'Ireland, verses, Scotland: crossing the (English) language barrier'

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The very problem of the national and the individual in language is basically the problem of the utterance (after all, only here, in the utterance, is the national language embodied in individual form). (Mikhail Bakhtin, cited Wesling 1997: 81)

The Irish mix better with the English than the Scotch do because their language is nearer. (Samuel Johnson, cited in Boswell 1906 [1791]: 473)

Why Scotland and Ireland? What is marginal, one might ask, about cultures that have produced writers like Burns, Boswell, Stevenson, and Scott, on the one hand, and Wilde, Shaw, Yeats, and Joyce, on the other? (Reizbaum 1992: 168–9)

One measure of the strength of a new subject is its capacity to attract major funding. With this in mind it is worth noting that the Irish Government recently gave its largest ever grant in the humanities – £400,000 – to Trinity College Dublin to develop Irish–Scottish Studies. At the same time, the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Board (AHRB), from a list of 145 applications, published a shortlist of twenty-five that included only one Scottish University for its Research Centre funding. Aberdeen University, whose Research Institute in Irish and Scottish Studies (RIISS) piloted the UK's first postgraduate programme in Irish–Scottish Studies, netted an award of £870,000, the largest ever grant in the humanities in Scotland. What is evident from these institutional awards and innovations is that Irish–Scottish Studies has officially arrived as a new (inter) discipline.

The pioneering work of critics such as Marilyn Reizbaum is now being followed through (Horton 1997; Reizbaum 1992). Reizbaum justified her own cross-marginal approach in the following way:

I feel I can talk about Scotland and Ireland together in this context, without homogenizing them and thereby further marginalizing them (all Celts are alike), because they have comparable 'colonial' histories with respect to England (unlike Wales) and because their status as minority cultures, which has more or less continued in psychic and/or political ways, has had a similar impact not only on the dissemination of their respective literatures but on the nature and means of the writing. (1992: 169)

Ireland and Scotland are marginalised and minoritised, but this experience has provoked different reactions from writers in the two countries.

My title suggests a contest of some kind, a battle of the bards, and it would be tempting to referee some stiff competition in the dead poets society by reading Yeats in the light of Burns, and MacDiarmid in the wake of Joyce. But despite my title, the intention is not to draw up bardic battle lines. My essay aims at comparison rather than conflict. As Edna Longley writes:

If unionists want their Scottish ties to yield more than a baronial blazon, an ancestral and atavistic title to 'Ulster Britishness', they must explore contemporary Scotland while Scotland itself explores the ratio between pluralistic cultural self-consciousness and gradations of political independence. The Scottish debate has more to offer than the English muddle about British nationalism. Belonging to the UK means engaging with what might be its crisis, what might be its mutation. To behave otherwise is to admit a 'colonial' status. (1997: 114–15)

Of course, there are very good historical reasons for Scotland and Ireland being averse to one another, to do with Empire and Union, and I have written elsewhere on that aversion (Maley 2000a; 2000b). Here, I want to accentuate the positive. In this essay I shall explore the missing middle of the vernacular in Irish writing, drawing on Edna Longley's perceptive remarks about Tom Paulin's poetic project and the vexed issue of Ulster-Scots. I propose to take in other kinds of writing than just poetry, though the chief part of what I have to say does relate to verses.

A few years ago, I was preparing to teach a course on contemporary Scottish and Irish writing, and I sat down to select the poetry and drama options. Since the Renaissance was my own period I found three plays I thought would work well together: Brian Friel's *Making History* (1989), the story of Hugh O'Neill, the Gaelic chieftain whose flight to the Continent left a vacuum into which a nascent Catholic nationalism was born; Frank McGuinness's *Mutabilitie* (1997), the story of Spenser's Irish sojourn, weaving in a visit by Shakespeare and an analogy between the theatre

and Catholicism that effectively dramatises Stephen Greenblatt's essay on 'Shakespeare and the exorcists' (1985); and, finally, Liz Lochhead's *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off* (1989), whose nursery rhyme title is undercut by its adult theme. All three plays were set in the 1580s or 1590s, and all addressed gender, history and national identity, focusing on a loser of one kind or another: the embattled and ultimately exiled Hugh O'Neill; the English poet burned out of his adopted home; and the Scottish monarch executed by her English cousin. All three also obsessed about England, and this interested me because I was concerned with the ways in which the hyphen between Anglo-Irish and Anglo-Scottish concealed a third term – Scotland and Ireland respectively. Another thing that struck me was the fact that while Friel and McGuinness opted for an English poetic voice – with a brief and unconvincing lapse on O'Neill's part – Lochhead's language was resolutely Scots.

