

a common human experience. Loneliness, love in all its forms, the terrible fact of death. Older, and knowing as one does what time can do to people anywhere, one tends to conflate, even to cut out local reference altogether. This is from a poem I wrote about the Swiss sculptor Giacometti, a night-wanderer in his adopted city of Paris:

Not Paris now, but infinities
Of disconnected people, faces, times,
Humanity dissolving into shapes
At the ends of avenues, at the ends of rhymes.

But if placelessness is the ideal, and “here and there cease to matter”, as T. S. Eliot writes in the Four Quartets, then why leave Ireland in the first place? One reason, I think, is that my generation still equated Ireland with innocence and Elsewhere with experience. To grow morally, it seemed one had to leave, at least for a while. And then there was the danger, if one stayed in Ireland, of being categorised, boxed-in, neutralised for life. To de-categorise, to remain faithful to one’s own self, however small, it seemed better to be away. After that, there were the personal reasons—mixed ancestry in my case, and the delusive wish to be active in great causes—all of which had to run their course.

Now that all of that is in the past and I come and go freely between Ireland and Elsewhere, I am inclined to reverse the original innocence-experience polarity and say that for me Ireland is an immersion in complexity, Elsewhere a finding of ideal distance. Paris, the big international city where I live, is also, like Giacometti’s shed, a place of necessary bareness and withdrawal. It’s as simple as that.

GREG DELANTY



Living abroad, specifically in the United States, has affected my work in various ways. Without any predetermination on my part, I found myself writing emigrant/immigrant poems. Outside the quality of the writing which is paramount, expressing the world of the emigrant/immigrant seems important because it has not been articulated through poetry in any extensive way by anyone with first-hand experience. Considering that emigration is such a profound part of the Irish psyche, it is surprising

that no emigrant has done this already. Coincidentally, around the same time that I began to focus on this subject, poets such as Eamonn Wall, Nuala Archer and Louis de Paor were also beginning to write from a similar perspective.

Another way that living outside Ireland has affected my writing concerns my reaction to both the tradition I come from and the one I found myself within. Even while in Ireland I was eager to develop my writing beyond my comprehension of the Irish dual language tradition. This did not mean any abandoning of the past. Leaving Ireland gave me a literary distance from which to view the Irish literary tradition. Essential to my perspective of this is my belief that I have to write through it in order to develop beyond it. It may be best for an artist to tackle the past head-on—in form and style, no matter how traditional—before he or she can be free to work in new ways. For instance, the visual artist should be able to sketch the human figure well before working in the abstract. This is simply the commonsense approach of the craftsman. It may force the artist backwards in content and technique but much will depend on the writer's voice coming through from the ghostly realm of tradition, and how he or she uses those influences rather than allow him or herself to be used by them. In my own work, writing through the Irish tradition culminated in my longish poem "The Splinters" from my book *American Wake*. This poem, I feel, gave me a passport to free myself up to work within an American tradition which emerges in my next book, *The Hellbox*, especially in the title poem at the end of the volume.

I do not know how successful my poems are, and I am aware that in all likelihood their achievement may be minor if not worse, but if I had my wish I would like them to add to and extend the Irish and American traditions, and at the same time rise above both to be accessible to all readers regardless of their nationality.

EAMON GRENNAN



I've lived in America since 1966, when (after a year in Rome) I came over as a graduate student. I had written poetry and stories while I was at UCD, as well as editing *St Stephen's* and being in a small way part of the literary ferment taking place in Dublin in the early Sixties. When I came to the States, however, writing went underground on me. I don't

really know why. Transplantation, changing countries, changing lives, being obliged to the time-filling tasks of a student, the private and public perturbations of the late Sixties, my weak, if any, self-image as a “writer”—probably a mix of these and other reasons lie at the back of it. Whatever the reason, by the time I felt writing—and in particular the writing of poems—start to push back up into the light, by the time it had started to inch in from the margins to the centre of my life, I was in my mid-thirties, had a Ph.D., a teaching job, a wife, two children, and two step-sons. In 1977 I decided to test whatever it was I felt was happening, so I took a leave of absence and went back with my wife and our two children and lived for a year in the coastguard house in Ballymoney, County Wexford. I was trying to plug myself back into the actuality of Ireland, by being there, and by writing out of being there. I read Kavanagh and Padraic Fallon, Kinsella and Montague and Murphy, and the poets of my own generation. In addition, I had brought with me the work of American poets I particularly liked—James Wright, William Carlos Williams, Elizabeth Bishop, Berryman, Lowell, Snyder. When I think of that year and what it meant to me as someone starting out as a poet—someone who was starting to take more seriously than he had before the writing of poems—it is the conjunction of these two literary elements, the Irish and the American, that seems to have marked most indelibly the time, what I did in it, and what came out of it and after it. That was a beginning, and I think it probably established the particular curve for whatever trajectory I may have been making since then. So when I think, then, of what “living away from Ireland” has meant to my work, I feel I may be something of a special case, since my beginnings as a writer occurred “over here”, but I went back “over there” in order to get at those beginnings in a way that made sense to me. And since that time, it is the movement back and forth between over here and over there that’s important to me. I suspect my poetic manners owe their feel and substance to this movement, to my living in a sort of bi-polar way between the two places. (I might add that living and working in this country has probably also stimulated the particular critical habits I’ve developed in writing essays and reviews on the subject of Irish poetry since Yeats.) In addition, I think—to go from manner to matter—that some of the pressure of “doubleness” that may be felt in certain poems I write may also owe something to my condition of being both here and there (or neither here nor there). Possibly, too, the way I attach myself to subjects such as family, settlement and break-up, animals and landscapes (American and Irish fauna and flora), may suggest a consciousness and sensibility preoccupied with notions (sometimes rather rattled

notions) of home, a consciousness and sensibility eager to make a map of its own surroundings, in order to be at home in them, wherever they are. The real point is, of course, that—important as they may be for an external understanding of what one is at, for the critical grasp to tighten on the lineaments of the work—issues such as these have to be digested by the poet himself or herself, and become some organic element in the larger project, which is making sense of the world, this world, the one we inhabit in our one body for whatever span we stretch to. For this reason, poems of “exile” couldn’t be part of what I’m at, since (however personally complicated my relationship with Ireland and with America might be, however the word “home” might seem natural to me in its broad sense only as it applies to Ireland) mine is not really an experience of exile, and to make a subject of it would be for me a kind of emotional exploitation (as other contemporary Irish writers have said about themselves). And the poems that might result from such exploitation—whether corrosive with indignation or sticky with nostalgia—would, as poems, be neither interesting nor worthwhile.

SEAMUS HEANEY



A poem is, among other things, a process of coming to for the first time in a place which nevertheless feels like home ground. That being so, you would think it should be easy for poets to remember where they are, but in fact it usually takes a while for the familiar to sink in deep enough to resurface in an imaginable way. Even poems as on-the-spot as Frank O’Hara’s come from the reredos rather than the retina; they too are “things discovered in the deep” of brilliant, burning lunch-hours, as far off within themselves as sunstruck flowers in a Manhattan roof-garden.

Somehow, the landscape of the poem needs to undergo the kind of flooding that will make it a reservoir, make it newly available as a breathable and lucid element. This was what happened when Wordsworth—not used, as he says in *The Prelude*, to make a present joy the matter of his song—crossed Westminster Bridge; or when Whitman crossed Brooklyn Bridge; or when Emily Dickinson crossed into a certain slant of light. The present became a foreign country. They were effortlessly in step with the stranger inside themselves.