

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 unrepeatably 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

dubious politics of place. I think the primary homeland of any poet should be curiosity, energy, a preparedness to roam. But Ireland can be strangely oppressive in its parochialism, as if there were some kind of reality gap, a fear that Ireland and all that goes with it might somehow disappear—worse still, may not even be there at all—and that the only way of staving off our vanishment is to tell ourselves over and over that we are here, that we matter, that we are our very own category in the world.

This is, perhaps, why our relationship with the wider world is largely export-driven. We read about Frankfurt because Ireland is the theme country in the book fair that year, we are plied with a series of articles about Paris which are actually about the Irish cultural festival there. Did you know that in Helsinki there are five Irish pubs? The Irish, I read recently in the *Irish Times*, have taught Europeans how to enjoy themselves, which is why they flock here in their depressed thousands. An international poetry magazine is suddenly, miraculously, available in Dublin bookshops because it is an Irish issue. We will never see the German issue or the Italian issue, not to mention the Scottish, Welsh or English issue. I have a sense that the more we pat ourselves on the back for our newly discovered “Europeanness” the more are we ensnared in our own theme park.

This parochialism can translate itself to experience elsewhere, so that the Irish poet living abroad seems in the poems he or she writes to be more concerned with what is left behind than what is arrived at. The danger is that the poet becomes trapped in two kinds of distance; the ever lengthening distance between current experience and a closely husbanded “Irish” experience; and the distance that results from a refusal to engage imaginatively with the host country, which often remains a kind of dry, unpromising hinterland, fenced off from the primary clutter of home. Poets come from particular places, like everyone else. Nor would I want anyone to shed any of that particularity, but I’d prefer if poets left their luggage to rot in the airport and wandered around the city with the wind from the river or the mountain-tops whipping the hats off their heads, the shirts from their backs and the vocabulary of home from their mouths. All poets live abroad, don’t they?