This last feature was even more striking when it came to the poetry. I had picked up two anthologies that I admired, Fallon and Mahon's *Penguin Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry* (1990), and Donny O'Rourke's *Dream State* (1994). When I looked at the two together I was astonished at the difference. While the Scottish anthology offered poetry in all the languages and dialects of Scotland, and displayed a richness and diversity of voice that I had come to expect, the Irish volume, by contrast, was much more monologic, full of the samey and the sonorous, with very few exceptions. There was a tendency, to quote Beckett's Winnie in *Happy Days*, 'to speak in the old style'. Why was this so? What gave the Irish anthology a less 'contemporary' feel? The answer lies in the language question as it impinges, unevenly, on the literature of the two nations.

Edwin Muir, Scottish poet and critic, made light of Irish immigration in his travelogue, *A Scottish Journey*, published in 1935, but in his literary history, *Scott and Scotland*, published the following year, he held Ireland up as a model of national cultural revival. Muir's argument, simply put, was that Scottish writers had lost the ability to speak to the nation as a whole by their refusal of English – Muir was attacking Hugh MacDiarmid in particular – and he labelled their local efforts 'parochial', citing Yeats as an example to be followed of a truly national figure. Muir was arguably reacting against such influential accounts as that of T. S. Eliot, who in 1919 had pronounced Scottish Literature 'provincial':

The first part of the history of Scottish literature is part of the history of English literature when English was several dialects; the second part is part of the history of English literature when English was two dialects – English and Scottish; the third part is something quite different – it is

the history of a provincial literature. And finally, there is no longer any tenable distinction to be drawn for the present day between the two literatures. (cited in Dunn 1992: xvii)

For Muir, who was determined to see a Scottish literature develop that was worthy of a nation rather than a region, such remarks were anathema. Muir's argument, which concludes his study of Scottish literature, is worth quoting in full, since it captures the complexity of the modern debate around language and national identity:

Scotland can only create a national literature by writing in English. This may sound paradoxical: in support of it I can only advance my whole case in regard to the Scots language ... and the contemporary case of Ireland. Irish nationality cannot be said to be any less intense than ours; but Ireland produced a national literature not by clinging to Irish dialect, but by adopting English and making it into a language fit for all its purposes. The poetry of Mr Yeats belongs to English literature, but no one would deny that it belongs to Irish literature pre-eminently and essentially. The difference between contemporary Irish and contemporary Scottish literature is that the first is central and homogeneous, and that the second is parochial and conglomerate; and this is because it does not possess an organ for the expression of a whole and unambiguous nationality. Scots dialect poetry represents Scotland in bits and patches, and in doing that it is no doubt a faithful enough image of the present divided state of Scotland. But while we cling to it we shall never be able to express the central reality of Scotland, as Mr Yeats has expressed the central reality of Ireland; though for such an end the sacrifice of dialect poetry would be cheap. The real issue in contemporary Scottish literature is between centrality and provincialism; dialect poetry is one of the chief supports of the second of these two forces; the first can hardly be said to exist at all. And until Scottish literature has an adequate language, it cannot exist. Scotland will remain a mere collection of districts. (Muir 1982 [1936]: 111–12)

The irony is that the 'Mr Yeats' whom Muir praised had himself looked to Scotland for inspiration, and to a Scottish writer who helped establish the vernacular as a truly international language. At the turn of the century Yeats characterised Synge as 'truly a National writer, as Burns was when he wrote finely' (Yeats 1962: 157).

It is ironic that at a time when Edwin Muir was arguing for a Yeatsian model of national literature for Scotland, Irish writers were pursuing a more local/regional line, but with one difference from Scottish writers. Irish writers appear to have adhered more to Muir's insistence on English as the proper language of literary renaissance and resistance than to the

opposing view of Hugh MacDiarmid, who championed the vernacular. The letter of Yeats lives on, if not the spirit.

Douglas Dunn is one of many Scottish critics who have argued for the degree to which MacDiarmid's was a project of recovery and renewal, a cultural enterprise that was national as much as linguistic or literary:

MacDiarmid was trying to make a nation as well as poetry. He did so with a language that through disuse had become the victim of an inbuilt preterite. Vernacular, Doric, Braid Scots, Synthetic Scots, Plastic Scots, Aggrandized Scots, or Lallans, were and are (but, by and large, they are all one) instruments with which to cleanse the Scottish psyche of generations of English influence. It was for decades, and remains, a language unexposed to actual contact with changing intellectual and domestic life. It is a language with very few, if any, new words. Indeed, it is a language in which old words are used in poetry with the force of neologisms, the shock of the unfamiliar. (Dunn 1992: xxi)

While MacDiarmid looked to the Modernist experimentation of Joyce, Muir looked to the potent public oratory of Yeats.

As Dunn points out: 'Only in recent years has [Edwin Muir's] insistence on English as the only authentic language of Scottish poetry been proved mistaken through developments which have brought about a healing in the controversy that used to be described as "the language question"' (1992: xxxi). But Muir's mistake had implications for Irish poetry, for if Scottish writers defied his call and continued to write in all the languages of Scotland, then across the water in Ireland a 'central reality' would be forged at the expense of 'dialect poetry'. And this despite the arguments of a formidable figure like Patrick Kavanagh.

