

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-

giance to a specific place, whether in Ireland or “abroad”, doesn’t seem to be a big factor.

But there is affection, and some loyalty too, for this area of London where I’ve watched my family grow up: showrooms with BEDS writ large on the windows; a house I passed twice weekly with a cactus garden out front (more climatic envy); the sheer conglomeration of people in the one place; the daily, almost tidal rhythm of its traffic, especially the trains, shuttling people “in and out”. And the quiet, surprisingly: the deep alcoves of almost-silence that are so characteristic of the place.

And there is loyalty too, and a more intangible and cherished, attachment to the place where I grew up—which, for one thing, imposes something close to a taboo on describing it—It comes out in my poems in polarities: here and there, then and now, and in other ways that may be less obvious. This has to do perhaps with the ease of getting “home”, three or four hours, which is also a type of time travel: it seems to be into the past in both directions.

But I’m wary of constructs such as “Irishness”. Is there anything I’ve less to worry about when I wake up in the morning? If there’s any deliberate effort, it must be towards open-ended-ness, in keeping with the improbability of being here, wherever it is, and the imponderable concatenation of accidents that determines one’s destiny, which has at once an utter—well, perhaps an absolute—contingency, and yet all the pathos of uniqueness, of its one unrepeatable story.

So to tell this, now and then, in spurts of language, in something seemingly coherent and complete, rhythmic and formal? Well, it’s a pleasure, a “high”, since it is, or one thinks of it as being, an intimation—yes, of transformation, of being located in a coherent history, with trustworthy co-ordinates of geography and ancestry with its “Irishness”, if you like—or its Afro-Austral-Argo-Irishness maybe.

PETER SIRR



How useful is it, really, to think in terms of “Irish poetry”, to talk about the experience of the “Irish poet” as if Irishness were self-evidently the defining characteristic, the first principle from which all else follows? The notion of a poetry essentially defined by its place of origin is probably as disabling as the aspiration towards an internationalist or universalist poetry. Both perspectives are locked into the