

me both mysterious and basically uninteresting. Thinking about a request to give opinions on living abroad, and not having any such opinions, I have dug out Van Morrison's 1993 *Too Long in Exile* (which might, by the way, be re-titled *Too Much Georgie Fame*), and listen to another voice I feel at home with, as the title track unravels this:

Oh that isolated feeling  
Drives you up against the wall  
'Cos you've been on the mainland baby  
Been on the mainland, comin' on strong

Is he talking to me, or for me? I don't know, but I suspect that Morrison and I share a register of vocabulary where words like "mainland" have a special charge. A lot of people in Northern Ireland don't like that word; many people use it, and I myself think I know what it means. Despite Van's slightly sentimental take on "exile" in the song (neither he nor I are ever likely to be in exile from anywhere we'd want to be), living where you're happy is living at home. As it happens, I don't consider myself to be living abroad, though I might do so if I found myself holed up in Berlin, or Tokyo, or Dublin. Then again, I might love it in those places, and decide that they could be added to the expanding catchment area (where, in my experience, poems happen) that I like to think of as a kind of personal Greater Belfast. In that sense, I was born in Belfast and live there still. I'm sorry that people who talk a lot about "Irishness" find this difficult to understand, but to me it seems perfectly natural; and let me confess now (it's no surprise) that, being from Belfast, I don't think of myself as having, or wanting, a stake in the "Irishness" debate. More pressingly, the collection of tapes is in a mess; something will have to be done, and soon, for we're moving house at the end of next month—to Bath, this time, another suburb of Belfast where (they say) a local pub near the new house is one of Van Morrison's occasional haunts. "Just like George Best, baby?" We'll see.

MICHAEL O'LOUGHLIN



Has living abroad affected my work? I find it hard to localise a standpoint from which I can answer such questions: a centre of gravity, a meridian. Being an emigrant means crossing lines, visible and otherwise.

The diaries of Wolfe Tone are a key document of the Irish Diaspora. At some stage the Irish revolutionary crosses a line and becomes an officer in the Napoleonic army, and Ireland becomes as foreign to him as “the coast of Japan”. The essence of emigration, of exile, of being an *émigré*, is displacement of meanings. It is living and thinking in categories which are not translatable back into the original. To be Irish living the Europe of today is not to be following in the footsteps of St Brendan and Patrick Sarsfield, or even James Joyce. That is what cannot be communicated. That silence has entered my poetry: where it will lead I do not know.

How has the diaspora of Irish poets affected views of Irish poetry? This is a political question in the narrow sense of the word, and its ironies will not surprise any student of other people’s diasporas. The existence of the current “diaspora” poets seems almost an embarrassment for some people in Ireland. They were noticeably absent from the Frankfurt Buchmesse special on Ireland and Its Diaspora last year. In this context I remember a conversation I once had with an official in Ireland, when I asked for a travel grant: the official replied, in gales of laughter, that such grants were designed to get the poets off the island, not onto it. And yet the man would have thought of himself as not insensitive, internationally-minded, etc. And maybe he was. But the gulf has become almost too big to bridge. The problem is, if you dump the category Irish you make it difficult for other people to place you. You can proudly proclaim yourself to be a citizen in the first days of a civilisation that will last a thousand years, but that makes problems for anthology makers and Arts Council officials. As of yet, and not just in poetry, there are no real transnational European institutions, reflecting the lack of any authentic common culture.

I write this in Amsterdam on Bloomsday 1997. Over my head helicopters are circling and one hundred metres away the heads of Europe are meeting to “decide our future”, as the expression goes. Celan spoke of the poem being a message in a bottle, and so is the diaspora poet. Who knows what shores he will wash up on? The only thing he can be certain of is that it won’t be the Shamrock one. On to the new Bloomusalem!

JOHN REDMOND



One important consequence of going abroad for anyone—whether they are Irish or not, whether they write or not—is captured in Aldous Huxley’s maxim: comparison is the beginning of criticism. Simply