For, curiously, at the same time that Muir was deriding Scottish dialect poetry for creating a Scotland that was 'parochial and conglomerate', reducing the country to 'bits and patches', 'a mere collection of districts', Kavanagh was defending parochialism. There was in Ireland at this time a move afoot – still visible today – to resist the overweening influence of Yeats and to celebrate specificity, locality and region rather than nation. But – and here is the rub – to do so in the anglicised accents of Yeats. Kavanagh's famous distinction is instructive:

Parochialism and provincialism are direct opposites. The provincial has no mind of his own; he does not trust what his eyes see until he has heard what the metropolis – towards which his eyes are turned – has to say on any subject. This runs through all activities.

The parochial mentality on the other hand is never in any doubt about the social and artistic validity of his [sic] parish. All great civilizations

are based on parochialism – Greek, Israelite, English. Parochialism is universal; it deals with the fundamentals.

To know fully even one field or one lane is a lifetime's experience. In the world of poetic experience it is depth that counts, not width. A gap in a hedge, a smooth rock surfacing a narrow lane, a view of a woody meadow, the stream at the junction of four small fields – these are as much as a man can fully experience. (cited in Fallon and Mahon 1990: xviii)

If MacDiarmid won the day in Scotland, as writers became increasingly confident about using Scots, then Muir saw his vision materialise in Ireland. As Declan Kiberd points out:

The story of Irish poetry after the 1950s is the tale of how a new generation of men and women sought once again – as Yeats had at the start of the century – to free Ireland from provincialism by an exacting criticism and a European pose ... The poetry of those postwar decades was characterized also by a growing engagement with foreign – and specifically English – authors. One way of fighting free of the awesome legacy of Yeats, after all, was to set up shop under the sign of Eliot or Auden. (1991: 1311–12)

It is in this context, the context of a shift towards an English-oriented poetry, that Edna Longley refers to the poetry of the North of Ireland as exerting a necessary complicating force:

'Ulster poetry' – in the totality of its relations and publications – is an ideal focus for inter-disciplinary study. It breaks up Ireland as a unitary subject. It breaks up Britain as a unifying affiliation. It subverts the 'discourses' of Englishness and Irishness. It upsets poetic canons in two countries at once. (1988: 18)

Longley's call for a transgressive cultural poetics is salutary: 'In tandem with the inter-disciplinary and the inter-national, we need the inter-sectarian, and the cross-border' (1988: 22). Comparing Scottish and (Northern) Irish poetry should prove productive, though the differences may turn out to be as significant as the similarities.

Provincialism persists in Ireland, not least of all in the so-called 'Province'. In 1998 I asked Seamus Deane why he had not chosen to write his novel, *Reading in the Dark* (1996), in the Derry dialect that he so clearly still speaks. I had some idea as to why this might be. One was his own interest in the literature of an earlier period, hence his facility for the reflective, high tone suited to a memoir. A second, more problematic hunch I had was that Deane shared an Irish Catholic antipathy to the 'bad example' set by Protestant playwrights like Synge and O'Casey, and

a suspicion of anything that smacked of stage Irish or peasant parlance dressed up as ‘poet’s talking’. A third was market conservatism. I found his answer – that he had seen unsuccessful efforts to render that speech into print – somewhat evasive. If you look at the couple of instances where Derry speech is invoked in *Reading in the Dark* it is in the kind of comic-cut way that Scottish writers like James Kelman have argued against, wearing the clothes-pegs of dialogue rather than being integrated into the narrative. Accent is almost always apostrophised in contemporary Irish poetry, trapped in a speech bubble, denied the oxygen of publicity.

Apart from the expression ‘gom’ (meaning ‘fool’), Deane’s novel contains two clear instances of accented Irish English. In the first case, the narrator and his brother are laughing at the accents of the male relatives at their Aunt Ena’s funeral:

We would listen and then move away, choking with laughter at their accents and their repetitions. For it wasn’t talking; it was more like chanting.

‘Man dear, but that’s a sore heart this time o’ year, wi’ Christmas on top o’ us and all.’

‘It is that, a sore heart indeed.’

‘Aye, and at Christmas too.’

‘Och ay, so it is. Sore surely.’

‘Did ye see Bernadette, now; the younger sister?’

‘Was that Bernadette? She’s far changed now.’

‘Far changed indeed. But sure she’d be shook badly now by that death.’

‘Aye, the manner o’ it. So quick.’

‘Still, you can see the likeness to the brother. The dead spit o’ him.’

‘Which brother d’ye mean?’

‘The lost one. Eddie. The wan that disappeared ...’

Liam and I had stopped laughing. We both listened, but they said little before my father appeared. He motioned us over to him.

