

more because my job was in an American school, which was a kind of fortress of Americana determined to repel all vestiges of Italy, and so I had to work hard to purge that out my system and soak up as much of Italy as I could. But certainly the language was a huge part of it. I tend to find a home in language before anything else.

*Why did you decide to return to Ireland?*

Various life reasons, emotional and practical. I was at a point where I could either try and go back and make a life in Ireland and maintain all the connections I still had with the place, or stay on in Italy and try to make a life there. I was keen to get out of Milan, which is really a little piece of Austria that has leaked into Italy. I sometimes wonder what it would have been like to stay and build a life in Rome, say, or Bologna or Florence. Italy is not always a very easy country for a foreigner to live in, but the advantages outweigh the nuisances. The sheer interest of the place. The real difficulty, in the absence of large amounts of money, is having to make absolute choices. You must live in X or Y, whereas the really interesting thing to do would be to live in X and Y or X and Y and Z.

Then the job in the Irish Writers' Centre came up, and though I'd already decided to leave, getting the job was what enabled me to stay in Ireland. If that hadn't happened I probably wouldn't have stayed very long. Ireland wasn't exactly the land of opportunity then. But the Centre was a real challenge, and I enjoyed an awful lot of it. Not the endless politics and backroom struggles and the lack of money to really do things properly, but being able to run a completely new institution and add something to the mix. The early '90s were a good time to be back in Ireland. There was a real sense of possibility after the bleakness of the '80s, when the main political impetus seemed to be to get as many people off the island as possible. You trudged to the Careers and Disappointments Officer to find out not what you could do, but where you could go. And this was also the Ireland of the first divorce referendum, of shambolic government. By the '90s the place had changed hugely, and from a cultural point of view things had opened out, with many new institutions starting up and a little more money for the arts.

*People often talk about the danger of teaching creative writing. You've*

*worked for many years in arts administration. Were there dangers there for your work as a poet? Advantages?*

I don't think my work had much effect on the poetry at all, to begin with. Six years of teaching in secondary school in Europe had had a much more pronounced effect, eating up most of the available time. So compared to that, anything else was a relief. The problem for anyone trying to write and also hold down some sort of job (which is the position most poets would find themselves in) is to strike a reasonable balance, to husband the energies so that there's something left over at the end of the day to write with. Inevitably you end up being a smuggler, smuggling bits of poetry into the margins of the life. But then, being a full-time poet would, I imagine, have its own stresses. Somewhere in between is the happy and probably unachievable medium where there's ample time to think, reflect and read, as well as write. Where there's some sort of relatively uninterrupted continuum of preoccupation. Working in the Writers' Centre was good for me in that it made me think a good deal about writers and writing, and to work in a small practical way to promote their work. I also got to meet many writers I admired.

*Which aspects of the present Arts policy are you most in sympathy with? And which not?*

I'm in favour of any Arts policy that supports artists and promotes audiences for their work. I dislike policies that are overly directive, interventionist or bureaucratic. Which talk in terms of inputs and outputs and measurables and endless criteria for monitoring and evaluation. Which import practices ten years after they have failed elsewhere. I used to tear my hair out filling out forms which wanted to know how many phone calls per year I received from Laois or the South Riding of Tipperary or what percentage of our intended target audience was gay or transgendered or just plain confused. During my time in the Centre there was a perceptible shift to bean-counting in both the Arts Councils on the island and what seemed to me an essential distrust of artists and art. The language of the arts became this instrumentalist managerial gobbledegook, the same sort of language that's peddled in universities and other third-level institutions. I used to cut out examples of it and collect them in a sort of hate book, but I've junked all that now. The thing I most resist is the notion that the arts must

continuously prove their usefulness or saleability or ability to be a general social panacea or generally be everything except what they actually are and should be. I don't think the arts should have to be part of the relentless market capitalist consensus. Recently a third-level institution decided to close down its school of music, because, horror of horrors, it cost money every year to run and you can't have that. Had it been a school of sport, the argument would never have arisen. I actually think despite the improvements of recent years there's a very strong vein of philistinism and indifference to anything but the fate of money running through the culture.

