

INTRODUCTION



Irish Poetry and the Diaspora

The whole issue might be, as Eamon Grennan suggests, neither here nor there. However, in an effort to make sure, in the spring of this year *Metre* sent out letters to a number of Irish poets who either have lived abroad for an extended period or are living abroad still, asking them for their opinions on Irish poetry and being abroad. They were invited to respond either with reference to their own development as poets or in more general terms.

Harry Clifton's comments in interview provided the original idea for this opinion poll. He remarked that "the concept of Ireland and what constitutes Irish poetry (and what constitutes Irish society too) has been changing radically in the last five or eight years", and that "now both in poetry and fiction it is entirely acceptable for writers to write out of Japanese, Argentinian or Asian experience and for all of that to be included in their Irishness".

The biographies of the poets who contribute here are varied—some left at any early age, others, to use Peter Fallon and Derek Mahon's term, "commute"—but one common idea emerges: childhood. That a poet grows up in a certain region and learns the use of English first in that place would seem to be a crucial factor in securing a sense of national identity. In interview once, Derek Mahon told the story of the Irishman who had lived in London for over thirty years, and who, when asked how he liked his adopted city, replied that it was a fine place but that he'd hate to live there. Several of these writers don't feel quite so temporary in their adopted homelands, but as Eamon Grennan says the word "home" for him only applies to Ireland and Peter McDonald, even though he lives in Britain, says the poems come from the Greater Belfast area.

If Ireland equals childhood, then what is the sell-by date of the "Ireland" that is being exported? One year? Or twenty? When does it stop being a true picture of the country or region the poet comes from? One's recollection of childhood is unlikely to be completely trustworthy—rose-tints spread through even the most unpleasant experiences—and there can be danger of idealisation, or its obverse, unfounded vilification. These two elements have been present in *some* poems written by Irish poets living abroad in the last few decades. But many other poems, despite the fact

that they were written many thousands of miles away from the country, can give a clearer view of things than would have been possible had the poet stayed at home. That one is far from the green, green grass of home might be just cause for many a maudlin moan but it can also provide a healthy dislocation for the imagination, as exhilarating as switching to free-verse after twenty years of sonnets. In any case, a brief look at work by poets who do stay at home will persuade that they could be living in Minsk for all the connection their poems have with their country of residence. Which is fine also.

Introducing *Escape from the Anthill*, Hubert Butler comments that “even when these essays appear to be about Russia or Greece or Spain or Yugoslavia, they are really about Ireland”. Does this remain true of contemporary writing by Irish authors? Perhaps the poems now about Japanese, Argentinian or Asian experience really are about that experience. This raises the question of who their audience is. There is an important distinction here to be made between the tourist poem (which obviously has more to do with where the poet’s flight originated) and the poem that emerges from a considered engagement with the alien culture. The interesting possibility arises that these poems, so concerned with foreign places, might be of scant interest to anyone “back home”. In cases where the foreign country’s language is not English, the situation is simple. The indigenous culture will not concern itself with literature about its country that is not in its language. However, when the language is the same, strange hybrids come into being. Thom Gunn now calls himself an Anglo-American poet—no other description would be accurate. Several of the poets here are in a similar position. The possibility arises that if their poetry doesn’t address concerns central to an Irish audience then they will be excluded from serious critical consideration.

In other words, the time has come to take account of the diaspora as an integral part of Irish writing. This could be taken even further: it might be time to jettison narrow ideas of what a national canon is; indeed, if we need a national canon at all. The fact of these poets living abroad can be seen as a metaphor for the way in which all poets are in constant conversation with their peers, alive and dead, regardless of nationality: Berryman and Yeats; Muldoon and Frost; Carson and Williams; Heaney and Hughes. There is no doubt that the idea of a national canon was of use in a time when poets tended to stay put and often defined themselves in relation to nationalist aspiration (whether accepting or rejecting it). But this is no longer the case. Perhaps now it would be better if we paid heed to the post-officer Rosita Boland recounts meeting with in Karimabad, the canny gentleman who so forcefully insisted that Ireland doesn’t exist at all.

JQ