‘Now there’s a double sore heart,’ said one of them as we moved off.

‘The oldest boy gone and now the youngest sister. Never had good health, God help her.’ (41)

’Tis a double sore heart indeed, says I. To be sure. Ironically, the narrator’s own phrase – ‘For it wasn’t talking; it was more like chanting’ – is not only dialect itself, but in its evocation of ‘chanting’ it recalls the etymology of ‘accent’, which derives from the ‘chant’ or ‘accompanied song’. Irish writers prefer to sing unaccompanied.

The second occurrence of accented Irish English – or Ulster Scots – comes when the narrator is mapping out his territory, ‘with the border writhing behind it’:

We would walk out there into Donegal in the late morning and be back in the city by six o'clock, in time to see the women and girls streaming home from the shirt factories, arms linked, so much more brightly dressed, so much more talkative than the men, most of whom stood at the street corners. We would call to them, but they would dismiss us as youngsters.

'Wheel that fella home in his pram. His mother'll be lookin' for him.'

'You and your wee red cheeks. Teethin' again!'

We'd retreat in disarray. (60)

Disarray indeed. In this array, Deane, like many Irish authors, adopts a priestly tone, the high style, for first-person narrative. Like others too he laments the loss of Irish and upholds the idea of an oral tradition, yet still he opts in the end for a language that by and large uses an Irish accent only for comic effect or to represent speech. The narrative voice remains resolutely anglicised.

Recently, one Irish critic, interviewing Patrick McCabe, asked why this anomaly arose between dialogue and narrative in Irish writing: 'how is it that so many writers, writers living and writing in this country today, when they come to the descriptive passages or the thoughtful passages and so on, it goes into a sort of scholastic prose and it's quite different from the dialogue?' (FitzSimon 1998: 186)

This is a good question, and while the power of the Church, the history of colonialism, and the ill-fated experiments of Protestant playwrights may constitute the beginnings of an answer, it is worth attending to McCabe's immediate response:

you describe and then suddenly you're back into God-mode, you know, the omnipotent narrator sort of stuff and you think 'Ah, this is wrong' ... there does certainly seem to be a sense where the scholastic, dispassionate prose has disconnected you, or you don't want to be connected with the real pain of life or the real joy of life. Somehow, it's a fingernail-paring kind of thing, and ultimately it's not rewarding really for reader or writer. (186)

Compare the comments of Liz Lochhead, a performance poet and playwright who plays with varieties of Scots, current and historical: 'I don't write in standard English. I write in Scots English and sometimes actually in Scots ... but there's also that prose voice one feels one's got to master, that English-male-posh-grown-up-dead speech'. (1990: 10-11)

It is precisely 'that English-male-posh-grown-up-dead speech' that predominates in Irish poetry, not to mention plays and prose, what McCabe calls the 'God-mode' but I prefer to think of as the priestly high

tone. Irish writers have a tendency to confine accent to quoted speech. Take Seamus Heaney's moving tribute to his mother, 'Clearances'. One verse in this powerful poem tells of Heaney's mother's anxiety about her speech:

Fear of affectation made her affect
 Inadequacy whenever it came to
 Pronouncing words 'beyond her'. *Bertold Brek*.
 She'd manage something hampered and askew
 Every time, as if she might betray
 The hampered and inadequate by too
 Well-adjusted a vocabulary.
 With more challenge than pride, she'd tell me, 'You
 Know all them things'. So I governed my tongue
 In front of her, a genuinely well-
 adjusted adequate betrayal
 Of what I knew better. I'd *narw* and *aye*
 And decently relapse into the wrong
 Grammar which kept us allied and at bay.

(Fallon and Mahon 1990: 169–70)

Little wonder Heaney's mother affected inadequacy in the presence of such an exacting and corrective attitude. For Heaney's terms here – 'hampered and askew', 'inadequate', 'the wrong Grammar' – betray an approach to language that is normative to say the least. In 'Man and Boy', a poem about his father and grandfather, Heaney cites his father describing a salmon 'As big as a wee pork pig by the sound of it' (1991: 14). The comical colloquialism – 'big as a wee' – is in sharp contrast with the sombre and serious tone of the rest of the poem. In this scenario, as in Deane's novel, it is the older generation that have accents. The narrator knows 'better', and speaks perfect English, or imagines himself so to do.

Roddy Doyle and Patrick McCabe are exceptions in fiction, but as Edna Longley argues, employing what for me is a strange sort of logic, 'prose writers, particularising character and scene, can perhaps do more than poets to preserve local words' (1991: 651). Conversely, one might say that contemporary Irish poetry, though Irish in content, is very English in form, and for good historical reasons – translation, a longer interaction with English culture than Scotland, and a different education system to the Scottish one, the latter allowing more readily for bidialectalism. In Scotland, writers are comfortable with both English and Scots. In Ireland, the politics of pronunciation is much more problematic.