*In a recent issue of Poetry Ireland Review there were several poems in Irish without English translation, as well as a review in Irish. What do you think are the prospects of Irish-language poetry and criticism in the immediate future? And does this have any bearing on your work as an Irish poet of the English language?*

I'm very glad to receive poems and prose in Irish, and happy to have material in Irish side with material in English. The *Review* has always featured poetry in Irish so this is not any kind of innovation on my part. I have also published translations of poetry from Irish, but I don't feel under any compulsion to feature Irish-language poetry only if accompanied with an English translation. There is the additional difficulty that as soon as Irish-language poetry is translated no-one bothers with the original—they take the translation as if it were the primary source and the Irish version only a kind of shadowy pre-existence. In a recent issue I published a review in Irish of Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's *Cead Aighnis*, which was published in 1998. That was the first review of that collection. Yet when Nuala's work is published in English it's reviewed immediately. It's as if Irish language poetry has to be first validated in English before it can be taken seriously. I think it's more interesting if people make the effort to read the original. There are very fine poets in Irish, after all. The last issue of *PIR* featured two superb poems by Biddy Jenkinson, an excellent and important poet, ignored because she doesn't go in for translation. To me it goes without saying that if you want to understand Irish poetry you need to attend to the two languages it occurs in. I get bored with the constant binary oppositions in the culture: Irish or English rather than Irish and English. A dual language heritage is a huge opportunity rather than a burden. I think it's difficult to be

an Irish-language poet in Ireland, though, because their fate is often to be celebrated and ignored with equal fervour. They are wheeled out at every possible opportunity, dispatched to festivals in Boston or Budapest as ambassadors of our marvellous heritage and linguistic plurality, and, largely, unread. Except, maybe, when they have the good manners to get themselves translated into a proper language. But then, apart from a few household names, poets in English are pretty much unread. We shouldn't delude ourselves into thinking that people are queuing outside Waterstone's to snap up the latest poetry book. A statistical analysis of the sales figures of new collections in Irish and English might provide interesting results. They mightn't be as far from each other as you'd imagine. But I can't really say what the future holds for Irish language poetry and criticism. In a sense, I think, I'm not overly concerned with "what-does-the-future-hold-ism" because it's essentially a doomsday form of thinking. People are constantly, and almost gleefully, writing off the Irish language, as if they couldn't wait to dance on its grave so they wouldn't ever have to think about it again. The language has proved pretty resistant to the grim forecasts. I prefer to try and engage with what's there, and find nourishment in that. The future can look after itself.

*You also are giving a lot of attention to poetry in translation in PIR. Which country's poetry do you feel is particularly dynamic at the present time? Which matters most to you personally?*

I suppose any editor follows the drift of his or her own prejudices. It seems to me that if you're really interested in poetry you can't afford to stop at the boundaries of your own language. But I'm no expert on contemporary poetry in other languages, and wouldn't want to pronounce on them. The people I'm interested in are a bit earlier. And I think that's probably often the case—it's the established reputations that reach you first. I have a particular interest in Italian poetry, as I mentioned earlier. And I find huge amounts of poetry in German completely compelling. Hüchel, Bobrowski, Celan, Günter Kunert, Jürgen Becker. And I keep going back to Hölderlin. A lot of contemporary French poetry leaves me pretty cold, but Bonnefoy is a huge presence, and I'm equally drawn to people like Jaccottet, Jacques Dupin. Pessoa has always been a very important poet for me. I read what I can, in what languages I can, and in translation. I'm a big believer in the

importance of the translation of poetry. But I'm always aware of the barriers that obstruct our understanding of the literature of other cultures. We tend often to like what most approximates our own experiences or biases. Like the French idolisation of Poe or Kenneth White. Or the Anglophone love affair with a certain kind of East European poetry before the collapse of the old regimes.

