now Billy’s ghost was stalking Michael, like Marley’s ghost in “A Christmas Carol”, warning him that if he didn’t stop drinking he’d suffer a similar fate—an early death. Billy says: “The fight you are fighting, Mikie, is a fight you’ll never win.” But unlike Scrooge who sees the light of day, buys the big turkey and saves Tiny Tim, Michael said, “I locked the door inside my head and I would not let him in.” A few months later we were sitting in the Burlington Hotel when Michael spots Billy’s sister. I think he was about to mention the poem, maybe even recite it, when she declares that Billy was asking for him. Mulvihill was alive and well, it had

been another ghost all the time maybe even poor Patrick. As Mark Twain might have said, reports of his death have been greatly poeticised...

We always met in the morning; I can't remember what we talked about—definitely not great literature. In the flat we might have read a new poem or a translation, but once we were outside we rarely spoke about poetry. This, I think, is true of most poets. We would gossip about poets because a lot of our friends were poets or what happened at festivals because they were always great meeting places for writers. That's perhaps why I remember those mornings when Michael did introduce a new poem into the conversation. I can recall that around his fiftieth birthday he had written a tiny little poem, another of his strays:

O my darling, o my dears,  
I have lived for fifty years  
And my hair is a river of tears  
O my darlings, o my dears.

He later called this little poem "For Children Everywhere".

Sometimes being with Michael was like being in a different country; a place full of stories and characters, books and wine, with its own politics, its own wars, its own language. A place where there were good times and bad times. It could be exhausting, but it was never dull. He had also the most gentle of souls. If you walked with him into town along the banks of the Grand Canal, he would point out little weeds and flowers, name them in Irish and have a story to tell about their name or their medicinal properties. He would stand for an age just looking at a swan's nest. He might even talk to the ducks.

I love the tree as much as lightning does;  
I care as much for sunset as the sun.

On his rambles around the city Michael would talk to anyone. Everyone and everything interested him. Often a short trip to the pub became a memorable journey; he'd stop to talk to nuns, road-sweepers, professors, politicians, sportsmen. Nobody ever forgot meeting Michael Hartnett. In his company, you felt Dublin was only a village.

On 20 September 2001, a few days before what would have

Tomlinson, the better poet of the two, is much less on the critical *qui vive* than Davie: he is more anecdotal and recounts stories of his friendships with several American poets. While doing little to change ideas of American poetry, it does provide valuable background on the influence that poetry has had on Tomlinson's own work as a poet.

Reginald Shepherd was the recipient of a "Discovery"/*The Nation* Award in 1993, and his third collection, *Wrong* (University of Pittsburgh Press), comes strongly endorsed by Mark Doty and Marilyn Hacker. As noted by Doty, the collection's main theme is the erasure and founding of identity based on being "not white, not straight, not apologetic, not believing in the easy way of making sense". The collection contains an oration, "At the Grave of Hart Crane", and it is easy to detect Crane's influence in the tidal zones chosen as the setting for meditations about Narcissus, and in the formal mode of address that reflects the classical temper of each. Shepherd is strongest when he resists the draw of an abstract landscape and turns to the physicality of the figures in it; "Icarus on Fire Island" puts Stephen Dedalus's meditation in *Portrait of the Artist* to good use, replacing the tumbling son of the original myth with a kite, while his erotic imagery recalls Mapplethorpe: "Wolfsbane, monkshood/ demon lover's black corsage". Weaker are the poems in which puns and homonyms lead into the maze of language poetry, all too sententious in their conclusions; better is "Geology of Water"—a translucent exploration of self using an extended conceit, reminiscent of Clampitt or Moore.

Ian Hamilton, poet, editor and critic is dead. As editor of *The Review* and *The New Review* he perfected the art not just of paying contributors nothing, but of making them seem grateful for it too (see *Another Round at the Pillars*, the *Festschrift* for his sixtieth birthday, *passim*). He ran a tight shop: "praise was unknown", Blake Morrison noted, "the best hope was to avoid a withering put down". He biographised Lowell, Salinger and Arnold and wrote the best-titled sports book ever, *Gazza Agonistes*. Is it true that he once finished a round-up review by describing the last book as having "a nice title"—end of review? Maybe we'll find out if someone puts together a miscellany of Hamilton's fugitive pieces. It'd make an enjoyable book. Oh, and he wrote poems too. *Sixty Poems* at the last count in 1998, and small ones too, most of the lower halves of its few enough

been his sixtieth birthday, Gallery Press launched Michael's *Collected Poems in English*. What a terrible pity Michael was not here to grace the launch with his own presence. So it fell to Dermot Bolger, Peter Fallon, Seamus Heaney and Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill to bless the book. Each poet in their turn spoke of Michael with deep affection, conjuring up memories, laughter and tears. They finished with a reading of a few of their favourite Hartnett poems. I am in no doubt that this wonderful, life-giving book, containing poems of growing importance, will see Michael's star burn bright and brighter.

What was I doing with these foreign words?  
I, the polisher of the complex clause,  
wizard of grasses and warlock of birds  
midnight-oiled in the metric laws?