There is a double bind, and Longley points to it, perhaps unwittingly. Unionist writers, in their desire to be British, underplay Ulster Scots,

or, if they promote it, they do so for political rather than cultural reasons: 'The inflated and politicised claims made for Scots, which copy Sinn Féin's exploitation of the Irish language, both discredit a real case and epitomise the selective unionist use of Scotland' (1997: 114). Nationalists are likewise resistant to dialects since Irish English sounds too much like English, and recalls an earlier Anglo-Irish tradition. Irish writers would rather be priestly and classical and high in tone, or write in Irish. Sticking with Longley (who is a wonderful close reader of poetry and a marvellous polemicist), she takes issue with Tom Paulin's call for writing in Ireland's 'three fully-fledged languages – Irish, Ulster Scots and Irish English' (Paulin 1984: 191). Paulin's look at the language question throws back a marginal mirror image:

Many words which now appear simply gnarled, or which 'make strange' or seem opaque to most readers would be released into the shaped flow of a new public language. Thus in Ireland there would exist three fully-fledged languages – Irish, Ulster Scots and Irish English. Irish and Ulster Scots would be preserved and nourished, while Irish English would be a form of modern English which draws on Irish, the Yola and Fingallian dialects, Ulster Scots, Elizabethan English, Hiberno-English, British English and American English. A confident concept of Irish English would substantially increase the vocabulary and this would invigorate the written language. A language that lives lithely on the tongue ought to be capable of becoming the flexible written instrument of a complete cultural idea. (191)

Paulin touches a nerve here. 'A confident concept of Irish English' is exactly what is missing in modern Irish literature, though recent work has gone some way to restoring confidence, at least in terms of critical credibility (Todd 1989; Wales 1992). Edna Longley takes issue with the alleged novelty of Paulin's look at the language question:

In fact, since Yeats, such an idea, shorn of Paulin's totalitarianism, has informed the practice of the best poets. Nor can Ulster Scots, either for conversational or literary purposes, be cordoned off in some linguistic zoo-park as a backward species whose robust primitiveness may one day contribute to the national bloodstock. The natural spectrum of Seamus Heaney's vocabulary shows the way that Paulin would harshly flood-light with academy or dictionary. Moreover, Paulin has invented a new form of poetic diction by sprinkling his poems with dialect, or would-be dialect, words (in Edward Thomas's phrase) 'like the raisins that will get burnt on an ill-made cake': scuffy, choggy, glooby, claggy, biffy, keeks, glup, boke. If that's meant to be Ulster-Scots idiom, the implications are almost racist. As Thomas maintained: 'Only when a word has

become necessary can a man use it safely; if he try to impress words by force on a sudden occasion, they will either perish of his violence or betray him'. Even Synge went a bit far in the matter of idiomatic vitamin-injections. And prose-writers, particularising character and scene, can perhaps do more than poets to preserve local words. Lallans poetry, in the mouth of Hugh MacDiarmid, was virtually a one-man show. On the political front, Paulin's advocacy of a 'confident concept of Irish English' has met with some amazement among Nationalist Irish-language enthusiasts, who refer scornfully to 'the creole dialects of English'. (1991: 651)

MacDiarmid was not a one-man show. Other writers – like Lewis Grassie Gibbon, Nan Shepherd, Marion Angus, Violet Jacob and Neil Gunn – cultivated Scots in influential ways. And in any case, MacDiarmid did instil confidence in the Scots tongue. Does Longley share the scorn of 'Nationalist Irish-language enthusiasts' for 'the creole dialects of English'? Longley concludes that distance from the domestic scene gives rise to a cultivated nostalgia: 'Since Heaney, Deane and Paulin no longer live in Northern Ireland, it may be inevitable that they should fall into the tropes of stylised retrospect' (1991: 652). But 'the tropes of stylised retrospect' are far from being confined to exiles. They pervade Irish culture.

Paulin fails to mention among his 'three languages' the one that arguably exerts most pressure on Irish poets, namely 'English English', or just plain English. Longley considers Paulin's version of Ulster Scots to be impoverished and she contrasts Seamus Heaney's use of phrases like 'the body o' the kirk' (1991: 654), which strikes me as no less tokenistic and clichéd, akin to Deane's 'wee red cheeks'. (Moreover, in an odd move, Longley appears to endorse Irish-language advocates who resist Paulin's notion of Irish English, which they refer to scornfully as 'the creole dialects of English'.) Well, double sore heart indeed. Hampered and askew, I ask you.