*Your interest in mediæval Irish literature comes through very strongly in Nonetheless. This is material that carries with it a heavy ideological freight from at least the mid-nineteenth century to the work of Kinsella, Heaney and Trevor Joyce. But in your treatment it's a new world discovered, and it seems strangely contemporary with the world of office-workers, PAYE, "the ongoing review, the unfinished application". Was this a deliberate strategy on your part?*

I do admire the work that poets like Kinsella, Heaney, Joyce and many others have done in this area. Kinsella, of course, has had an extraordinary impact on the appreciation in English of huge swathes of the tradition. His Oxford anthology was very attentive to the different veins of early Irish poetry in Irish and Latin. But there is a history of brilliant translation of this poetry: Gerard Murphy, James Carney, Myles Dillon, all the way back to Kuno Meyer. Frank O'Connor and David Greene did marvellous work in making the early material accessible. O'Connor was a great, cranky, opinionated translator. "Edge Songs" is my way of engaging with part of that tradition. I curated a literary exhibition for the Irish presidency of Brussels, and chose to focus on texts in the different languages of Ireland: Latin and French, as well as the various varieties of Irish and English, and I became interested in the work of figures like Sedulius Scottus, a brilliant Irish exile, theologian and biblical commentator, and also a devoted classical scholar, who knew his Horace, Virgil and Sappho and had connections with the court of Charles the Bald. My own strategy, inasmuch as these things are ever strategies, was to chip away at this tradition and play with a few fragments, trying to get at the spirit of the originals through imitation, half translation, micro-translation and a certain amount of invention. I want to present them as a single impulse, without any paraphernalia, because that's how they were written, but also because I was trying to create the feel of a single piece, a weird, fragmentary poem.

*What do you read (apart from poetry)?*

Poetry is the meat and drink, but I also consume large amounts of fiction (though my wife leaves me in the ha'penny place here; she reads novels at an astonishing rate, which means the house is always packed with fiction). I also read a lot of history, travel writing, sociology, all kinds of things. I'm not particularly systematic—I follow particular drifts. I'm interested in computer technology so I read a lot of technical stuff about operating systems and so forth. I make sporadic attempts to learn other languages. I'd gladly be an eternal student if I could...

*I have difficulties connecting your work with that of your Irish contemporaries. I think of, say, Glyn Maxwell in England, and in that case there seems to be more of a sense of collective endeavour (writing a book with Simon Armitage, etc.). Do you feel isolated or happily alone in the Irish context? Or am I reading the situation the wrong way?*

It's probably hard for me to say anything useful or enlightening about this. I think poetry is essentially a solitary endeavour, and I don't really believe in collective enterprises or endeavours. If poets do form groups it's usually for political or promotional ends and it usually lasts until the point where the individual members carve out their own particular route, i.e. at the point where they start to become interesting. I enjoy the work of many of my contemporaries in Ireland and elsewhere, but I don't see myself as having an exclusively Irish context. I think that's part of the problem in Ireland, that writers are all too self-consciously Irish, and the critical context is focused within the boundaries of this island. So I wouldn't be too concerned about trying to situate myself within an Irish context. You form your context out of the whole breath of your reading and your sympathies. Roy Fisher, Edwin Morgan, George Oppen, Elizabeth Bishop, James Schuyler, Ungaretti, Machado, Bonnefoy, etc., mean at least as much as Irish poets. And of course you don't only have a relationship with contemporaries or immediate predecessors, but with whole traditions of poetry. I'm deeply interested in early Irish poetry, in mediæval poetry, in Hölderlin, Heine and so on, as other people will have their interests, and any configuration of context needs to allow for that. Obviously some poets and some traditions mean more to you than others and your relationship with the poetry of your own culture will have a particular intensity, but it's just one strand. It always seems to me that Ireland is a small enough place without trying to make it even smaller.

