

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 gaels 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

to be exposed to the different patterns of another culture enables a writer to criticise his own with greater force. I believe that this has less to do with, say, the colour of the trains, the preferred time for meals or the relative popularity of bicycles (the things about a new place which strike us first), or even with dating habits, attitudes to babies and to public institutions (the things which strike us after a while) than it has to do with fundamental existential stances such as how much trust we have in the world, how happy we are capable of being and how willing we are to surrender ourselves to one another.

The main lesson I have learned about the English after having lived among them is that, in stark contrast to the Irish, they expect very little of other people. That is not a great insight—indeed it is little more than a variation on the stereotypes of the reserved English and the friendly Irish (although the variation reflects a lesson which has been lived as well as learned). I confine myself to this tentative proposition because I don't have much faith in notions of a "diaspora writer" or an "*émigré* poet". Contemporary poetry, sometimes even the very best of it, seems to me composed—to an alarming degree—of clichéd positions, over-familiar gestures (poems about paintings, about films, rural elegies, poems about place-names, animal poems, poems about the marginal nature of one's identity and so on). To this list can be added the *émigré's* poem (who could stomach another poem about the ferry to Holyhead?). Of course this isn't to say that there is no value in writing poems along such lines. I am merely recording my weariness with the question and the usual answers to it. So for me the main consequence of being someone in a foreign country who writes is the swerve I always want to make from the patterns of "being an *émigré* writer".

MAURICE RIORDAN



Looking out this March day at the overcast sky in south London, where I've lived for the past ten years, I don't feel very "abroad". Abroad, I suspect, is where other people are enjoying themselves.

Of course where one lives affects one's poetry—in which case there is perhaps in mine a good deal of overcast, and no doubt climactic, envy. But the degree varies with the writer, and in my case an intense alle-