If Longley can tar Paulin with the brush of racism for proposing that 'Ulster Scots' be deliberately cultivated in such a coarse manner then something is rotten in the state of Irish letters. The 'three languages' debate in Scotland has different connotations. Douglas Dunn points to the unique Scottish achievement whereby national unity is imagined through linguistic diversity: 'Despite the survival of poetry in three languages (and it was far from guaranteed) there seems a hunger for unity, not through a single language, but through one nationality that sanctions a tripled linguistic and poetic experience' (1992: xxvii). This flexibility of language choice allows for a freedom of expression and a richness of

representation that makes a mockery of Muir's arguments against depicting Scotland in 'bits and patches'. Thus, for a poet like Dunn, the availability of accents is the key to accommodating variation: he maintains that the language question in Scotland has essentially been resolved through a three-way dialogue:

That poetry in Gaelic should not only have survived, but enjoyed a renaissance, is little short of miraculous. At one time a Scottish poet writing in English could be bullied into believing that his or her language was not a native tongue. Similarly, the translating-back-in-time feeling of the Scots language, with its sometimes extruded diction, could generate unsettling questions about the authenticity of what seemed an archaizing mode. Hectoring issues such as these now appear to have been settled, and the liberty of three languages established. (1992: xlvi)

Perhaps I am guilty of hectoring here, but it strikes me that 'the translating-back-in-time feeling ... with its sometimes extruded diction', a feature of some Scots writing, applies across the board – and across the water. Irish poetry is clearly marked by 'an archaizing mode'.

Before one gets too carried away with Scotland's inclusiveness it is worth pointing out that black Scottish poets such as Jackie Kay and Maud Sulter, who have contributed considerably to Scotland's literary culture, have made their homes in England. There may be openness in the languages on offer, but there is still a residual monoculturalism that mitigates against difference that is visible as well as vocal. There is further work to be done on the effects of such vocal interventions on patterns of gender and national identities.

Of course, 'English' is itself an Anglo-Latin Creole, and there are only varieties that rally round an unsettled standard, but while other varieties, such as Indian English, jockey for position, Irish English remains problematic, at least in a literary context, not least of all because Ireland's writers are self-conscious about its use. Irish English is spoken by a majority of Irish citizens, but it is a language that is devalued, and largely absent from literature, from poetry and from public life. When Roddy Doyle said that he 'wrote *The Commitments* because there are probably a million people living in suburbs in Dublin who did not exist in TV content and literature' he indicates an accentual absence (1996). What Doyle marks in some ways is the return of the vernacular. He also marks a reaction to an attitude of intellectual snobbery that disparages accentual variation from the so-called standard. There's nothing more amusing – and sad – than people with accents pontificating about purity of diction. Scottish poet Tom Leonard has parodied this stance:

thi langwij
 a thi
 intillect hi
 said thi lang-
 wij a thi intill-
 ect's English.

(Dunn 1992: 336)

Irish writers with strong accents that are absent from their work do not appear to see the irony. Hyper correction, the tendency to overcompensate for any possible accented deviation from the perceived standard; downright snobbery; lip service to an oral tradition that they overlook in favour of a scholastic style, a preferred academic mode that will get them recognition beyond their shores, and to hell with the homeys. Old English in new clothing, more sermon than song. Accents allowed for funny stuff and light-hearted interludes, for dialogue and quaint colloquial colour. More English than the English themselves, hence their success.

But enough of Irish poets – what about the Scots? And is there something about the profession of poetry in Ireland that rules out the working class in a way that this form of literary expression does not exclude speakers of the middle tongue in Scotland? Ireland, verses, Scotland. But let us build bridges, for if there is a different attitude to the middle tongue in the two countries, then at the level of content and theme there is much to be gained from close comparative reading. Irish and Scottish poets share the loss of a native language, the loss of land that accompanies the loss of language, the gap that opens up between fathers and sons and mothers and daughters as older forms of expression yield underfoot to more anglicised modes, the pain of exile, anger, hunger, and uprooting.

Robert Crawford, one of several Scottish poets to mix marginalised modes of speaking with cutting-edge poetic technology, has written at length in Bakhtinian terms of the in-betweenness of Scots: neither English nor Other:

Scots is likely to strike the majority of international readers as a deliberate variation on English, which frequently quotes, re-accent, and realigns elements of English vocabulary, mixing them in a rich impurity with alien elements (in the same way that some 'Black English' works). Such Scots is a form of 'dialogized heteroglossia', which is why the use of it affects not only Scottish but English identity, in much the same way as does the superbly impure language of James Joyce and the other Modernists. (1993: 7)

In 'Mappamundi', W. N. Herbert, a poet closely linked with Crawford (they were contemporaries at Oxford doing doctorates respectively on MacDiarmid and Eliot), touches on the Scottish perception of the place of Irish poetry in the world:

Eh've wurkt oot a poetic map o thi warld.
 Vass tracts o land ur Penntit reid tae shaw
 Englan kens naethin aboot um. Ireland's
 bin shuftit tae London, whaur
 oafficis o thi Poetry Sock occupeh fehv
 squerr mile. Seamus Heaney occupehs three
 o thon. Th'anerly ither bits in Britain
 ur Oaxfurd an Hull. Thi Pool, Scoatlan,
 an Bisley, Stroud, ur cut ti cuttilbanes in
 America, which issa grecht big burdcage wi
 a tartan rug owre ut, tae shaw
 Roabirt Lowell.