*It's been said that your work has close affinities with the New York School. What are your feelings about this characterisation?*

I don't know about the characterisation, but I have always admired the wit, energy, brio of Schuyler, O'Hara, some of Koch, Tony Towle, but Schuyler especially. Schuyler's poems often take place in a kind of rapt apprehending, a continuous, and continuously updating present. Description is a form of intense exploration for him, and he has the brilliant knack of making his cunningly paced poems seems effortless, instantaneous.

*Bring Everything caught something of the changes which have occurred in Ireland over the past decade or so. For instance, there's an obvious relish about the increased energy that's moving through Dublin. Have your feelings about the city changed over this period?*

I wasn't conscious of trying to document a new phase in the history of Dublin or a new movement in the nation's economy. But I was certainly trying to write out of the experience of the city. I was living in the centre of the city, and it was changing almost daily in front of my eyes. At the same time I was living in a part of the city that has been continuously occupied for hundreds of years, continuously noisy, a continual witness to the history of the city. And I was interested in that too. I love the complex, shifting organism of cities in general, and am interested in everything to do with cities. But it is true that my feelings about Dublin changed over the years. I think it's a much better place than it was ten or fifteen years ago, despite the problems—greed, impatience, racism. It's still a more open place than it was, and I love its increasingly multi-cultural mix. I love the fact that you get on a bus and hear ten different languages. And like everyone else, I hate the planning mess, the endlessly proliferating ugly suburbs, the traffic, the whole car culture...

*In an essay on Pessoa you talk about the Portuguese's lack of interest in the social responsibility of the poet. Does the same hold for you?*

I have no interest in prescription of any kind. For me the poet's only responsibility is to produce the best poetry he or she can, and to follow the drift of their own sensibility. Poetry is necessarily a social art in that it is a communication with others, but this doesn't mean the poet has social obligations to any particular group. For Pessoa a poet full of beliefs and opinions wasn't a poet

at all. He maintained of himself that he had “no personality at all except an expressive one”. Yet every mood that came upon him was intense enough to become a distinctive personality. His poet is a shell invaded by one absolute force after another, and the poet’s only duty is to offer total allegiance to the force of the moment: to keep himself open and uncluttered to allow that absolute occupation. There’s a remarkable passage in his journal which shows this extremity of sympathy, where he’s riding in a trolley car and obsessively noting all the details of the people who pass before him. He sees a girl’s dress and starts to think about the material it’s made of, the work that went into it, the factory, the workers, so that by the time he gets off the tram he’s exhausted—he feels he’s lived an entire life. So on one level this is an intensely social imagination but it’s not constructed out of opinions. Pessoa, being Pessoa, takes this a step farther—according to him the two great crimes for a poet are sincerity and insincerity. What he meant by this was that the poet should have the capacity for total belief, total commitment only for the duration of the poem “the length of time which is necessary for a poem to be conceived and written”. What happens outside of the poem isn’t that interesting.

*Did you try to write a September 11 poem?*

No.

*But some of the surprising poems in Nonetheless do deal with atrocity, from previous ages and also in our own experience of them (I’m thinking of “A book with the names of the hanged” and “We will make a pit”—and there’s also “Pages Ripped from July” from The Ledger of Fruitful Exchange). You’re obviously interested in the way that large acts of violence are mediated through the culture...*

Like anyone else I’m appalled at atrocity and helpless in the face of it. I’ve written lots of poems that are immediate reactions to things that have happened, most of them no good. And the sheer evil of men throughout history is a continuing preoccupation, not that I have anything in the least original to say about it. Many of the poems you mention have to do with ritualised killing, the fetishisation of the murder impulses, with all the despicable judicial trappings. “We will make a pit...” begins with the actual words of a Sharia court in Nigeria. “A book with the names of the hanged” is from a history of public execution in Dublin.