(from O'Rourke 1994: 146)

Herbert hails from Dundee, a city which itself has a long and complicated history of Irish immigration and trade links with the Indian subcontinent; his views on language are worth quoting at length:

My experience of being Scottish in England was the discovery of suppressed contrasts. Unlike Ireland, Scotland is not supposed to be 'different' or 'foreign'. It is the country which is not quite a country, possessing a language which is not really a language. To use only English or Scots, then, seems to cover up some aspect of our experience, to 'lie'. The truth about Scotland, perhaps, can only be situated between the dominant and suppressed parts of language, in the realm of the forked tongue.

So I write in English and Scots. In each of these I could be accused of lying. In Scots I pretend that my basic speech – Dundonian – hasn't been atrophied by cultural neglect, and still has access to the broad vocabulary of the Scots dictionary. This creates the language of a quasi-fictional country, one which offers a critique of the present status of 'Scotland'.

In English I don't lie so much as hope: that an English audience is engaged by the depiction of a challengingly 'other' culture, and that my Scottish audience has a mind of its own. (cited in O'Rourke 1994: 144)

Interestingly, Donny O'Rourke, the editor of the *Dream State* anthology, and himself an engaging Scottish poet, says: 'What is lacking in Scotland, as opposed to Ireland, is much sense of young writers using an ancient language to grapple with the present'. (1994: xxxvii) Is it perhaps that where Scottish poets resort to Old Scots, Irish poets resort to Old English?

I want to close with two poems that present very different accounts of the Irish–Scottish relationship: different versions but also different sides; betrayal but also shared suffering. The first poem is by James Joyce, and expresses the theme of betrayal that characterises much of his writing on Scotland. In ‘Gas from a Burner’, published in 1912, Joyce wrote:

Poor sister Scotland! Her doom is fell
She cannot find any more Stuarts to sell.

(Levin 1977: 462–3)

The second poem, called ‘Donegal’, is by the Scottish Gaelic poet Derrick Thomson (Ruaraidh MacThomais), and puts matters in a different light. It is in Gaelic, and although it is called ‘Donegal’, its subject is the Gaelic language(s). The translation (in English, not Scots) closes with these lines:

all it asks is to clamber, like the goats,
on sharp rocky pinnacles, above the blue sea.

Until the ragged children carry it away with them
on the steamer to England,
or to Glasgow, where it dies
in its sister’s arms –
the royal language of Scotland and of Ireland
become a sacrifice of atonement on the altar of
riches.

(Dunn 1992: 219)

A double sore heart – betrayal and sacrifice – but atonement too, as two countries marginalised by England express themselves in three languages, with one eye on England, the other on America – two countries that have been rooted out of Europe by the British state, that have avoided making eye-contact with one another, yet compatible and comparable in so many ways. Edna Longley advocates ‘[language] which crosses rather than takes sides’ (1991: 654). Across the margins, close to the edge, lands of missing middles and double sore hearts, hampered and askew. Ireland, verses, Scotland. But one person’s margin is another’s metropolis. As Colin Nicholson points out:

Scotland continues to experience, and must perforce struggle with, the imperatives of a homogenizing culture emanating from London and the south-east of England, still imperially powerful over the domestic territories of the British Isles. Such metropolitan systems of culture marginalise whatever divergences happen to exist on so-called ‘peripheries’. But for those who live there these peripheries are centres. (1992; xii)

From the so-called centre, all peripheries might look the same, but from those putative peripheries, things may look – and sound – very different.

Language can take sides in different ways. Cairns Craig has pondered the paradox that Scottish literature has won its independence with a gusto lacking in the political sphere:

Why then should Scottish literature have retained and indeed asserted its independence in a context where the Scottish people – unlike the Irish, for example – have seemed deeply resistant or apathetic about other forms of independence? ... In part it is that Scotland has, despite both internal and external pressures, never been integrated into the cultural values of the British state. The texture of Scottish life, in its religious, educational, legal, linguistic forms, remains distinct from that of England to an extent which is little recognized in England, let alone the outside world. (cited in Nicholson 1992: xii)

The habit of perceiving language as national, dialect as regional, and accent as social, is compounded in a colonial context, because class is inflected by race (and nation) and nations are subordinated as regions, provincialised and patronised. Educationalist Lindsay Paterson suggests that class is at the root of perceptions of language and art:

Now, not much in Scottish culture happens without reference to England, and the implicit contrast running through all this is with English. The convention that has grown up along with this aggressive Scots is that an 'English' accent signifies social detachment ... But the linguistic contrast with English has not mainly been with England itself so much as with those Scottish social groups that can be claimed to have betrayed their country. (1996: 77)

Class is the key to understanding attitudes to colloquialism in a colonial context. Picking up on a point made by Raymond Williams in his subtle account of Synge and O'Casey, Declan Kiberd identifies a social strand in the language of Irish poetry:

Irish eloquence is implicitly presented in many plays as a kind of consolation for poverty, and so O'Casey's slum-dwellers are seen to create in rolling speeches a kind of spaciousness that they can never find in their tenements. While collecting folklore in a Galway workhouse, Lady Gregory pronounced herself struck by the contrast between the destitution of the tellers and the splendour of their tales, but a more modern Irish generation has been less charmed by that disjunction. Current reservations about eloquence are dramatized with much subtlety in Brian Friel's *Translations*, where the hedge-schoolmaster, Hugh, explains his native culture to the visiting Englishman Yolland: 'Indeed,

Lieutenant. A rich language. A rich literature. You'll find, sir, that certain cultures expend on their vocabularies and syntax acquisitive energies and ostentations entirely lacking in their material lives. I suppose you could call us a spiritual people.' He claims that a 'syntax opulent with tomorrows' is 'our response to mud cabins and a diet of potatoes'. (1991: 1313)

This is a critical passage, because it captures a central tension in modern Irish writing and criticism. The old eloquence that threatened to turn into stage Irishness, the eloquence of dialect or 'poet's talking', has been supplanted by another eloquence, apparently invisible, in which writers adopt an anglicised mode that avoids engaging with an 'inferiorised' Irishness. Kiberd's allusion to 'a more modern Irish generation ... less charmed by [the] disjunction' between economic poverty and linguistic plenty is telling. For 'reservations about eloquence' are both an understandable reaction to the consoling and compensatory rhetoric that stands in for a fundamental lack – this is Williams's argument in his essay on Synge and O'Casey – but at the same time they arguably amount to a desire for upward mobility that glosses over social and linguistic realities. Speaking of Synge and his contemporaries, Williams wrote: 'What the writers found, in their own medium, was "richness", but the richness was a function of a more pressing poverty, and this was at times idealized, at times compounded'. Of O'Casey, Williams remarked: 'But the most interesting later work is where the interest always was: in the true nature of that endless fantasy of Irish talk' (1981: 148, 169). The latter part of the twentieth century witnessed a reaction against the 'Elizabethan richness' commended by Yeats. Irish poets would speak the Queen's English, but it would be the English of Elizabeth II.

Kiberd's own language is revealing. Speaking of the predicament of the Irish writer, caught between Irish and English modes, Kiberd remarks:

Many artists, most notably Synge, have sought to bridge that schism by injecting toxins of Gaelic syntax and imagery into their writing. In lesser writers, this can give rise to the factitious eloquence that is now so despised. A psychological mechanism of compensation, it can leave a certain type of Irish chauvinist congratulating himself on his poetic deviations from standard English, in order to console himself for his failure to create anything in the Irish language. (1991: 1314)

A 'factitious eloquence that is now so despised' – this is how Irish English is perceived after Synge and O'Casey, and never mind 'lesser writers'. 'Fear of affectation', Heaney's mother's fear, is there, but so too is its obverse, fear of lapsing into 'sub-standard' English. The other Irish

chauvinist is the one who, having no facility for Irish, and despising Irish English as a demeaning form of English, chooses the high road and passes for English. Kiberd cites Michael Hartnett's 'A Farewell to English' as an exemplary account of the quandary of the contemporary Irish poet:

Our commis-chefs attend and learn the trade,
bemoan the scraps of Gaelic that they know:
add to a simple Anglo-Saxon stock
Cuchulainn's marrow-bones to marinate,
a dash of Ó Rathaille simmered slow,
a glass of University hic-haec-hoc:
sniff and stand back and proudly offer you
the celebrated Anglo-Irish stew.

(cited in Kiberd 1991: 1314)

While Scottish poets are proud of their Anglo-Scottish stew, it turns the stomachs of Irish poets. 'Anglo-Irish' and 'Anglo-Scottish' mean different things. The 'Anglo-Irish' tradition is bound up with a discredited dominant minority. In Scotland, Scots has emerged as a language of resistance and reinvention. Paradoxically – or perhaps not – Irish literature has enjoyed greater global success as the more anglicised form. Marilyn Reizbaum, who has done so much to establish an Irish–Scottish comparison, notes that: 'Other writers in Scotland [as well as Liz Lochhead] have used and are more and more using Scots, despite the example of Hugh MacDiarmid whose use of Scots has made his work seem inaccessible to or unworthy of an English-speaking audience' (1992: 184). Despite the example of MacDiarmid, his archaisms and inaccessibility, Scots survives as a poetic language. In Ireland, because of the example of Synge and O'Casey, Irish English founders. The language barrier is a class barrier, and a colonial one too. A double bind that ties the tongue, forks and forges it. Across the margins, language is always political, especially when it is poetic.

Notes

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