*Your Selected Poems were published this year. Did assembling that book give you a new perspective on your own work? A new idea of where it has come from and where it might be going to?*

I have terrible misgivings about publishing any kind of book. The whole process is fraught with anxiety. I think it's partly because I don't tend to think in terms of books as I'm writing. One poem leads to another, or doesn't, and slowly things accumulate. My main thinking about books is reactive, in the sense that I often react against the last book and try to move in a new direction. The last few months before publication is when I begin to assemble the work into a book, and it's at that point that the patterns begin to emerge, and the work acquires some sort of order and cohesion. With a *Selected* the potential for anxiety is even greater. It means you have to go back and read all of your work and realise you're no longer the same person who wrote those poems. At the same time you have to respect the motley crew who produced the earlier work, rather than sit in sniffy judgement on them. I cleaned up lines here and there, lopped off a few excessive ones, but otherwise didn't interfere too much. The *Selected* is quite a slim book, and I wasn't setting out to make some kind of absolute statement, so much as to present a small and reasonably tightly edited selection from the work to date. It happened specifically because the poems have never been published in book form outside Ireland and a press in the US wanted a selection. And then Gallery decided to originate it in Ireland. Most of the thinking I do about my own poetry is about the poetry I want to write, that I haven't managed yet. Other than that I try to let the thinking happen in the poems. I very rarely sit around reading work once I've written it, and find it hard to do readings for the same reason. I don't have a stable sense of myself as poet—I'm interested in the evolving thing. You do of course realise when you re-read stuff how certain things come up again and again, how certain words are leant on like talismans, and you hope to be a bit less repetitive in the future.

*When I wrote about your work a few years back I said that some of the longer sequences don't hold together. Aingeal Clare takes me to task about this, remarking that you're more interested in creating a "feuilletonistic collage of a world 'bursting to tell itself'". She connects this with the deliberate absence of a personal voice in your work—by suppressing that, the world can come forth. Obviously I can't ask you to arbitrate in the mat-*

*ter, but I can ask you about the more general issue of the personal in poetry. For instance, it's extremely easy to connect the speaking voice in, say, Seamus Heaney's poetry or Eavan Boland's poetry, with the extra-poetical person. Are you wary of such a "personal" voice when you write? Do you feel it can lead to a suppression of the plenitude of the world?*

I think every poet leaves a clear set of footprints and voice prints and personality prints in every line. So the personal is always there whether you like it or not. The world, alas, doesn't tell itself, except in our imaginations. It's true that I'm not especially interested in a poetry of the foregrounded self, or in detailed narratives of personal life. Although, again, I try not to be prescriptive. I'd like to think it's possible to write many kinds of poems without being imprisoned by allegiance to one aesthetic or ideology. And that applies to formal experiment, positioning of voice, and so on. Maybe it's a function of that instability I mentioned, the sense of every possible moment shifting before you can realise it, and reaching for multiple forms of utterance to make sense of it. What I distrust about poetry that sells itself primarily on its autobiographical content is the assumption it makes that the reader should care about the poet's particular circumstances—it's a chat-show, phone-in, life-style journalism assumption. Poetry can be as autobiographical as it wants as long as it's doing something interesting in the process: physically interesting, sonically interesting, making you prick up your ears and listen. I can't arbitrate in the business of the longer sequences. I actually think sequence is the wrong word, and the kind of coherence you mention the wrong thing to be looking for. I tend to write groups or clusters of related poems, not out of a centrally co-ordinated plan, but because it happens that way. I'll come at something from different perspectives, or I'll feel that something else can be said. Or something will have its own momentum. The long group that forms the second part of *The Ledger of Fruitful Exchange* was written very quickly over a short space of time, as were the "Edge Songs" in *Nonetheless*. What I'm actually interested in is clusters, in clustering poems around some sort of central, though not centralising pre-occupation, and letting them radiate out in different directions, maybe enhancing each other or having some kind of fruitful relationship with each other. I find working like this is a release from the distraction of the individual, islanded and importantly titled poem. It liberates the poem into a freer, more meditative space. This is the idea, it's what I'd like to work towards.